

**1/8/24 Monday**

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**At Least 11 Injured After Explosion Rocks Texas' Fort Worth**

Eleven people were injured in the explosion reportedly linked to a natural gas leak.

A heavy police presence was reported in downtown Fort Worth, Texas, on Monday as reports of a massive explosion emerged.

It has been reported, but not confirmed, that the explosion was linked to gas. MedStar has confirmed that 11 people were injured, and one person was reported to be critically injured while two were "seriously injured". Local news said the gas leak was still active, and that one reporter on the ground could still smell the leak.

Footage emerging on social media showed multiple blown out windows and doorways, with nearby streets covered in debris as police worked to secure the scene.

The explosion was reported at the Sandman Signature Fort Worth Hotel in the 800 block of Houston Street. The 245-room, heritage building is known as the W.T. Waggoner Building and was completed in 1920, according to the hotel, and is one of the most historic hotels in Dallas Fort Worth.

Fort Worth Chief Communications Officer [Reyne Telles](#) said: "There was an explosion in downtown," adding that there was a plume of smoke seen "higher than the high rises."

Police have blocked off several blocks surrounding the area and are urging people to avoid the site of the explosion. They began expanding that area as the threat of the gas leak continued. Fort Worth Police also announced a Family Reunification Area at Sundance Square, 420 Main Street, following the incident.

During a media briefing on Monday, Craig Trojacek, the Fort Worth Fire Department Public Information Officer, said that at about 3:30 an officer received a call about a fire structure at the hotel. Afterwards multiple calls poured in reporting an explosion. Trojacek believes the explosion was linked to a gas leak, but has not confirmed such. He is also unsure if the explosion is related to the fire that was reported there.

Trojacek added that officials are referring to the explosion as a "mass casualty incident" due to the amount of people injured. He also said that they are continuing to do searches throughout the building, but were not aware of the building's structural integrity at the time of the briefing.

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**Inspections on Grounded Boeing Max 9s Reveal Several 'Issues' With United Airlines Planes**

On Friday, an Alaska Airlines flight, en route from Oregon to California, was forced to make an emergency landing after its emergency door was blown off. Due to sheer luck, no one died

during the incident, although one flight attendant suffered minor injuries from the incident. Several passengers required medical attention for their injuries.

The Federal Aviation Administration announced on Monday that inspections were underway on grounded Boeing planes in response to the shocking incident in which a panel on an Alaska Airlines flight broke off mid-flight.

The federal agency has stated that inspections could take four to eight hours per plane. Latest reports have revealed that during the recent inspections, United Airlines uncovered loose bolts on at least five of the airline's Boeing Max 9 planes.

A joint Monday statement issued by Stan Deal, the CEO of Boeing Commercial Airplanes, and Mike Delaney, chief aerospace safety officer at Boeing, to employees relayed that the "the safety of our airplanes and everyone who steps onboard is a core Boeing value."

"We agree with and fully support the FAA's decision to require immediate inspections of 737-9 MAX airplanes with the same configuration as the affected airplane."

In response to the Alaska Airlines development, Boeing's [stock shares](#) on Monday dropped as much as 9%, with the subsequent [grounding](#) of dozens of Boeing 737 Max 9 planes further startling investors.

Figures managed to recover somewhat after the company issued inspection instructions for their 737 Max 9 planes to airlines. Large scale groundings such as these are rare, but are not unheard of for Boeing since two fatal crashes involving the manufacturer's 737 MAX 8 planes in 2018 and 2019 that killed a total of 346 people.

However, further complicating the case is investigators' recent finding that revealed the cockpit voice recorder - the black box - from the Alaska Airlines flight was erased.

The audio could have been used to figure out what happened when a door plug blew off the airplane after it reached an altitude of 16,000 feet, but it is now lost as no one pulled the circuit breaker on the cockpit voice recorder to preserve the audio, said Jennifer Homendy, the chair of the National Transportation Safety Board. Instead, the black box holds just its most recent two hours of recording.

"The cockpit voice recorder was completely overwritten. There was nothing on the cockpit voice recorder," [Homendy](#) said.

The official further noted about 10 other recent incidents in which other voice recorders had been overwritten. She has called on the FAA and Congress to implement a rule that would require both new and existing planes to store audio for 25 hours—a system which is already being practiced in Europe.

In addition to that grim discovery, the missing door plug that had detached from the plane was found in a yard by a Portland, Oregon, teacher. Homendy said she and her team would retrieve it for analysis.

Two cellphones were also found—one was discovered in a yard and the other on the side of a road, [Homendy](#) added.

Over 170 Boeing 737 Max 9 planes in the US have been grounded as a result of the incident. United Airlines and Alaska Airlines have canceled over 300 flights collectively following the FAA's decision.

Homendy added on [Sunday](#) that Alaska Airlines had a fail light—which is used to signal failure in the control of cabin pressure—that illuminated on three flights in the weeks prior to Friday's accident. She noted that the airline restricted the plane from flying to Hawaii in the event that it

would need to make an emergency landing, and that a follow-up request for a deeper inspection had gone unfulfilled prior to Friday's incident.

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#### Car Crashes Into Exterior Gate of White House Complex, Probe Underway

DC Police and US Secret Service are working to figure out the cause of the incident.

The US Secret Service revealed late Monday that a vehicle crashed into the exterior gate on the east side of the White House complex, with the driver having since been taken into custody.

Anthony Guglielmi, a spokesperson for the Secret Service, [confirmed](#) the arrest.

An investigation into the incident is reportedly underway after the vehicle slammed into an exterior gate on the east side of the White House complex, said [authorities](#).

Police add that the 100 through 600 blocks of 15th Street, NW between Constitution Avenue and G Street, NW will remain shut down while they conduct their investigation. The crash reportedly cause traffic delays at 15th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue.

"We are investigating the cause & manner of the collision," Guglielmi said in a [statement](#).

Unverified photos of the accident were shared to X, showing what appears to be an early 2000s Cadillac Escalade. The license plate also appears to be a Virginia state plate, though that is currently unconfirmed.

According to one report, US President Joe Biden was not in the White House at the time of the incident. No injuries from the crash have been reported.

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#### Rare 7,000-Year-Old Bottle Dug Up in Central China

The bottle is reportedly the "earliest dated artifact of its kind" to be found in China.

A 7,000-year-old bottle has been discovered in an ancient tomb in China, according to a December 25 news release from the Institute of Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the China Archeology network. The bottle was unearthed at the Peiligang site in the city of Xinzheng, Henan Province.

The bottle has a distinctive shape, and features a small mouth at the top and a pointed bottom. The 10.16 centimeter bottle looks as if it is shaped like a teardrop or a spade. Researchers initially estimated the bottle to be about 7,700 years old.

The [site](#) where it was found is considered to be "one of the birthplaces of Chinese agricultural civilization", according to one new source. The settlement is between 7,600 and 8,000 years old, with an area of 50,000 to 60,000 square meters.

Prior to this discovery, these distinctly shaped bottles have been found before and are considered to be a representative artifact of the prehistoric [Yangshao](#) culture. This Neolithic

culture originated along the Yellow River in China, flourishing in what is known today as Northwest China's Shaanxi Province, North China's Shanxi Province and Central China's Henan Province.

These bottles have been found in the ruins of dwellings, ash pits and burial sites. But it is unclear what, exactly, these types of bottles were used for—though some archaeologists believe they were used as a vessel for water collection, as a brewing container or a burial item.

Li Yongqiang, an associate researcher at the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, believes the bottle could have been used for making yeast.

"This discovery provides fresh and crucial material evidence for exploring the origin and development relationship between the Peiligang culture and Yangshao culture," said Yongqiang. Nevertheless, this most recently discovered bottle is unique because of its abnormally small size and exceptionally old age. Other artifacts were also found at the site, including late Paleolithic stone relics, pieces of red iron ore, and fragments of an ostrich egg.

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Reports emerged over the weekend claiming US intel services fear Israel losing a two-front conflict in the event that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu launches war against Hezbollah in Lebanon.

"In private conversations, the [Biden] administration has warned Israel against a significant escalation," read one report in US media.

Key to Hezbollah's might is a greatly-expanded arsenal since the group's 2006 battle with Israel. The group possesses tens of thousands of weapons capable of striking ships, tanks, aircraft, and ground installations.

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🗣️ "Netanyahu is in real trouble," said analyst Elijah Magnier on Sputnik's Political Misfits program Monday, noting the Israeli Prime Minister faces growing divisions within his political coalition.

"The finance minister [Bezalel] Smotrich and the security minister [Itamar] Ben-Gvir warned him if he stopped the attack on Gaza, saying that they want the [Israeli] settlers to return to Gaza," the analyst stated. "This objective contradicts with the American announcement that the Palestinians will go nowhere and will remain in Gaza, and any ethnic cleansing is not permitted, which means that the coalition and Netanyahu's government is not going to hold."

