

1/11/24 Thursday

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Nikki Haley Hopes For Boost From Former Christie Supporters

With the Iowa caucus set to kick off the election season in earnest next week, the question of whether any Republican will rise to seriously challenge former US President Donald Trump is about to get much clearer.

Former Governor and UN Ambassador Nikki Haley is hoping that Republicans who backed Chris Christie in the party's primary will move to her side after the [former New Jersey governor](#) dropped out of the race on Wednesday.

Who Christie's former supporters flock to will be key to determining who, or if anyone, will become a serious challenger to Trump. While Florida Governor Ron DeSantis held the second place spot for most of 2023, in recent months Haley surpassed him nationally and has been looking increasingly competitive against Trump, particularly in New Hampshire, where Christie was performing his best.

Christie was polling 12% in New Hampshire, good for third in the State. [Trump and Haley](#) scored 44% and 28%, respectively.

New Hampshire is significant, despite its small population, because it is the second state in the primary after Iowa and has been the turning point of multiple primaries in the past. Furthermore, Haley is the most popular second choice among former Christie supporters, with 52% saying that she'd be their second choice.

Haley may also receive a boost from an unlikely source: Democrats. Last month, Democrat mega-donor Reid Hoffman contributed to a super PAC that supports Haley and some liberal commentators have been pleading with Democrats in open-primary states, including New Hampshire, to skip the Democratic primary to vote for Nikki Haley in the Republican primary. A similar campaign was suggested in 2016, with Democrats being urged to vote for Marco Rubio, but it was unsuccessful.

But even with those advantages, it will not be an easy path for Haley to win in New Hampshire and change the outlook of the race. For starters, even if every former Christie supporter voted for Haley, it still wouldn't be enough to catch Trump in that state (though it would be close).

Complicating matters further is that Christie has refused to endorse any candidate in the primary, pointing to their promises to support Trump if he becomes the nominee.

"Anyone who is unwilling to say he [Trump] is unfit to be president of the United States is unfit themselves to be president of the United States," Christie said.

Haley will have to work to court Christie voters, convincing them to pick her over the other candidates or sitting out the primary.

New Hampshire is shaping up to be the deciding point of the Republican primary. Trump holds a commanding lead in Iowa and barring some last-minute-game-changer, it is unlikely that they will catch them there.

Trump also holds a large lead in Nevada and Haley's home state of South Carolina, two other major prizes before Super Tuesday, when more than a third of the party's delegates will be chosen. If Haley can build momentum by performing better than expected or even upsetting Trump in that state, it may encourage DeSantis and Ramaswamy voters to back her and potentially bring out tepid supporters in South Carolina.

A strong performance in New Hampshire and South Carolina would change the narrative heading into Super Tuesday and give Haley her best and likely only chance to beat Trump. But New Hampshire's significance also shouldn't be overstated. As mentioned, Trump owns a commanding lead in the states immediately preceding and following the New Hampshire contest, as well as nationally. Haley could perform well in New Hampshire but if that momentum isn't carried over to the following states, it will be little more than a blip.

She needs to not only perform well in New Hampshire, but also win some delegates before Super Tuesday, or the perception that the primary is a foregone conclusion will take over.

"If Haley has an upset for Trump in New Hampshire, that still doesn't get any closer to the nomination," Republican strategist Mary Anna Mancuso said. "It would just be a good night for Nikki Haley."

Undoubtedly, the Trump team would like to see a "knockout" blow sooner rather than later. The longer she seems like a viable competitor, the higher the chance that something changes in the primary.

"I think she's the one candidate that's got momentum, and 12 days out, that's exactly what you want," Republican strategist Jim Merrill said.

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Speaker Johnson Facing Same Threats as McCarthy

In October of last year, then-House Speaker Kevin McCarthy was ousted from his position after a group of Republican representatives rebelled against party leadership and joined with Democrats to remove him from his post.

House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) is facing many of the same hurdles in the position that his predecessor faced.

A group of Republicans in the House are angry about the spending deal Johnson reached with House Democrats earlier this week, particularly Rep. Chip Roy (R-TX) who would not rule out a motion to vacate on a recent podcast.

"If they totally botch it, we get no policy reforms, and we spend \$1.66 trillion, I don't know why we would keep him as Speaker," he said.

A group of conservatives have been negotiating with Johnson after protesting the spending deal by derailing procedural votes for Republican bills. They are demanding that the House Speaker pull out of the deal he made with Democrats and enact deeper spending cuts.

The deal Johnson cut with Democrats is largely in line with the one his predecessor agreed to with Democrats in the fall. That deal ultimately led to his ouster as House Speaker after Rep.

Matt Gaetz (R-FL) called for a motion to vacate and several Republicans joined with every House Democrat to vote for his ousting.

Gaetz, who has become one of Johnson's strongest allies among the more conservative wing of the Republican party, said he does not think his colleagues will go through with ousting Johnson.

But Rep. Marjorie Taylor-Greene (R-GA) recently added her name to the list of Republicans who expressed a willingness to call for a motion to vacate after expressing hesitancy to do so earlier this week.

"I don't know, that could be something," she said when asked about the possibility. "If those deals are going to be made, then absolutely that's on the table." Previously, Greene said the last motion to vacate plunged the GOP into "utter chaos" and said another motion would be the "dumbest thing that could happen."

With House Majority Leader Steve Scalise (R-LA) out while undergoing cancer treatments, it would only take three Republicans to join with every Democrat to remove Johnson from his leadership position.

In McCarthy's last days as speaker, it was floated that Democrats could strike a deal with him and vote to keep him in the post. That did not happen, but the possibility has been raised again with Johnson.

"Just like I told McCarthy: Talk to [House Minority Leader] Hakeem [Jeffries], and there are some of us that can support you," Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-TX) said. "I'll say the same thing [to Johnson]."

But Rep. Juan Vargas (D-CA) said that despite his close personal relationship with Johnson, he would not hesitate to vote him out.

"Oh, we'd vote to vacate the chair — I think uniformly — because we disagree on everything," Vargas said. "You can't vote for somebody you disagree with. I think we'd all vote against him for that reason alone."

Johnson said of the negotiations with members of his party that he is open to some changes but has not committed to anything. He pointed to spending cuts to the IRS and pandemic funding as wins for Republicans in his current deal and insisted it was the best deal Republicans can get while Democrats control the Senate and White House.

Parts of the government will be shut down on January 19 if a spending bill is not passed before then. A more extensive shutdown will occur if a deal is not reached by February 2.

Republican Presidential hopeful Nikki Haley is hoping that supporters of former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie will give her the boost she needs to catch former US President Donald Trump as the Republican primary kicks off next week.

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Christie announced he was dropping out of the race earlier this week.

Of crucial importance will be New Hampshire, the second state in the primary schedule and one where both Haley and Christie were performing well.

New Hampshire has been the staging ground for primary campaigns before, with the state playing a crucial role in upending frontrunners who were expecting an easy victory. Haley has another advantage: her home state is South Carolina, which is the last major prize before Super Tuesday, when more than a third of the delegates are awarded.

If Haley can siphon off enough Christie voters to upset Trump in New Hampshire she may parlay that into a better than expected performance in South Carolina, opening the primary that has seemingly been in Trump's hand since before he even announced his campaign.

But that will be easier said than done. While Trump's polling numbers have dropped in New Hampshire, he still has a strong lead in the state and would still best Haley even if every Christie votes for Haley. He also has commanding leads both nationally and in the states preceding and following the New Hampshire primary.

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US Speaker of the House Rep. Mike Johnson (R-LA) is facing threats from his own party that they may remove him from his position in a situation that is reminiscence of the final months of his predecessor, former Rep. Kevin McCarthy's (R-CA) time as House Speaker.

A group of Republicans are angry with Johnson for strike a deal with Democrats on a spending bill without including the significant cuts to spending that conservatives in Congress have been demanding.

Earlier this week, the group blocked a procedural vote on Republican pushed bills, resulting in them and Johnson entering closed-door negotiations. Johnson said he has not committed to anything but is open to hearing them out, while the group of conservatives are demanding that Johnson back out of the deal he made with Democrats.

Now, two influential Reps, Chip Roy (R-TX) and Marjorie Taylor-Greene (R-GA) have hinted that they are open to calling for a motion to vacate again.

"If they totally botch it, we get no policy reforms, and we spend \$1.66 trillion, I don't know why we would keep him as Speaker," Roy said in a podcast earlier this week.

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Canadian Police Say Responded to Bomb Threat That Halted Flights at St. John's Airport

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Police in Canada's Newfoundland and Labrador province said they responded to a bomb threat at St. John's international airport on Friday morning that prompted a pause in flight operations.

"RNC resources have responded to a bomb threat at @stjohnairport. The investigation into the validity of the information is in its preliminary stages," the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary said on X.

The airport received a bomb threat on Friday morning, it wrote on social media.

Newfoundlanders were requested to avoid the terminal building, with flight operations paused pending the investigation.

In a later post, the airport said that the RNC, Transport Canada Security and St. John's International Airport Security deem the bomb threat received this morning as a "non-credible threat."