Discussion then shifted towards South Africa's bringing of charges against Israel in The Hague, with Magnier noting the exhaustive detail of South Africa's 80-page statement documenting numerous comments from Israeli officials suggesting genocidal intent.

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Germany was rocked by protests from farmers Monday over a planned cut in agricultural subsidies. Analyst Elijah Magnier says the continent's mounting economic problems stem from failed Western sanctions against Russia.

"All the decisions that have been made by the European leaders were incompatible with the necessity of the European population, and will have a boomerang effect." he added, noting the skyrocketing energy prices throughout the continent. "The first that was hit is the diesel that the farmers use in their machines because, again, of the Nord Stream 2, because we stopped buying the oil and gas from Russia."

"We're buying it from India, that buys it off Russia, and we buy from Norway and America with... increase of price."

Magnier said economic difficulties throughout Europe are leading to the election of "right-wing leaders," as voters are "fed up" with government policy.

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US Intel Fears Hezbollah May Defeat Israel With Expanded Weaponry, Capabilities

An act of aggression in Lebanon could further damage Israel's reputation as it faces charges of genocide in The Hague this week.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has signaled in recent days that he plans to launch a war on Hezbollah across Israel's northern border, but the United States is [afraid](#) the country is biting off more than it can chew.

That's according to [reports in US media](#) over the weekend as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrives in the Middle East to meet with leaders in the region.

"US officials are concerned that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may see an expanded fight in Lebanon as key to his political survival amid domestic criticism of his government's failure to prevent Hamas's Oct. 7 attack," read one [report](#). "In private conversations, the [Biden] administration has warned Israel against a significant escalation in Lebanon."

Israel maintains a small military during peacetime, mostly relying on reservists when conflict arises. The country has suffered heavy casualties in Gaza. Netanyahu promised to “destroy” Hamas after their October attack, but months later the Palestinian group [remains powerful](#). Now, US analysts believe Netanyahu is tempted to open up a second front against the group Hezbollah in Lebanon, a move they fear could draw Iran into the conflict and force the United States to enter as well.

Israel is widely considered to have lost a war with the armed group in 2006 under former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Now analysts say Hezbollah is even more powerful.

Key to the group’s might is its expanded arsenal in the years since that conflict.

Hezbollah [possesses](#) greater numbers of weapons of every variety the group used in 2006, and some powerful new ones as well. Experts believe the group has more than 100,000 rockets, which it says can strike all parts of Israel.

Most of them are of the unguided variety, but the group’s leader Sayyed Nasrallah has claimed they are able to install guidance systems to transform them into weapons capable of precision strikes.

In addition to guided missiles, the group also has rockets capable of hitting tanks, ships, and aircraft.

Iranian weaponry makes up much of the arsenal, including Raad, Fajr, and Zilzal rockets. The group also possesses Chinese and Russian missiles.

Finally, drone warfare plays an increasingly important part in Hezbollah’s strategy as it has in other recent conflicts. The group is able to assemble its Ayoub and Mersad models locally to engage in reconnaissance or deliver a small explosive payload. The unmanned aircraft, which can be easily produced, could be used to deplete Israel’s Iron Dome defense system.

Experts say few other non-state groups possess the weapons capabilities of Hezbollah.

Manning its weapons are 100,000 fighters, many of whom are battle hardened by experience fighting in Syria.

Israel’s Western backing has long given the country an important edge, but lethal aid to the Kiev regime in Ukraine has drained much of the US’ arsenal.

Additionally, US President Joe Biden faces increasing pressure over Israel’s mass killing of civilians in Gaza, which may politically complicate continued American support.

If Netanyahu launches an attack in Lebanon this week, it will come as the International Court of Justice hears charges of genocide brought by South Africa. The country [unveiled](#) an 80-page claim against Israel last week, exhaustively documenting comments by Israeli officials suggesting a deliberate attempt to kill Palestinian civilians. Aggression in Lebanon may only further imperil the country’s case.

South Africa’s charge comes after the Anglican Church of Southern Africa recently [adopted](#) a resolution deeming Israel to be an “apartheid state.”

The outlook of South Africa’s ruling African National Congress is heavily shaped by decades of apartheid rule that imposed a racist and oppressive system on the country’s Black population. In a post-Civil Rights Movement era, the country’s white supremacist government became increasingly untenable until apartheid was abolished in the early 1990s.

Western citizens’ [increasing rejection](#) of what many consider to be a similar system in Israel may also contribute to a similar slow-motion collapse there.

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Netanyahu 'In Real Trouble,' IDF Can't Control Gaza - Analyst

Netanyahu's political future may depend on a second Trump presidency, says one observer. Political analyst Elijah Magnier joined [Sputnik's Political Misfits program](#) Monday to discuss Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's declining political fortunes as the country pulls troops from northern Gaza.

"Netanyahu is in real trouble today," said the journalist in a discussion with host John Kiriakou. "First, he is attacked by his coalition in the government... the finance minister [Bezael] Smotrich and the security minister [Itamar] Ben-Gvir warned him if he stopped [the attack on Gaza](#), saying that they want the [Israeli] settlers to return to Gaza after they were asked to leave in 2005 by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon."

"This objective contradicts with the American announcement that the Palestinians will go nowhere and will remain in Gaza, and any [ethnic cleansing](#) is not permitted," added Magnier, "which means that the coalition and Netanyahu's government is not going to hold."

The Biden administration has largely [defended Netanyahu's military operation in Gaza](#), which has [killed](#) 1% of the enclave's population over the previous months. Both Biden and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken have a long history of strong support for Israel.

But, hounded by elements of his party's base and activists who have dubbed him "Genocide Joe," Biden has been compelled to offer rhetorical opposition. His administration has [criticized](#) far-right members of Netanyahu's government calling for a population transfer of Palestinians from Gaza.

Magnier said Netanyahu's future may depend on Biden losing reelection later this year, with a second Donald Trump administration likely being more amenable to ethnic cleansing.

"He [Netanyahu] needs to keep going in this war, first to avoid the fall of the coalition and have the war last for [as long as possible](#), waiting in the hope that Donald Trump will come to power," said the analyst. "Trump will be extremely happy to put pressure on Egypt to open the gate and force an exodus of all the Palestinians and give him the whole of Gaza."

"The only hope for Netanyahu is to disregard what the Biden administration wants," he concluded.

Discussion then shifted towards South Africa's recent filing of genocide charges against Israel at the International Court of Justice. The South African government delivered an 80-page complaint against Israel last week, documenting [various statements](#) from members of the Israeli government expressing support for ethnic cleansing and [mass civilian casualties](#). The charges are set to be heard this week.

"Ministers in the Netanyahu government said, 'We want to kill all the Palestinians, we don't want anyone in Gaza to remain alive, and we want to force an exodus on them if they don't leave Gaza,'" recalled Magnier. "The heritage minister of Benjamin Netanyahu's government said we need to [use nuclear bombs on Gaza](#). And the other minister said we are going to cut both electricity and food and supply to Gaza and 'don't lecture us about human rights.'"

“All these represent clear evidence [of [genocidal intent](#)],” he said. “Plus all the films and videos that are posted on TikTok and social media by the Israeli army itself inside Gaza showing how they're blowing up those homes by spreading explosive everywhere. And then another officer saying, 'Well, I killed two boys of 20 because I didn't find any children to kill.' And the snipers killing civilians who were raising white flags and raising their arms in the sky. So all these represent solid proof of crimes against humanity and war crimes that Israel is committing.” “I think many countries would like to see some of the international laws coming back to normality,” Magnier concluded.

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White House: Biden Won't Fire US Defense Secretary Over Transparency Scandal

The issue raised questions about the White House's commitment to transparency and the US president's level of involvement in day-to-day affairs.

A White House official on Monday said that US President Joe Biden is not considering firing Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin after his failure to disclose a hospital stay drew bipartisan criticism.

The scandal emerged late last week when the Department of Defense revealed Austin had been hospitalized since Monday after complications from a recent surgery. The decision had been made not to share the information outside the Pentagon, with the president only being informed Thursday afternoon.

“The president continues to have confidence in Secretary Austin,” White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre [told reporters](#) Monday. “The number one thing is we want to see him get well and back at the Pentagon.”

“There is no plan for anything other than for Secretary Austin to stay in the job,” [said](#) National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby of the retired four-star general and former Raytheon board member. Kirby added that Biden “respects the fact that Secretary Austin took ownership for the lack of transparency.”

Lawmakers from both major political parties criticized the lapse in traditional protocol. “We are concerned with how the disclosure of the Secretary's condition was handled,” read a joint [statement](#) from Reps. Mike Rogers (R-AL) and Adam Smith (D-WA) Sunday.