The airport terminal building is set to reopen to the public at 11:30 a.m. local time (15:00 GMT).

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Americans Identifying as Independents at High of 43%, Democrats at New Low - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The number of Americans identifying themselves as independents tied a 2014 record of 43%, while Democratic party identification shrank to a new low of 27%, according to a Gallup poll out Friday.

"Political independents continue to constitute the largest political bloc in the U.S., with an average of 43% of U.S. adults identifying this way in 2023, tying the record high from 2014," the pollster said.

Equal of 27% shares of US adults identify themselves as Republicans and Democrats. At the same time, slightly more independents leaned Republican than leaned Democratic.

"The Democratic figure marking a new low for that party in Gallup's trend," the poll stated.

At the same time, independent identification has been 40% or higher each year since 2011. The share was lower (39%) only twice, in 2016 and in 2020, when the US held presidential elections, according to the survey.

"Independents first outnumbered supporters of both major political parties in 1991 and have continued to do so since then, except in several years between 2004 and 2008," the poll said. The Democrats, once the largest political group in the country, began losing supporters faster than Republicans.

"Democratic identification has now declined by one point in each of the past three years," the survey said.

These declines are likely tied to President Joe Biden's unpopularity, according to the poll.

The record low for Republican identification was 25% in 2013.

Results for the poll were based on telephone interviews from combined surveys in 2023 among of 12,145 adults from all 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

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Pentagon Ready to Take 'Further Action' Against Houthis, Has Not Seen Retaliatory Attacks

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to take "further action" against Houthis following US-UK strikes on Yemen and has not seen any retaliatory attacks, Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said on Friday.

"We'll be prepared to take further action should we need too," Ryder told CBS.

Ryder said that Washington had targeted specific facilities and capabilities to degrade and disrupt the Houthis' capability to attack vessels in the Red Sea.

"So far, we have not seen any kind of retaliatory action on the part of the Houthis," he added.

The US and the UK carried out overnight airstrikes against Houthi positions in four governorates of Yemen in retaliation for attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea.

The Houthis said they were carrying out strikes against UK and US military bases and positions and threatened that Washington and London would pay a "high price" for the massive attack.

The US Central Command estimates that the Houthis have attacked commercial ships in the Red Sea 27 times since November 19. The rebels are seeking to prevent the passage of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until the Jewish state ends its invasion of the Gaza Strip.

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US Strikes on Houthis in Yemen Hit Over 60 Targets in 16 Different Locations - Air Force

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US strikes against Houthi rebels in Yemen hit more than 60 targets in 16 different locations, US Air Forces Central said in a press release.

"At the direction of US Central Command, US Air Forces Central, CENTCOM's Joint and Combined Air Component Command, executed deliberate strikes on over 60 targets at 16 Iranian-backed Houthi militant locations, including command and control nodes, munitions depots, launching systems, production facilities, and air defense radar systems," the release said late Thursday night.

More than 100 precision-guided munitions of various types were used in the strikes, the release added.

The US and the United Kingdom carried out overnight airstrikes against Houthi positions in four governorates of Yemen, including the capital Sanaa and the cities of Al Hudaydah, Saada and Taiz, provincial government officials told Sputnik. The US and UK officials confirmed the airstrikes, saying these were targeting Houthi military facilities and positions in Yemen in response to attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea and not civilian population centers.

The Houthis said they were carrying out strikes against the UK and US military bases and positions and threatened that Washington and London would pay a "high price" for this massive

attack.

On Thursday, the US Central Command said in a statement that the Houthis have attacked commercial ships in the Red Sea 27 times since November 19. The Houthis have previously announced their plans to prevent the passage of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea until the latter's military actions in the Gaza Strip end.

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Texas Denies Federal Gov't Entry to Area Where Migrants Arrive on Southern Border -Reports

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Texas state authorities are denying US federal immigration enforcement agents entry to an area along the US southern border where there has been a consistent heavy flow of migrants crossing into the United States illegally, CBS News reported, citing US officials.

The report said on Thursday that Texas National Guard units blocked US Border Patrol agents from patrolling a park in the Texas border town of Eagle Pass, which has been a hot spot for illegal immigration under the Biden administration.

According to the report, the Texas Military Department said this action was taken to "prepare for future illegal immigrant surges and to restrict access to organizations that perpetuate illegal immigrant crossings in the park and greater Eagle Pass area."

US officials said Border Patrol agents have not been able to conduct their duties. Border Patrol is legally required to process migrants who enter the US.

Texas and the federal government are currently in the middle of at least two legal battles over differences in their handling of the immigration crisis on the US southern 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. The Biden administration has also experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the southern border.

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US Republican Leadership in Congress Backs Biden's Decision to Strike Houthis in Yemen

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell both expressed support for US President Joe Biden's decision to strike Houthi rebels inside Yemen in response to the group's attacks on commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea.

"This action by US and British forces is long overdue, and we must hope these operations indicate a true shift in the Biden Administration's approach to Iran and its proxies that are engaging in such evil and wreaking such havoc," Johnson said in a statement Thursday night.

"America must always project strength, especially in these dangerous times."

Johnson further said the message must be made clear that there is a serious price to pay for attacks on US personnel and commercial vessels.

McConnell said he welcomed the US and allied strikes against the Houthis.

"President Biden's decision to use military force against these Iranian proxies is overdue," McConnell said in a press release.

McConnell said he hopes Biden's decision to strike the Houthis in Yemen restores deterrence in the Middle East and sends a message to Iran.

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

The US and the United Kingdom carried out 23 overnight airstrikes against Houthi positions in four governorates of Yemen, including the capital Sanaa and the cities of Al Hudaydah, Saada and Taiz, provincial government officials told Sputnik. The US and UK officials confirmed the airstrikes, saying these were targeting Houthi military facilities and positions in Yemen in response to attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea and not civilian population centers.

The Houthis said they were carrying out strikes against the UK and US military bases and positions and threatened that Washington and London would pay a "high price" for this massive attack.

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US Official Says No Attack on Embassy in Iraq, No US Warship Hit After Strike on Houthis

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - A US defense official told Sputnik that there has been no attack against the American Embassy in Iraq and no reports of US warships struck following US strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen.

"At this time, there has not been an attack against the US embassy," the official said. "We have not seen any reports of a US warship being struck."

A senior US military official told reporters in later remarks that the United States has not seen any retaliatory attacks against US and allied forces in the Middle East following the strikes against Houthi targets on Thursday night.

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US Did Not Target Civilian Population Centers in Strikes Against Houthis – Senior Official

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The United States did not target civilian population centers in Yemen and used very specific capability in every location as it conducted a series of strikes against the Houthi position in the country, a senior US defense official said during a press briefing.

“These targets [in Yemen] were very specifically selected for minimizing the risk of collateral damage. We were absolutely not targeting civilian population centers. We were going after very specific capability in very specific locations with precision munitions,” the official said on Thursday.

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US Hasn't Seen Retaliatory Attacks Against Forces in Mideast After Yemen Strikes-Official

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States has not seen any retaliatory attacks against US and allied forces in the Middle East following the strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen on Thursday night, a senior US military official told reporters.

"As of right now, we have not seen any direct retaliatory action directed towards our US or other coalition members," the official said.

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Strikes Against Houthis Launched From Air, Sea Destroyed Multiple Targets – US Official

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The US and UK’s strikes against Yemen’s Houthi rebels were launched from air and sea destroying multiple targets, a US defense official said during a press briefing.

“The strikes were launched from air surface and subsurface platforms and destroyed multiple targets in Houthi control,” the official said on Thursday. “We conducted the strikes with a variety of manned aircraft from the United States Navy, United States Air Force, and the UK. Precision-guided munitions were used to destroy the targets and also to minimize collateral damage.”

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US Doesn't Intend to Escalate Situation in Mideast After Strikes on Houthis in Yemen

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States does not intend to escalate the situation in the Middle East after it carried out strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen that are designed to degrade their capabilities to continue attacks against commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea, a senior US administration official told reporters.

"No intent to escalate the situation. The aim is to degrade the ability of the Houthis to continue carrying out these reckless attacks," the official said.

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US Strikes in Yemen Targeted Houthi Missile, Radar, Drone Capabilities - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The recent US strikes in Yemen targeted Houthi missile, radar, and drone capabilities, a senior US administration official told reporters.

"This action is aimed specifically to disrupt and degrade Houthi capabilities to threaten global trade and freedom of navigation in one of the world's most critical waterways. The targets selected focus specifically on Houthi missile, radar and UAV [drone] capabilities," the official said on Thursday.

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Bipartisan Group of US Lawmakers Expresses Concern About Multilateral Strikes on Yemen

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Both Republican and Democratic members of the US Congress are expressing concerns about strikes on Yemen by a United States-led coalition of countries, in response to attacks on vessels in the Red Sea by Houthi militants.

"These airstrikes have not been authorized by Congress. The Constitution is clear: Congress has the sole authority to authorize military involvement in overseas conflicts. Every president must first come to Congress and ask for military authorization, regardless of party," Democratic US Congresswoman Val Hoyle said in a statement on Thursday via social media platform X.