“Several questions remain unanswered,” the statement continued, “including what the medical procedure and resulting complications were, what the Secretary's current health status is, how and when the delegation of the Secretary's responsibilities were made, and the reason for the delay in notification to the President and Congress.”

“Sec. Austin must provide these additional details on his health and the decision-making process that occurred in the past week as soon as possible,” the congressmen concluded. Former President and GOP presidential frontrunner Donald Trump said, “Failed Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin should be fired immediately for improper professional conduct and dereliction of duty,” in a [post](#) on his Truth Social platform.

Austin, who is 70, returned to work remotely from the hospital on Friday.

Kirby said the White House would investigate the situation and consider changes in protocol. "As you might expect, we'll take a look at process and procedure here and try to learn from this experience and if there's changes that need to be made in terms of process and procedure, we'll do that," he said.

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#### German Farmers Protest Economic Policy Forced by Failed Sanctions on Russia

An analyst says the economic consequences of Western support for Ukraine have caused a "crack" in European society.

Germany was rocked by protests from farmers Monday over a planned cut in agricultural subsidies. Analyst Elijah Magnier says the continent's mounting economic problems stem from [failed Western sanctions against Russia](#).

The protests are "related to the war in Ukraine and the consequences of the war in Ukraine," said Magnier.

"All the decisions that have been made by the European leaders were incompatible with the necessity of the European population, and will have a boomerang effect," he added, noting the skyrocketing energy prices throughout the continent. "The first that was hit is the diesel that the farmers use in their machines because, again, of the [Nord Stream 2](#), because we stopped buying the oil and gas from Russia. We're buying it from India, that buys it off Russia, and we buy from Norway and America with... increase of price."

Magnier said economic difficulties throughout Europe are leading to the election of "right-wing leaders."

"What the consequences are today is the rise of right-wing leaders everywhere, like in Italy, back in the Netherlands, and now like in Argentina. And like is going to happen also in Germany and in France. Today, if you run an election in [France Marine Le Pen](#) would win, she is right-wing and she would win."

"All that is because people are fed up with the [policy of their leaders](#) and the increase of taxes and the lift of subsidies," he concluded, "like the German farmers and like the farmers in the Netherlands and all these other consequences of our policy towards Russia and our involvement in Ukraine and the Ukraine war, thinking that we could strip off Russia from all its resources and we end up paying all that we have accumulated throughout the centuries from stealing [from] other continents."

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#### US Exports to Russia Rise to Highest Level in Year at \$69Mln - Census Bureau

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - US exports to Russia reached the highest level in a year in November at \$69 million, up from \$34.8 million in October, the Census Bureau said in new trade data published on Tuesday.

Meanwhile imports from Russia to the United States rose to \$362.4 million in November, from a previous level of \$274.4 million, according to the data.

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#### Blinken Tells Herzog of Need to Minimize Harm to Gaza Civilians - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Israeli President Isaac Herzog and stressed the need to minimize harm to the civilian population in the Gaza Strip amid Israel's military operations, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said Tuesday.

Blinken is currently in Israel as part of his fourth trip to the Middle East since the October 7 Hamas attack.

"The Secretary reiterated U.S. support for Israel's right to ensure the terrorist attacks of October 7 cannot be repeated and emphasized the need to take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians," Miller said in a readout.

Blinken and Herzog also reviewed the ongoing efforts to free all remaining hostages.

"Secretary Blinken emphasized the imperative of facilitating the increased and sustained delivery of humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza and discussed efforts to achieve broader regional integration that ensures Israel's security and advances the establishment of an independent Palestinian state," Miller added.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip, while its fighters breached the border, opening fire on 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 began a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 23,000 people have been killed in Gaza as a result of Israeli strikes, local authorities said.

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#### Number of People Injured in Possible Gas Explosion in Texas Rises from 11 to 21 - Police

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - The number of people injured in a possible gas explosion in downtown Fort Worth Texas rose from 11 to 21, a Fort Worth Police Department

spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik.

"The latest report on injured individuals is 21," the spokesperson said on Monday. "One of those is critical, 4 seriously injured and 14 of those were transported to a local hospital. One of the injured was self-transported to a hospital."

Earlier in the day, the Fort Worth Fire Department said a gas leak may have caused the explosion at the Sandman Hotel in downtown Fort Worth, but authorities are still investigating the incident.

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Haley Says Biden Should Lose Job Over US Defense Chief Hospitalization Scandal

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden should lose his job over poor communication in his administration about US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's hospitalization, 2024 Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley said during a Fox News town hall event.

"I think Biden should be fired," Haley said on Monday, when asked about the situation Austin was hospitalized on January 1 after experiencing pain and complications from an elective surgery. However, the Pentagon did not inform the White House, lawmakers and the public about the hospitalization for several days.

The White House said earlier on Monday that it maintains confidence in Austin and looks forward to seeing him back to work at the Pentagon. Austin is currently handling his duties from the hospital.

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Unauthorized Vehicle Crashes Into White House Gate, Driver Detained - US Secret Service

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - An unauthorized vehicle crashed into the exterior gate of the White House and the driver has been detained by authorities, US Secret Service spokesperson Anthony Guglielmi said in a statement.

"Shortly before 6 p.m. [Eastern Time], a vehicle collided with an exterior gate on the White House complex," Guglielmi said on Monday. "The driver has been taken into custody and we are investigating the cause and manner of the collision."

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RPT- Canada to Continue Looking for Ways to List IRGC as Terror Organization - Trudeau

(updates in paras 4-5)

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - Canada will continue to pursue accountability for the Iranian regime, including listing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said.

"There is more to do, to hold the regime to account, and we will continue our work, including continuing to look for ways to responsibly list the IRGC as a terrorist organization and explore any and all other options," Trudeau said on Monday.

The prime minister made the remarks during an event to commemorate the Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752.

The airplane was shot down by Iran on January 8, 2020, shortly after takeoff from the Tehran's international airport. All 167 passengers on board the airplane - mostly Canadian and Iranian citizens - died, including nine Ukrainian crew members.

The Iranian government admitted that the plane had been mistakenly shot down by its military, which mistook it for a cruise missile at a time when Iran's air defenses were active following strikes on a US military base in Iraq.

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Nikki Haley Says Does Not Want US Troops on Ground in Ukraine, But Support Prevents War

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - Republican 2024 presidential hopeful Nikki Haley said during a Fox News town hall event that the United States should not put troops on the ground in Ukraine, but Washington must continue to back the Kiev regime in order to avoid a wider conflict.

"I don't think we need to put troops on the ground in Ukraine," Haley said on Monday. "But to avoid going to war, you have to prevent it."

Skepticism about further US support for Ukraine is legitimate, Haley said.

However, it "only" costs the US 3.5% of its defense budget to prop up Ukraine, Haley said.

When asked about dwindling public support for Ukraine among Republicans, Haley said that she does not base her decisions on polling.

The Biden administration has done a poor job of explaining the importance of support for Ukraine, Haley also said.

Fellow 2024 presidential hopeful Ron DeSantis was wrong to label the Ukraine conflict a "territorial dispute," Haley added.

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US Navy Boosts Lockheed Nuclear Sub Undersea Detection Project by \$311Mln - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has awarded Lockheed Martin with a more than \$311 million contract boost to continue work on a new submarine electronic warfare system, the Department of Defense announced in a press release,

"Lockheed Martin Corporation [of] Syracuse, New York is awarded a \$311,995,464 ...modification ...contract ...for design, qualification testing, and production of the submarine electronic warfare system, AN-BLQ-10," the release said on Monday.

"Work on the contract will be performed in Syracuse, New York over the next five years and is expected to be completed by February 2029," the Defense Department said.

The AN-BLQ-10 system is an electronic warfare support system for US submarines. It is intended to provide automatic intercept capability (detection, classification, localization, and identification) for both radar and communications signals, according to published sources.

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The airplane was shut down by Iran on January 8, 2020, shortly after takeoff from the Tehran's international airport. All 167 passengers on board the airplane - mostly Canadian and Iranian citizens - died, including nine Ukrainian crew members.

Iran said it mistakenly shot down the airplane after it mistook it for a cruise missile at a time when the country's air defenses were on high alert following strikes on a US military base in Iraq.

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Canada to Continue Looking for Ways to List IRGC as Terror Organization - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - Canada will continue to pursue accountability for the Iranian regime, including listing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said.

"There is more to do, to hold the regime to account, and we will continue our work, including continuing to look for ways to responsibly list the IRGC as a terrorist organization and explore

any and all other options," Trudeau said on Monday.

The prime minister made the remarks during an event to commemorate Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752.

The airplane was shut down by Iran on January 8, 2020, shortly after takeoff from Tehran's international airport. All 167 passengers on board the airplane - mostly Canadian and Iranian citizens - died, including nine Ukrainian crew members.

Iran said it mistakenly shot down the airplane after it mistook it for a cruise missile at a time when the country's air defenses were on high alert following strikes on a US military base in Iraq.

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**Pentagon Says Austin Continues to Experience Discomfort, But Prognosis Good**

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin continues to experience discomfort following hospitalization for health complications but his prognosis is good, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said in a statement.

"Secretary Austin currently remains hospitalized at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and is in good condition. He is recovering well and in good spirits. He is no longer in the Intensive Care Unit and is recovering in a more private area of the hospital. He continues to experience discomfort but his prognosis is good," the statement said on Monday.

Austin resumed his duties as US defense chief from the hospital starting on Friday evening, the statement said. There is no specific date for Austin's release from the hospital, the statement added.

Austin was hospitalized after experiencing pain and complications following an elective medical procedure, the Pentagon said. Austin delayed notifying the White House and lawmakers about his hospitalization for several days, sparking calls for his resignation.

However, the White House has said that US President Joe Biden maintains confidence in Austin and looks forward to seeing him back to work at the Pentagon.

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**Explosion in Downtown Fort Worth, Texas Most Likely Some Type of Gas Leak - Fire Dept.**

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - An explosion that occurred at a hotel in downtown Fort Worth, Texas, is mostly likely caused by a gas leak, but an investigation is still underway, a Fort Worth Fire Department spokesperson said during a press conference.

"Right now, through our investigation, it looks like it is more of some type of gas leak," the spokesperson said about the cause of the explosion on Monday. "We have not confirmed that yet at this time. We're not sure if the smell of gas was caused from the explosion of the fire itself, or if that's what caused the explosion, but that's what we're looking at right now."

Eleven people were taken to local hospitals, one person is in critical condition and two others are in serious condition, according to local officials.

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White House Working With Lawmakers to Make Big Changes on Immigration Policy - Mayorkas

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) The Biden administration is working with lawmakers on legislation that will substantially change US immigration policies to address the record number of illegal immigrants arriving in the United States via the US border with Mexico, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said.

Lawmakers and the Biden administration officials have negotiated for weeks to reach a deal and provide the White House with more than \$106 billion in extra funds for Ukraine, Israel and other priorities, including US border security.

"My colleagues from the White House have been working tirelessly to reach a framework, to reach a legislative solution that both the Senate and the House [of Representative] can pass, and that can transform the manner in which we address the challenges of migration that are so very different than they were 10, 20 and 30 years ago," Mayorkas said during a press briefing at Eagle Pass, Texas, on Monday.

The White House is reportedly willing to work with Republicans on including provisions in legislation that will tighten immigration policies as a means to crack down on the record number of people crossing the US-Mexico border illegally.

The White House asked Congress to provide \$106 billion in supplemental funds, including more than \$60 billion for Ukraine, but Republican lawmakers are refusing to support the request without measures to strengthen border security and restrict immigration.

Earlier this month, US media reported that border security officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded.

Mayorkas faces impeachment threats from the House of Representatives for his alleged mishandling of border security.

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US Sailor Sentenced to 27 Months for Giving Sensitive Information to China - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - A US Navy sailor has been sentenced to two years and three months in prison for providing sensitive US military information to a Chinese intelligence officer, the Justice Department said.

"A US Navy service member was sentenced today to 27 months in prison and ordered to pay a \$5,500 fine for transmitting sensitive US military information to an intelligence officer from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in exchange for bribery payments," the Justice Department

said in a press release on Monday.

Petty Officer Wenheng Zhao, 26, from California, pleaded guilty in October 2023 to one count of conspiring with a foreign intelligence officer and one count of receiving a bribe, the release said.

Zhao worked at Naval Base Ventura County in Port Hueneme, California, and held a US security clearance, the release said.

Between August 2021 and May 2023, Zhao received a total of \$14,866 from the Chinese intelligence officer, the release added.

In exchange for the payments, Zhao secretly collected and transmitted sensitive, non-public information regarding US Navy operational security, military training and exercises, and critical infrastructure, according to the release.

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Multiple People Injured After Explosion Destroys Hotel in Fort Worth, Texas - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - An explosion in downtown Fort Worth, resulting in the destruction of a hotel and prompting a robust police reaction has left people injured, NBC News reported on Monday.

The report added that details regarding the timing of the explosion and the number of individuals affected remain undisclosed.

Furthermore, the Fort Worth Police in a social media post advised the public to avoid the downtown area and assured that more details will be shared soon.

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UNGA to Hold Plenary Meeting Tuesday Due to US Blocking Russian Amendment in UNSC

UNITED NATIONS, January 9 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly will hold a plenary meeting on January 9 following the United States' veto of a Russia-drafted amendment to a resolution on Gaza at the UN Security Council, according to the United Nations program of work.

The meeting will start at 10:00 a.m. EST time and it is expected to continue until the afternoon. On December 22, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution to facilitate humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Before the vote, Russia proposed an amendment to the resolution calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities in Gaza. The only country that voted against the amendment was the United States.

The UN General Assembly session will provide a forum for the United States to explain the reasoning for vetoing the amendment.

The United States has regularly impeded any resolution on Gaza that may hinder Israeli military

operations. On December 8, the United States blocked a United Arab Emirates-drafted resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and a Brazil-drafted resolution on October 18.

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Israel Believes Hostage Deal Needed Before Palestinians Return to North Gaza - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - The Israeli government will tell US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during meetings on Tuesday that Hamas must agree to a new hostage deal before Palestinians are allowed to return to northern Gaza, Axios reported, citing two senior Israeli officials.

Blinken is set to visit Israel as part of a broader trip around the Middle East, during which he also met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Emirati President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

Israeli officials will tell Blinken that Israel will restrict Palestinians from returning to northern Gaza until Hamas agrees to release more hostages, the report said on Monday. On Sunday, Blinken said that Israel must allow Palestinian civilians to return home as soon as conditions permit.

On October 7, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, during which they abducted approximately 240 people. In November, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of prisoners and hostages, which also facilitated the delivery of humanitarian aid into Gaza. The ceasefire was extended several times, but expired on December 1.

Hamas' attack on Israel left more than 1,200 Israelis dead, leading to retaliatory strikes and a ground operation in Gaza. More than 23,000 people in Gaza have been killed as a result of the fighting.

Israeli negotiators believe that restricting the ability of Palestinians to return to northern Gaza serves as significant leverage in hostage negotiations with Hamas, the report said.

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Blinken Meets With Saudi Crown Prince to Discuss Gaza Crisis, Houthi Attacks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has met with Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and discussed the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the Houthi attacks on vessels in the Red Sea, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Al 'Ula. The Secretary underscored the need to urgently address the

humanitarian situation in Gaza and prevent further spread of the conflict," Miller said in a press release on Monday.

Blinken and Bin Salman also discussed the ongoing efforts to reduce regional tensions, including by deterring Houthi attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea, the release said.

The US diplomat emphasized the importance of building a more secure and integrated Middle Eastern region, including via establishing a Palestinian state.

The meeting took place prior to Blinken travelling to Israel as part of his Middle East tour to attempt to contain the war in Gaza.

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#### Judge Tanya Chutkan Targeted in Swatting Incident at Her Residence - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - Judge Tanya Chutkan, overseeing the federal election interference case against Former President Donald Trump, became the apparent target of an attempted swatting attack, NBC News reported on Monday.

According to the report, police and fire trucks responded to false reports of a shooting at Tanya Chutkan's residence on Sunday night, with confirmation that she was home when law enforcement arrived at her house.

Upon arriving at the residence, it was confirmed that Chutkan was unharmed, and the house was empty, the report said.

Moreover, the police concluded that no shooting had taken place, and the origin of the emergency services call remains unknown, the report added.

Swatting involves making a fake emergency call to bring a significant police response to a specific location, often as a prank.

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#### United Airlines Found Loose Bolts on Doors of Its Boeing 737 Max 9 Fleet - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - United Airlines found loose bolts on the doors of its Boeing 737 MAX 9 aircraft fleet during recent inspections, The Air Current publication reported, citing three people familiar with the matter.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said earlier on Monday that the Boeing MAX 9 aircraft will remain grounded until operators complete enhanced inspections of its cabin door exit components.

The report said inspectors found the loose parts on at least five of the company's Boeing 737 MAX 9 fleet.

On Sunday, media reported that a missing door plug may have caused a door exit on a Boeing 737 MAX 9 aircraft to detach midflight on an Alaska Airlines flight.

Alaska Airlines decided to cancel about 140 flights because of the Boeing 737-9 MAX aircraft grounding.

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Schumer Says Senate Made Significant Progress on Border, Ukraine Aid Talks

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer on Monday said negotiators have recently made significant progress negotiating a deal to boost border security and provide the White House with billions of dollars in extra funds for Ukraine, Israel and other priorities.

"On the supplemental, it's been a very promising few days," Schumer said. "We've made more progress in the past couple of days on the border than we have in the past few weeks. The work's not yet finished, but I am more hopeful right now even more than I was a few days ago that we can get something meaningful done."