Fellow House Democrat Ro Khanna reiterated Hoyle's concerns in a statement. Biden must seek congressional approval before involving the US in another Middle East conflict, Khanna said.

Republican US Senator Mike Lee replied to Khanna's statement and expressed his agreement. The US Constitution applies regardless of political affiliation, Lee said.

Earlier on Thursday, US President Joe Biden announced that the US and the United Kingdom conducted strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen, with the support of Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands.

The strikes came in response to Houthi attacks on vessels in the Red Sea, which the group

claimed were in support of the people of Gaza, amid the conflict between Israel and Hamas. The strikes are a "clear message" that the US and its partners will not tolerate attacks on their personnel or threats to freedom of navigation.

The Biden administration briefed congressional leaders Thursday afternoon, a US official reportedly told HuffPost.

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Biden Says Ordered US Strikes on Houthis Targets in Yemen, Prepared to Take More Action

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said that at his direction the US military, along with several US partners, successfully carried out strikes against multiple Houthi targets in Yemen that will hinder the group's ability to attack commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea.

"Today, at my direction, US military forces—together with the United Kingdom and with support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada, and the Netherlands— successfully conducted strikes against a number of targets in Yemen used by Houthi rebels to endanger freedom of navigation in one of the world's most vital waterways," Biden said in a statement on Thursday.

The strikes send a clear message that the United States and its partners will not tolerate attacks on their personnel, Biden said, adding that he will not hesitate to direct further measures to protect the free flow of trade in the region.

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US Military, Allies Carried Out Strikes Against Houthi Targets in Yemen - Pentagon

(Updates with details in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States, in coordination with US partners, carried out strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen on Thursday night, a US defense official told Sputnik.

"Tonight the US military, in coordination with our partners, conducted strikes in Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen. We will have more details to share soon," the official said.

Media reported, citing US sources, that the United Kingdom also participated in the operation. Australia, the Netherlands, Bahrain, and Canada provided support for the United States' and United Kingdom's joint operation, reports said.

According to reports, the United States used fighter jets, Navy warships and submarines.

More than a dozen Houthi targeted during the attack as a means to degrade the group's capability to continue attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea, media reported.

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US Officials to Visit Ecuador to Discuss Transnational Crime Organizations - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US officials will visit Ecuador in the coming weeks to discuss the threat posed by transnational criminal organizations and ways to effectively counter them following a series of prison riots in the country, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a statement.

On Monday, Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa declared a 60-day state of emergency in Ecuador following prison riots and the escape of a major gang leader. Noboa declared a state of internal armed conflict the following day and ordered Ecuador's army to neutralize the criminal groups operating in the country.

The unrest came as authorities raided prisons in search of weapons as well as to disperse gang members to different facilities. During Sunday's search of the Guayaquil prison, law enforcement officials failed to find the leader of the Los Choneros gang, Jose Adolfo Macias Villamar, also known as Fito, who is considered the most dangerous criminal in Ecuador.

"[S]enior US officials will visit Ecuador in the coming weeks to explore with Ecuadorian counterparts ways we can work together more effectively to confront the threat posed by transnational criminal organizations," the statement said on Thursday.

Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Assistant Secretary Todd Robinson, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs Deputy Assistant Secretary Kevin Sullivan, US Southern Command chief Laura Richardson, among other US officials, will visit Quito, the statement said.

In addition, US law enforcement officials will also visit Ecuador to assist in the upcoming criminal investigations, the statement added.

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US Strikes Houthi Targets in Yemen Using Fighter Jets, Tomahawk Missiles - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States carried out strikes against multiple Houthi targets in Yemen, CNN reported citing a US official.

The report said on Thursday that the United States launched its attack using fighter jets and Tomahawk missiles.

The United Kingdom also reportedly took part in the operation.

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ANALYSIS - Missing \$1Bln in Ukraine Aid Looms as Major Problem For Biden's Re-Election

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Official confirmation that more than \$1 billion in arms meant for Ukraine have disappeared will grow to be an embarrassing problem for the Biden administration ahead of the November elections, as well as complicate efforts to approve the supplemental aid package for Kiev in Congress, US experts told Sputnik.

"\$1.005 billion of the total \$1.699 billion (59% of the total value) of EEUM [Enhanced End-Use Monitoring]-designated defense articles remained delinquent," the Department of Defense Inspector General said in a new report issued on Thursday.

Additionally, the Department of Defense did not maintain an accurate inventory of Ukrainian EEUM-designated defense articles in the Security Cooperation Information Portal End-Use Monitoring (SCIP-EUM) database, the report documented.

WEAKEN SUPPORT

Retired CIA analyst Raymond McGovern, who personally briefed four US presidents on Russia, said the report confirmed a major scandal which would further hinder the Biden administration's efforts to get even more weapons and supplemental aid packages approved for Ukraine.

"Yes - This acknowledged scandal will complicate efforts to approve the supplemental aid package for Ukraine in Congress," he said, adding that the confirmation of the scandal could further damage President Joe Biden's already uncertain reelection chances.

In addition, Covert Action Magazine Managing Editor Jeremy Kuzmarov agreed that the new revelations would further weaken support for increased aid to Ukraine on Capitol Hill. "I would hope that the inability to track \$1 billion in weapons would cause doubt in people in Congress to stop the spigot on Ukraine," he said.

However, most members of Congress were not independent, Kuzmarov acknowledged.

"Instead, most of them remained paid shells of the arms merchants and Wall Street hedge funds that profit off the war in Ukraine and have no choice but to keep voting for more military aid and Pentagon spending. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. aptly called the war in Ukraine a financial boondoggle for these special interests who own the morally bankrupt political class," he said.

However, support for Ukraine was definitely eroding in Congress, Kuzmarov observed.

"Some are starting to backtrack on their support for the war and are holding up more aid, so this is likely to continue and Biden may not be able to fund the war as he'd like. (Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky is already looking more to European countries and elsewhere than the US to fund his rapidly deteriorating army," he said.

Kuzmarov agreed with McGovern that this latest embarrassment would further damage Biden's

hopes of a successful reelection. "As far as hindering Biden's election chances, I would say yes it will, as the public is not happy with his leadership and sees Ukraine as a symptom of his misrule," he said.

GROWING SKEPTICISM

The congressional support for further funding and arming Ukraine in the war was running up against the growing skepticism of the American people that they were wasting their money and resources on a hopeless cause, Kuzmarov explained.

"The US taxpayer gets little in return for his hard-earned dollars and they see that with Ukraine, which is another disaster like Afghanistan and Iraq," he said. Biden's disastrous policies in supporting Ukraine were now coming home to haunt him in domestic politics, Kuzmarov noted.

"Biden may deservedly pay at the polls and is likely to lose this election. He offers nothing to the American people and is an overall embarrassment," he said.

Biden administration officials claimed on Thursday that there was no evidence that the unaccounted-for \$1 billion had been stolen. However, the audit disproved two years of strong administration pledges that all the aid would be rigorously monitored and would be properly used, despite the Kiev regime's reputation for endemic corruption.

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US Announces New Russia-Related Sanctions - State Dept.

(Updates with more details in paras 1-5; modifies headline, dateline and lede)

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing sanctions on one individual, three entities and four aircraft allegedly linked to arms transfers between Russia and North Korea (DPRK), the US Department of State said in a statement.

"The Department of State is today imposing sanctions on one individual and three entities complicit in the transfer to Russia and testing of DPRK-origin ballistic missiles by Russia since late November 2023. The Department is also identifying four aircraft owned by the US-designated Command of the Military Transport Aviation (VTA) as blocked property," the statement said on Thursday.

The sanctions target the general director of the state-owned airline 224th Flight Unit, Vladimir Mikheychik, the statement said.

The sanctions also target the Vladimirovka Advanced Weapons and Research Complex and the Ashuluk Firing Range, the statement added.

In November, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova denied that Russia's cooperation with North Korea violates UN Security Council resolutions. Accusations of illegal military-technical cooperation between Russia and North Korea are unfounded and unsubstantiated, Zakharova said.

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Pentagon Says Will Not Speculate on Future Actions Amid Reports on Strikes Against Houthis

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department stands ready to respond to continued attacks on vessels in the Red Sea by Yemen's Houthis, but will not speculate or forecast any future military action, a Pentagon defense official told Sputnik in a statement.

"We won't speculate or forecast any potential actions, but US Forces maintain the inherent right to self-defense and if we choose to take action, it will be at a time and place of our choosing," the statement said on Thursday amid reports that the United States and the United Kingdom are preparing to strike the Ansar Allah movement in Yemen, whose members and supporters are popularly known as the Houthis.

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USAID Official Tells Congress Agency 'Has Seen Attempts' by Taliban to Divert Aid

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has observed efforts by the Taliban to redirect aid provided to Afghanistan to specific populations, USAID Bureau for Asia Assistant Administrator Michael Schiffer said in a congressional hearing.