The White House has asked Congress to provide \$106 billion in supplemental funds including more than \$60 billion for Ukraine, but Republican lawmakers have refused to approve the request without measures to strengthen border security and restrict immigration.

Schumer said finalizing a deal on a supplemental package would not be easy, and neither side of the Senate would get everything they want.

Immigration reform has always been one of the hardest issues facing the Senate, Schumer noted, adding that the "broken border" and US national security are at stake amid talks on a supplemental funding bill. Schumer urged his colleagues to continue making progress in their negotiations.

The White House, which has been involved in talks on a supplemental package, is reportedly willing to work with Republicans on including provisions in the legislation that will tighten immigration policies as a means to deter record migration at the US-Mexico border.

Earlier this month, US media reported that border security officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded. US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas faces impeachment threats by the House of Representatives for his alleged mishandling of border security.

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Biden Nominates Jennifer Gavito to Be New US Envoy to Libya - White House

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate senior diplomat Jennifer Gavito to be the new US ambassador to Libya, the White House said in a release.

Gavito is a career member of the senior Foreign Service with a class of Minister-Counselor and

most recently served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq, Iran, Press and Public Diplomacy, the release said on Monday.

Gavito also served in the US embassy in London and as Consul General in Munich, Germany, the release added.

As a specialist on the Middle East, Gavito served previously in the US missions in the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Lebanon and Israel, according to the release.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) -

##### BLINKEN VISIT TO THE MIDDLE EAST

\* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday that he discussed with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman the issue of resuming normalization talks with Israel, adding that there is still a clear interest in pursuing the initiative.

\* Blinken said that it is not in the interest of Israel, Lebanon and Hezbollah for the war in Gaza to widen and the Israeli government wants to pursue a diplomatic settlement that fits its needs.

\* Blinken met with United Arab Emirates President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and emphasized the need to prevent the Gaza war from further spreading, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

##### ISRAEL INVASION IN GAZA

\* President Joe Biden said on Monday that he understands mounting frustrations over the ongoing conflict in Gaza and emphasized that he is quietly working to get Israel to reduce its military operations and ultimately get out of the territory.

\* The number of Palestinians killed by Israeli strikes in Gaza now exceeds 23,000, with nearly 59,000 more injured, the Palestinian Health Ministry said.

\* A field commander of Lebanon's Hezbollah movement has been killed during an Israeli air attack on southern Lebanon, the Sky News Arabia reported.

\*Doctors Without Borders said four people were injured in its shelter in southern Gaza, which houses more than 100 staff and their families, after the facility came under an Israeli air strike.

##### US DEFENSE SECRETARY

\* Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has resumed all functions but is performing all of his duties from the hospital, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

\* President Joe Biden looks forward to having Austin back at the Pentagon, despite calls to fire him for failing to disclose his hospitalization, Kirby said.

##### CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

\* The Ukrainian military in the Donetsk direction lost more than 250 soldiers and two tanks over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Monday.

\* The Russian armed forces struck Ukraine's military facilities with Kinzhal hypersonic missiles, the Defense Ministry said.

\* Three people were injured in the Russian city of Belgorod by Ukrainian shelling, Region Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said.

\* The Russian military prevented Ukraine's attempt to carry out a terrorist attack with the RM-70 Vampire multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) by successfully destroying ten rockets over Russia's Belgorod region, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

#### BOEING 737-9 MAX GROUNDED

\* The Boeing MAX 9 aircraft will remain grounded until operators complete enhanced inspections of the cabin door exit components following an incident last week in the United States, a US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik on Monday.

\* Alaska Airlines decided to cancel about 140 flights because of the Boeing 737-9 MAX aircraft grounding, the company said.

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US Says Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh 'Not Free or Fair' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - The United States agrees with the view of other observers that the parliamentary elections in Bangladesh were not free and fair, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"The United States shares the view with other observers that these elections were not free or fair and we regret that not all parties participated," Miller said in a statement.

On January 7, Bangladesh held a general election in which the ruling Awami League party prevailed by winning 233 parliamentary seats, local media reported.

The United States condemned instances of reported violence that occurred before and during the vote and has been urged the Bangladesh authorities to investigate the reports.

"The United States remains concerned by the arrests of thousands of political opposition members and by reports of irregularities on elections day," the statement said.

Miller called on all political parties in Bangladesh to reject violence and reiterated the US commitment to partner with the country to advance a shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, the statement added.

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## McConnell Says US Must Increase Defense Spending to Counter Russia, China, Iran

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies will have to increase defense spending in order to counter the capabilities of their four main adversaries, US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Monday.

"Facing down an expanded industrial base in Russia, China, Iran and North Korea will require America and our allies and partners to invest more seriously in our own defense capacity," McConnell said during remarks on the Senate floor.

The Biden administration must stop proposing real-dollar cuts to US defense funding, McConnell said.

The fiscal year 2025 budget request must take long-term national security needs seriously, McConnell said.

China is watching to see if the United States can manage to sustain credible resistance to "authoritarian" violence, McConnell also said.

Countries around the world are wondering whether the US will start acting like a superpower, McConnell added.

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## Russian National Pleads Guilty in US to Trying to Provide Material Support to Terror Group

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - Russian national Murat Kurashev has pleaded guilty in US court to attempting to provide material support to a group designated by the United States as a foreign terrorist group, the Justice Department said on Monday.

"Murat Kurashev, 36, of Sacramento, California, pleaded guilty to a single-count indictment charging him with attempting to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Kurashev attempted to provide financial support to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which the State Department designated as a foreign terrorist organization that engages in terrorism in Syria, the release said.

Kurashev used money transfer services between July 2020 and February 2021 to send about \$13,000 to two known couriers of an HTS fundraiser, the release said.

Records obtained from the money transfer services showed multiple transactions from Kurashev to the couriers in Turkey usually in increments of \$1,000, the release added.

Kurashev's sentencing is set for March 18 and he faces up to 20 years in prison and up to a \$250,000 fine if convicted, according to the release.

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## RPT- NYC Drug Stores Forced to Hide Products Behind Plexiglass Amid Increased Thefts

(fixes date in lede)

NEW YORK January 8 (Sputnik)- New York City drug stores have to conceal their products behind a locked plexiglass due to a surge in shoplifting, a sales associate from Duane Reade Inc, a chain of pharmacy and convenience stores, told Sputnik.

"Thefts are increasing ... We are putting more and more products behind plexiglass," the shop assistant, who did not want to be named, said. "Instead of some products, especially in women's cosmetics, we are putting a paper with a painted product on it - and surprisingly, it's still selling."

In October of 2023, Syracuse Police Chief Joe Cecile in New York's Syracuse said that New York City has had a 55% shoplifting spike since 2021.

"They are stealing everything, including donuts," the sales associate said. "In the past, drug stores had some products behind plexiglass, too, but the amount has increased. I used to live in San Francisco, and I thought it could not be worse. But then I moved to New York and discovered I was mistaken."

In 2020, according to the NYPD, there were 20,024 complaints about shoplifting in NYC.

In 2022, the Rite Aid chain of drug stores reported \$5 million in losses in only three months caused by shoplifting and warned they may start locking every product behind shelf cases. In the same year, store owners calculated losses of \$4.4 billion due to retail thefts.

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## US Congressman Says Lawmakers Should Hold Hearing on Defense Chief's Hospitalization

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - US House lawmakers ought to hold a hearing on matters related to US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's hospitalization, Congressman Matt Gaetz said on Monday.

Austin was hospitalized on January 1 for severe pain and complications following an elective medical procedure. The White House and US Congress were reportedly not notified about the situation for several days after Austin's hospitalization.

US Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks prepared to act as defense chief in Austin's absence, the Pentagon said. However, Austin has resumed his duties from the hospital and is expected to stay in the role, the White House said on Monday.

"The White House has already signaled that Secretary Austin will face no consequences as a result of this scandal. Therefore, [the House Armed Services Committee] should immediately hold a hearing and receive testimony from Secretary Lloyd Austin and Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks regarding Austin's absence and Hicks' failure to return from vacation to perform her duties," Gaetz said in a statement via social media platform X.

Hicks was reportedly in Puerto Rico when she was informed of Austin's hospitalization on Thursday. Hicks returned from the island territory on Saturday, the reports said.

The Defense Department's failure to inform the White House, lawmakers and the public about Austin's incapacitation reflects a lack of leadership, competency and transparency in the Biden

administration, Gaetz said.

Former US President Donald Trump and other top Republicans have called on Biden to fire Austin for failing to immediately disclose the hospitalization. However, US President Joe Biden looks forward to having Austin back at the Pentagon as soon as possible, the White House said on Monday.