"We've seen attempts," Schiffer told the US House Foreign Affairs Committee on Thursday. The remarks were in response to US Congressman Mike Lawler's question of whether Schiffer has seen evidence of the Taliban diverting aid to specific populations, including Taliban fighters and their family members.

In response to a follow-up question from Lawler, Schiffer said he had also seen attempts by the Taliban to pressure UN and other non-governmental organizations into hiring relatives and allies.

The House Foreign Affairs Committee is holding hearings on the Biden administration's policy toward Afghanistan in the aftermath of the United States' disastrous withdrawal from that country in August 2021.

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Russia's Ochigava Refuses to Appear in US Court for Pre-Trial Conference - Court Document

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Russian national Sergey Ochigava, who has been indicted in the United States for stowing away on a flight from Copenhagen to Los Angeles, refused to leave his cell and attend the pre-trial conference, according to a court document.

"Per the US Marshals, Defendant refuses to leave his cell and is not present. Court and counsel confer," the document said on Thursday.

The court decided to continue the pretrial conference on January 24, the document added.

On November 4, the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers at the Los Angeles Airport checkpoint discovered that Ochigava was not a listed passenger on either the SK 931 flight or any other incoming international flight, and moreover, the man did not have a passport or a visa to enter the United States, according to another court document.

Ochigava, who holds a Ph.D. in economics and marketing, initially told CBP officers that he left his passport in the airplane. However, the passport was never found aboard the aircraft, the document said.

Ochigava said he had not slept in three days, did not remember how he got past security without a ticket in Copenhagen, and would not explain how he got to Denmark's capital city, the document added.

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Trump's Fox Town Hall Event Surpasses Fifth Republican Presidential Debate - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The Iowa Town Hall event featuring former President Trump, broadcasted on Fox News, surpassed the ratings of the fifth Republican presidential primary debate, The Hill reported on Thursday.

According to the report, last night's Fox broadcast with Trump, averaging 4.3 million viewers, outperformed the CNN debate featuring Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley, which averaged 2.5 million during the same time Trump was on.

Furthermore, yesterday marked Trump's first live appearance on Fox since the network settled a defamation lawsuit with Dominion Voting Systems last spring, paying hundreds of millions over coverage of his unfounded claims of voter fraud in the 2020 election, the report added.

Trump holds an overwhelming lead over his Republican colleagues in the run for the party's nomination in the 2024 election, while DeSantis has the support of 10% of Republicans and Haley has 12% support in national polls.

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US Committed to Strengthening Defense Cooperation With Guyana - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States has assured Guyana in talks held earlier in the week that it is committed to strengthening bilateral defense cooperation amid the country's border dispute with Venezuela, the US Defense Department said.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs Daniel Erikson met on January 8-9 with Guyana's national security leaders to reiterate the United States' commitment to enhancing bilateral cooperation.

"In these meetings, Erikson underscored the Department's commitment to strengthening

US-Guyana defense cooperation," the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

Erikson visited Guyana after Venezuela held a referendum in which 96% of the population voted in favor of incorporating the Essequibo region into the country. Guyana said Venezuela's intentions regarding Essequibo, which makes up two-thirds of Guyana's territory, represents a threat to its national security.

Erikson conveyed to the Guyanese leadership that the United States hopes for a peaceful resolution to the dispute with Venezuela, the release said.

President Mohamed Irfaan Ali and his Venezuelan counterpart Nicolas Maduro met in December in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines under the auspices of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States and the Caribbean Community in an effort to defuse tensions over the disputed Essequibo region. Following the talks, the Venezuelan president said Maduro and Ali had agreed to continue the dialogue to resolve the dispute.

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US Engaged in Coordinated Process to Discuss Evolution of Mission in Iraq - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is discussing with the Iraqi government the evolution of the US military mission in the country, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"We are engaged in a coordinated and deliberate process with the government of Iraq to discuss the evolution of that mission in a manner that preserves these gains and ensures that ISIS can never again resurge," the spokesperson said on Thursday, referring to the Islamic State (banned in Russia) terrorist group. "We don't want to get ahead of that ongoing process."

Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani on Wednesday said Iraq is seeking the withdrawal of the US-led international coalition from the country and is able to defend itself from terrorism. The State Department spokesperson stressed that Washington values its comprehensive relationship with Iraq.

"Over the past 10 years, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS has had tremendous success in partnering with the Iraqi Security Forces to fight ISIS and ultimately deny ISIS territory after tremendous cost and sacrifice," the spokesperson said.

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Hunter Biden Pleads Not Guilty to Nine Tax Crime Charges - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden pleaded not guilty to nine tax crime charges in a US court in Los Angeles, NBC News reported

Biden pleaded not guilty during an arraignment with US District Judge Mark Scarsi, the report

said on Thursday.