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#### NYC Drug Stores Forced to Hide Products Behind Plexiglass Amid Increased Thefts

NEW YORK January 4 (Sputnik)- New York City drug stores have to conceal their products behind a locked plexiglass due to a surge in shoplifting, a sales associate from Duane Reade Inc, a chain of pharmacy and convenience stores, told Sputnik.

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#### Pentagon Confirms US Defense Chief Taken to Hospital January 1 After Having Severe Pain

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was taken to a hospital in an ambulance from his home on January 1 after he experienced severe pain, a Defense Department spokesperson confirmed to Sputnik on Monday.

"Yes we can confirm," the spokesperson said when asked to confirm reports about Austin's circumstances.

Earlier on Monday, the Pentagon said Austin is still in the hospital and there is no specific date for his release yet.

On Friday, the Pentagon announced that Austin had been hospitalized four days prior after he experienced complications following an elective medical procedure.

According to media reports, the US defense chief spent four days in the intensive care unit following his hospitalization, which the Pentagon had kept the White House in the dark about for three days and notified Congress 15 minutes before releasing the official statement on Friday.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters that President Joe Biden has "complete confidence" in Austin despite the lack of transparency.

Former President Donald Trump and other top Republicans have called on Biden to fire Austin for failing to disclose his hospitalization for four days.

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Majority of Americans Believe US Under 'Invasion' by Migrants at Southern Border - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - Nearly two out of three likely voters in the United States believe that the country is facing an invasion by migrants at the southern border, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll published Monday.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents, 65%, said that it is accurate to describe the situation at the US-Mexico border as an "invasion," the poll report said. Forty-three percent (43%) of respondents said that such a description is "very accurate," the poll report added.

Less than one-third of respondents, 31%, believe that the description is inaccurate, including 15% who do not believe it is accurate at all, the poll report said.

One in five respondents believe that the situation at the US' southern border is not a crisis, while 72% believe that the situation is indeed a crisis, the poll report said. Seventy percent (70%) of respondents believe that border security is a vital US national security interest, the poll report said.

The poll surveyed 1,044 likely US voters from January 2-4. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

Earlier this month, US media reported that border security officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded. US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas faces impeachment threats by the House of Representatives for his alleged mishandling of border security.

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Blinken Says Discussed With Saudi Crown Prince Issue of Normalization With Israel

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday that he discussed with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman the issue of resuming normalization talks with Israel, adding that there is still a clear interest in pursuing the initiative.

"So normalization, yes, we talked about that actually on every stop, including of course here in Saudi Arabia., and I can tell you this, there's a clear interest here in pursuing that, there's a clear

interest in the region in pursuing that, but it will require that the conflict end in Gaza and it will also clearly require that there be a practical pathway to a Palestinian state," Blinken told reporters in Al Ula, Saudi Arabia before departing for Israel.

Blinken met with the Saudi crown prince earlier in the day before departing to Israel as part of his Middle East tour that aims to contain the Gaza conflict.

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UN Envoy For Humanitarian Issues in Gaza to Travel Directly to Washington - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 8 (Sputnik) - The new United Nations Coordinator for humanitarian aid in Gaza and Dutch politician Sigrid Kaag begins her work on Monday and is set to travel later this week to Washington DC, the Deputy Spokeswoman Florencia Soto Nino said on Monday.

"She will meet with the Secretary General today and she will also go to Washington DC later this week," Nino told a briefing.

Kaag also received the mandate to establish a UN mechanism to accelerate humanitarian leave consignments to Gaza through states which are not party to the conflict, she added.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip, while its fighters breached the border, opening fire on 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 23,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of Israeli strikes, local authorities said.

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Blinken Says Gaza War Widening Not in Interests of Israel, Lebanon, Hezbollah

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday that it is not in the interest of Israel, Lebanon and Hezbollah for the Gaza war to widen, and the Israeli government wants to pursue a diplomatic settlement that fits their needs.

"With regard to Lebanon, it's clearly not in the interest of anyone, Israel, Lebanon, Hezbollah, for that matter, to see this escalate and to see an actual conflict. And the Israelis have been very clear with us that they want to find a diplomatic way forward, a diplomatic way forward that creates the kind of security that allows Israelis to return home," Blinken told reporters in Al Ula, Saudi Arabia before departing for Israel.

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Protesters Interrupt Biden's South Carolina Address to Demand Ceasefire in Gaza

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - Protesters demanding a ceasefire in Gaza interrupted US President Biden's campaign speech in South Carolina on Monday afternoon, amid increasing tensions over the unrest in the Middle East.

"Ceasefire now! Ceasefire now!" chanted protesters in the back of the room of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston as Biden spoke about how he sees truth being "under assault" in America. Biden did not address the protesters directly as they were escorted out of the room, while members of the audience shouted "Four more years!"

"I understand their passion, and I've been quietly working with the Israeli government to get them to reduce and significantly get out of Gaza," Biden said once the room quieted.

Biden has encountered protesters during several of the trips he has made since the events of October 7, with growing Democrat calls for a ceasefire in Gaza.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas 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 22,800 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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Alaska Airlines Cancels 140 Flights Due to Boeing 737-9 MAX Grounding - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) – Alaska Airlines decided to cancel about 140 flights because of the Boeing 737-9 MAX aircraft grounding, the company said on Monday.

"As of 8:30 a.m. Pacific [time, 4:30 p.m. GMT], we have canceled roughly 140 flights for Monday due to the 737-9 MAX grounding," the statement said.

Boeing issued a message earlier in the day with inspection details related to 737-9 MAX aircraft, it added. Before those inspections can begin, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has to approve all the necessary processes to ensure compliance. Alaska Airlines, in turn, must prepare detailed inspection instructions for its technicians so they can follow those procedures, according to the statement.

"As we await further information from the FAA and work through these important steps, our

technicians have prepared each aircraft to be immediately ready for the required inspection when instructions are finalized,” the company said.

It is an active investigation, and the air carrier is awaiting permission from the authorities to provide additional information about the aircraft, it added.

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Flight PS752 Coordination Group Initiates Proceedings Before ICAO Against Iran – Statement

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) – The International Coordination and Response Group for the victims of Flight PS752 said in a joint statement on Monday that it initiated proceedings against Iran before the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).

The Coordination Group is comprised of Canada, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Ukraine, whose nationals and residents became victims of the fatal incident over the skies of Tehran.

In July 2023, the Groups member states collectively filed a lawsuit against Iran at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) over the 2020 downing of the Ukraine International Airlines Flight PS752.

“Today we have jointly initiated dispute-settlement proceedings before the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) against the Islamic Republic of Iran for using weapons against a civil aircraft in flight in breach of its international legal obligations under Article 3bis of the Convention on International Civil Aviation (known as the Chicago Convention),” the statement said.

The Coordination Group noted the decision was taken following four years of failed negotiations and of Iran evading its “responsibility” over the incident.

ICAO’s Council has the Group’s trust, the statement said, stressing the importance of accountability for those who violate the rules of aviation. It further noted that it hopes that alongside its proceedings against Iran before the ICJ, similar tragedies can be prevented.

On January 8, 2020, flight PS752 crashed shortly after takeoff from Tehran’s international airport. It claimed the lives of all 167 passengers on board the airplane - mostly Canadian and Iranian citizens - and nine Ukrainian crew members. Iran admitted that the plane had been mistakenly shot down by its military, which mistook it for a cruise missile at a time when Iran's air defenses were active following strikes on a US military base in Iraq.

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Biden Calls Donald Trump “Loser” During Political Event in South Carolina

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has called former leader Donald Trump a “loser.”

“They don’t have respect for 81 million people who voted the other way, voted for my

candidacy,” Biden said during the political event in South Carolina on Monday. “But that not the real world, that’s not democracy, that’s not America ... And losers talk to concede when they loose. He is a loser.”

A growing number of Americans, or more than one-third of US adults believe that US President Joe Biden’s 2020 election was not legitimate, a new Washington Post-University of Maryland poll revealed on Tuesday.

While the majority of US adults (62%) still consider Biden’s 2020 win legitimate, 36% have an opposite view on the matter. This represents a 7% increase compared with poll results for the same question in December 2021, when only 29% said Biden's election victory was not legitimate.

At the same time, almost two-thirds of US adults, or 63%, expressed confidence that there was no solid evidence of widespread voter fraud in the 2020 election, according to the survey.

On January 6, 2021, after Trump's election defeat, a mob of his supporters breached the US Capitol in an attempt to halt Congress's Electoral College vote count. Since the riot, charges have been filed against more than 1,200 individuals for crimes related to the breach of the Capitol.

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UN Reiterates Need to Protect Gaza Journalists After 2 Reporters Killed - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 8 (Sputnik) - The United Nations repeats its call to protect all journalists in the Gaza Strip after an Israeli airstrike killed two reporters in the enclave, the Deputy Spokeswoman Florencia Soto Nino said on Monday.

“We reiterate that journalists, just like any other civilians, must be protected and that they should not be targeted for the job that they're doing there [in Gaza],” Nino told a press briefing.

Journalists risk their lives to bring the truth to everyone all over the world, and this is increasingly difficult in the conditions they face in Gaza, she added.

Late Sunday, an Israeli airstrike in Rafah killed Hamza Wael Dahdouh, the son of Al Jazeera’s Gaza bureau chief Wael Al-Dahdouh, and Mustafa Thuria, an AFP video stringer who worked for Al Jazeera. A third journalist, Hazem Rajab, was seriously injured.

Last week, Al Jazeera cameraman Saber Abudaqa was killed in an Israeli airstrike on a school in the city of Khan Yunis in the south of the enclave. Al Jazeera said it intends to refer the matter to the International Criminal Court.

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Biden Says Understands Gaza Frustrations, Is Working to Get Israel Out of Enclave

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday that he understands mounting frustrations over the ongoing conflict in Gaza and emphasized that he is

quietly working to get Israel to reduce its military operations and ultimately get out of the territory.

"I understand their passion, and I've been quietly working with the Israeli government to get them to reduce and significantly get out of Gaza. I'm using all that I can to do that," Biden said after protesters interrupted his speech in Charleston, South Carolina to demand a ceasefire.

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Boeing MAX 9 to Remain Grounded 'Until Operators Complete Enhanced Inspections' - FAA

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - The Boeing MAX 9 aircraft will remain grounded until operators complete enhanced inspections of the aircraft's cabin door exit components following an incident last week in the United States, a US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik on Monday.

On Sunday, media reported that a missing door plug may have caused a door exit on a Boeing 737 MAX 9 aircraft to detach midflight on Friday on an Alaska Airlines flight.

"Boeing 737-9 aircraft will remain grounded until operators complete enhanced inspections which include both left and right cabin door exit plugs, door components, and fasteners," the spokesperson said. "Operators must also complete corrective action requirements based on findings from the inspections prior to bringing any aircraft back into service."

The FAA will continue to support the National Transportation Safety Board's (NTSB) investigation into Alaska Airlines Flight 1282, the spokesperson added.

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Epstein Accuser's Claims About Trump, Clinton Undermine Her Credibility - Filing

(Update: adds details in paras 7, 9)

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - Claims by Jeffrey Epstein accuser Sarah Ransome about alleged ties to former US Presidents Donald Trump and Bill Clinton demonstrate her lack of credibility as a witness in the case, lawyers representing Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz said in a court filing.

The US District Court for the Southern District of New York has been unsealing dozens of filings in recent days as part of a lawsuit linked to alleged sex trafficking by Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell, the latter of whom was convicted. Epstein died in 2019 while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges.

Ransome settled a civil lawsuit against Epstein and Maxwell, whom she accused of trafficking her, in 2018.

On Monday, the district court released filings from 2017, in which Dershowitz's lawyers used Ransome's claims about prominent figures such as Trump and Clinton as purported evidence of

her lack of credibility as a witness. Ransome also accused Epstein of having directed her to have sex with Dershowitz.

"The Emails will demonstrate that Ms. Ransome's inflammatory, salacious, and defamatory testimony concerning [Dershowitz] and others is false and that the deponent is not credible," the filing said.

The filing quotes emails written by Ransome, in which she claims that a friend filmed sex tapes with Clinton and Prince Andrew. Ransome also claimed that another friend was "one of the many girls" that had sexual relations with Trump.

Ransome said that she was unable to provide the alleged footage implicating the men, but claimed to maintain copies in her possession.

Ransome accused the CIA of having attempted to hack her emails and claimed that a friend was approached by agents sent directly by former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in an attempt to protect her presidential campaign.

Ransome attempted to threaten a US journalist into publishing her claims, according to the emails. However, Ransome later retracted the accusations emailed to the journalist.

The filings released Monday also include photos shared by Ransome of activity at Epstein's private island in the Caribbean Sea. The photos depict Epstein, Maxwell and a number of women, including Ransome herself.

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US Officials Increasingly Left Wondering Whether Netanyahu Really in Charge – Reports

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - US officials currently assisting the Israeli government in preventing the conflict with the Palestinian group Hamas from expanding, are increasingly wondering whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is really in charge of the situation, Politico reported on Monday.

Wishing to remain in office and avoid incarceration over corruption charges, Netanyahu has become increasingly vulnerable to pressures by members of his ruling coalition, most notably the far-right elements, the report said. This causes some reluctance to accept US advice on the ongoing conflict.

Accordingly, individuals such as ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir who have anti-Palestinian sentiments are opposed to US proposals which they see as overly friendly to Palestine. The report further noted that their departure from the coalition could cost Netanyahu his premiership and increase his "legal perils."

On condition of anonymity, a US official cited by the report said that it sometimes is unclear who is in charge. In addition, Netanyahu himself has allegedly in some instances conveyed explicitly to his American partners that his hands are tied by his coalition and related politics.

Politicians and other analysts believe that one of the main motivations for Netanyahu to remain in office is evading corruption charges laid against him, the report said, something he has been able to achieve with the assistance of the far-right elements of his coalition. Those elements however had pushed for Netanyahu to adopt measures aimed at weakening the judiciary's

ability to weigh in on government policies, the report noted.

Following the ruling by the country's Supreme Court against the overhaul, the coalition between the Prime Minister, Smotrich and Ben-Gvir may be left weakened, and Netanyahu's future further uncertain.

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Health Canada Says Monitoring National Drug Supply Following Bulk Import Plan by Florida

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) – Canadian authorities are monitoring the country's drug supply and will continue to ensure that citizens have access to the medicines they require after Florida announced plans to import prescription drugs from Canada, Health Canada said on Monday.

“On January 5, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the state of Florida's plan to import select Canadian prescription drugs in bulk,” Health Canada’s statement said. “The Government of Canada is taking all necessary action to safeguard the drug supply and ensure Canadians have access to the prescription drugs they need.”

Health Canada further stressed its belief that bulk imports of drugs from Canada by the state of Florida will not provide an effective solution to the issue of high drug prices in the United States.

The Canadian supply is safeguarded by regulations under the Food and Drugs Act, the health authority said. Those prevent some drugs which are intended for the national market and whose sale could cause or worsen a shortage in Canada, to be sold for consumption abroad.

“The Department has informed regulated parties of their obligations under Canadian regulations,” Health Canada said. “The Department will not hesitate to take immediate action to address non-compliance.”

Those measures could include corrective actions, the issuance of public advisories and/or other forms of communications, the statement said. If required, Health Canada will also act upon the licenses issued to concerned parties were they to infringe export prohibitions.

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Epstein Accuser’s Claims About Trump, Clinton Undermine Her Credibility - Filing

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White House Says Nothing to Preview At This Time on Possible Biden-Johnson Meeting

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Monday that at the moment they don't have anything to announce with regard to a possible bilateral meeting between US President Joe Biden and House Speaker Mike Johnson.

"I don't have anything to preview for you on any conversation that he's had specifically with the Speaker," Jean-Pierre said in a press briefing when asked whether there are any plans for the President to host Johnson at the White House to discuss the border. "I don't have any specific conversation between the two of them to preview at this time, or to lay out or to announce at this time."

A source familiar with the matter told Sputnik on Friday that Johnson is considering direct talks with President Joe Biden soon about the crisis on the southern border and the White House's request for \$106 billion in supplemental funds for Ukraine, Israel and other priorities.

However, the source underscored that the "Senate still has the pen" at the moment. Congressional Republicans have said they will not approve the White House's supplemental request without measures to strengthen border security and enforce stricter immigration policies.

Senate negotiators have been trying for weeks to reach a deal that would satisfy both the White House and congressional Republicans, but efforts to reach a compromise and pass supplemental funding legislation have stalled.

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White House Says 'No Comment' Regarding Elon Musk's Behavior

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby refrained from commenting on Monday regarding a recent article about Elon Musk's alleged drug use and inappropriate behavior towards board members.

"We wouldn't comment on that," Kirby said.

According to a Wall Street Journal report last week, executives within Musk's companies have expressed concerns about the billionaire's alleged drug use, including substances such as cocaine, LSD, ecstasy, and ketamine.

Furthermore, Musk responded in a social media post last week saying at NASA's request he agreed to undergo three years of random drug testing, adding that no trace quantities of any drugs or alcohol were detected during the testing period.

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NASA Peregrine Science Moon Mission Team Battles Operating Anomaly - Astrobiotic

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - Mission engineers are struggling to correct an anomaly in the orientation of NASA's unmanned robotic commercial Peregrine Moon lander after it separated from its booster, Astrobiotic announced in a press release on Monday.

"After successful propulsion systems activation, Peregrine entered a safe operational state," the space technology company said. "Unfortunately, an anomaly then occurred, which prevented Astrobiotic from achieving a stable sun-pointing orientation."

The Astrobiotic operating team is responding in real time as the situation unfolds, the release added.

Earlier, "after successfully separating from United Launch Alliance's Vulcan rocket, Astrobiotic's Peregrine lunar lander began receiving telemetry via the NASA Deep Space Network," the release said.

The first certification flight (Cert-1) mission included two payloads: Astrobiotic's first Peregrine Lunar Lander, Peregrine Mission One (PM1), as part of NASA's Commercial Lunar Payload Services (CLPS) initiative to deliver science packages to the lunar surface and the Celestis Memorial Spaceflights deep space Voyager mission Enterprise Flight, the release said.

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### Trump Seeks Dismissal of Georgia Election Case, Citing Presidential Immunity - Filing

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump has asked the Superior Court of Fulton County to dismiss the Georgia election interference case against him, arguing that he is protected by presidential immunity, a court filing showed on Monday. "The conduct charged in the indictment falls under the aegis of presidential immunity, and the indictment must be dismissed," the court filing said.

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### US House Oversight Panel Releases Hunter Biden Contempt of Congress Resolution

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - The US House Oversight Committee on Monday released a resolution recommending contempt of Congress charges against Hunter Biden for defying a subpoena to provide closed-door testimony to lawmakers, as part of their probe into alleged criminal conduct by the Biden family.

"Resolved, that Robert Hunter Biden shall be found to be in contempt of Congress for failure to comply with a congressional subpoena," the resolution said.

The resolution also directs US House Speaker Mike Johnson to take all appropriate action to enforce the subpoena.

Biden was set to appear for a closed-door deposition with lawmakers on December 13, but instead held a press conference, where he said he would only answer questions in an open setting. On Friday, the US House Oversight and Judiciary committees said that they are considering charging Biden with contempt of Congress for his conduct.

The panels are scheduled to consider a report recommending the contempt of Congress charge on January 10.

"Accountability is here," US House Republicans said on Monday in a statement on the resolution.

The subpoena comes amid House lawmakers' probe into Hunter Biden and US President Joe Biden for alleged criminal activity, including foreign bribery and influence peddling.

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### Cabinet Members Expected to Notify of Hospitalization, Process Under Review - White House

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - Members of the US presidential cabinet are expected to notify the White House when they are subject to hospitalization, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Monday.

"I fully expect that we'll take a look at process and procedure here... and try to see if processes

and procedures need to be changed at all, or modified, so that we can learn from this," Kirby said during a press briefing, when asked about a delay in notification of US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's hospitalization.

There is an "expectation" that cabinet officials send notification up the chain of command when hospitalized, Kirby said.

US President Joe Biden continues to have confidence in Austin as defense chief, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said during the briefing.

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Kirby on Calls to Fire Austin: Biden Looks Forward to Having Him Back at Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden looks forward to having Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin back at the Pentagon, despite calls to fire him for failing to disclose his hospitalization, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"The president's number one focus is on his health and recovery," Kirby said in a press briefing when asked about calls to fire Austin. "His is looking forward to having him back at the Pentagon as soon as possible ... The president respects fact that Secretary Austin took ownership for the lack of transparency."

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre for her part emphasized that Biden has "complete confidence" in Austin.

Former President Donald Trump and other top Republicans have called on Biden to fire Austin for failing to disclose his hospitalization for four days.

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New York Police Responds to Protesters Blocking Bridges - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - Police is responding to activists who have blocked several major bridges in New York City to protest Israel's invasion of Palestine, a police spokesperson told Sputnik.

"We have all the police forces responded," the spokesperson said on Monday.

The protesters have blocked three bridges - the Brooklyn Bridge, the Manhattan Bridge and the Williamsburg Bridge as well as the Holland Tunnel, the spokesperson said.

On Sunday, a group of activists named The People's Forum announced that they would shut down Wall Street to protest against what they said was Israel-perpetrated genocide in Palestine.

The protesters accused major US companies of making billions of dollars from the US-Israeli war machine.

"It's time to say it again: no business as usual while there's a genocide," the group said.

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US Defense Secretary Austin Has Resumed All Functions From Hospital - White House'S Kirby

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has resumed all his functions but is performing all of his duties from the hospital, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"He has already resumed all his authorities, he is already doing all the functions he would normally do, he is just doing it right now from the hospital," Kirby said.

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US Defense Secretary Will Not Resign Amid Initially Undisclosed Hospital Stay - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is not planning to resign due to the initially undisclosed stay in a hospital during which time he underwent a medical intervention, Fox News reported on Monday.

Austin does not intend to leave his post, the report quoted Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder as saying.

Ryder pointed out that Austin's intention is to remain focused on fulfilling his duties as defense secretary, the report said.

Ryder made the remarks after former President Donald Trump said Austin should step down due to health issues, the report added.

On Friday, the Defense Department issued a statement announcing that Austin had been hospitalized for four days for complications after undergoing an elective medical procedure.

US media reported that Austin spent four days in an intensive care unit. In addition, media reported that the Defense Department did not inform the White House about Austin's absence during the first three days while notifying Congress just minutes before releasing the official statement.

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US Government Funding Deal 'Total Failure,' Costs \$1.658 Trillion - House Freedom Caucus

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan deal negotiated in the US Congress to fund the federal government through the end of the fiscal year is a total failure with a cost higher than

announced by congressional leadership, the House Freedom Caucus said in a statement in opposition to the agreement.

"Don't believe the spin. Once you break through typical Washington match, the true total programmatic spending level is \$1.658 trillion — not \$1.59 trillion. This is a total failure," the House Freedom Caucus said on Sunday via social media platform X.

On Sunday, congressional leadership announced a bipartisan deal on topline appropriations, which clears the way for Congress to pass funding bills before government shutdown deadlines in the coming weeks.

The topline for fiscal year 2024 will be set at \$1.59 trillion, including \$886 billion for defense and \$704 billion for non-defense spending, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said in a letter to colleagues. However, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said in a statement that non-defense spending would be set at \$772.7 billion.

In November, the US Congress passed a so-called "laddered" government funding measure, which temporarily funded separate portions of the government through January 19 and February 2.

In order to avoid a partial or total government shutdown, lawmakers must pass appropriations bills on areas including agriculture and transportation by the first date, and on areas including defense, homeland security and foreign operations by the latter date.

Last month, the House Freedom Caucus released a statement urging Congress to reduce programmatic spending year-over-year and end "disingenuous gimmicks" to conceal real spending levels.

The deal announced by Johnson and Schumer is "even worse" than the House Freedom Caucus predicted, the statement said.

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Trump Says Will Attend Federal Appeals Court Arguments on Presidential Immunity Tuesday

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said on Monday that he will attend the following day arguments at the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit regarding the scope of his presidential immunity.

"I will be attending the Federal Appeals Court Arguments on Presidential Immunity in Washington, DC, on Tuesday," Trump said on the social media platform Truth Social.

The US Court of Appeals said in a notice that oral arguments will take place on January 9 at 9:30 a.m.

Prosecutors have accused Trump of attempting to obstruct the certification of the 2020 presidential election results in Congress and to defraud the US government by attempting to reverse Democratic President Joe Biden's 2020 election win.

Trump, who is the frontrunner for the 2024 Republican party's presidential nomination, said he was entitled to immunity as president and commander-in-chief while looking and discovering voter fraud.

"I wasn't campaigning, the election was long over. I was looking for voter fraud and finding it,

which is my obligation to do, and otherwise running our country," Trump said.

Earlier, Trump sought to dismiss the case on the grounds that former presidents cannot face criminal charges for conduct related to their official responsibilities.

On December 1, judge Tanya Chutkan rejected Trump's request to dismiss the case. However, Trump appealed the decision to the US Court of Appeals, which suspended his trial and which is currently set to take place in March.

Later in December, the US Supreme Court declined to immediately decide former President Donald Trump's claim that he cannot be prosecuted for allegedly trying to overturn his election defeat thereby allowing a lower court to continue reviewing the issue.

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US House COVID Panel Says Has Hundreds of Questions for Two-Day Hearing With Fauci

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - The US House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic said on Monday that it has prepared hundreds of questions for former presidential medical advisor Anthony Fauci, who is set to appear for two days of closed-door hearings with lawmakers.

"For the first time since retiring from public service, Dr. Anthony Fauci will appear in front of Congress. [The panel] has prepared more than 200 pages of questions and approximately 100 exhibits," the committee said in a statement via social media platform X.

Lawmakers are preparing to question Fauci about the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, including US funding of gain-of-function research and US ties to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, US Congresswoman Nicole Malliotakis said in a statement on Monday.

Fauci will also face questions about public health mandates and lockdowns in the United States, as well as about vaccines and natural immunity, the statement said.

Lawmakers are expected to interview Fauci for approximately 14 hours over the course of Monday and Tuesday, the statement added.