In December, prosecutors charged Biden for allegedly spending money on an “extravagant lifestyle” instead of paying federal taxes. Prosecutors allege that Biden avoided paying at least \$1.4 million in federal taxes over the course of four years.

The charges come alongside federal tax and firearms charges in Delaware, to which he pleaded not guilty in October.

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US, UK Preparing to Strike Houthis to Curb Attacks on Ships in Red Sea – Reports

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The United States and the United Kingdom are getting ready to conduct strikes on the Houthis in an attempt to curb their attacks on commercial ships linked to or bound for Israel, The Financial Times reported, citing people in the know.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was expected to authorize strikes on Thursday as part of a US-led coalition and even convened an urgent call of his cabinet at 7:45 p.m. GMT following a meeting of the National Security Council, the report said.

At the same time, Pentagon press secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said during a press briefing on Thursday that he did not want to speculate about any future operation against Houthi rebels.

On Thursday, the US Central Command said in a statement that the Houthis have attacked commercial ships in the Red Sea 27 times since November 19 when the Yemeni rebels announced their plans to prevent the passage in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until the latter's military actions in the Gaza Strip end.

In December, the US launched what it calls 'Operation Prosperity Guardian,' an international operation aimed at protecting commercial ships in the Red Sea from the attacks of Yemen's Ansar Allah rebel movement, also known as the Houthis. The United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, Spain and Italy will take part in the operation.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) –
CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects that Ukraine will need about \$32 billion in support this year, spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

* The Russian soldiers ensured the safe rotation of observers of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) mission at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (NPP), the Russian

Defense Ministry said.

* Ukraine has lost up to 260 servicepeople in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said that he plans to hold a meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, in Ukraine's Uzhhorod on January 29.

NEW PENTAGON REPORTS

* The Pentagon failed to properly track more than \$1 billion in weapons sent to Ukraine, and it remains unclear whether any arms were diverted, the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General (DoD OIG) said in a new audit report on US military assistance to Kiev.

* The Pentagon on Thursday released its National Defense Industrial Strategy report which admits there are concerning shortfalls in the country's domestic manufacturing capability.

BOMB THREAT AGAINST JUDGE IN TRUMP'S CASE

* The judge in the civil fraud case of former President Donald Trump has received a bomb threat at his house this morning, The New York Times reported on Thursday.

* Police are responding to a swatting incident at a New York residence amid reports that the judge in Trump's civil fraud trial was targeted with a bomb threat, a spokesperson for the Nassau County Police told Sputnik.

SOUTH AFRICA'S REQUEST AGAINST ISRAEL

* South Africa has asked the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in a lawsuit to oblige Israel to immediately stop its military operation in the Gaza Strip, a representative of the South African delegation, lawyer Vaughan Lowe, said on Thursday.

* The ICJ will make a decision on South Africa's case against Israel over alleged genocide in the Gaza Strip in near future due to urgency of requested temporary measures, the ICJ's press office told Ria Novosti.

WESTERN RESTRICTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The United States has not notified Moscow of the White House's support for the bill on confiscating Russian frozen assets while Russia has almost no communication channels with the US, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik on Thursday.

* Finland's border with Russia will remain closed until February 11, the government said in a statement after it conducted a session on this matter.

* The Russian Embassy in Riga said on Thursday that the transfer of the House of Moscow cultural center to state ownership is an example of legal outrage and an act of state robbery.

* The United States has imposed new Russia-related sanctions targeting one individual, two entities and three aircraft, the Treasury announced.

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US Recognizes Gaza Facing Real Food Security Issues - White House

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) – The United States acknowledges that Gaza residents are suffering from real food security issues amid the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas, White House Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We recognize that there are real food security issues in Gaza, a hundred percent. And that's why food has really been one of the main staples of the humanitarian assistance that we have been trying to get in: food, water, medicine. But food is certainly right at the top of that list," Kirby said during a press conference.

The official stated that the US is grateful to the Israeli government for opening the Karem Shalom border crossing but said that the amount of humanitarian supplies crossing into Gaza is still not enough.

"There are not enough trucks getting in. We're not satisfied with the level right now ... at the maximum on a given day, I think we've been able to reach around 200," Kirby said, noting that it was much less than previously.

The US knows that "there's many people suffering in Gaza, not just from hunger but other needs, and we're going to do everything we can to alleviate that," he 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 since been killed in Gaza in Israeli strikes, local authorities said.

In a statement marking the three-month anniversary of the war, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths said that "famine is around the corner" as Gazans are "facing the highest levels of food insecurity ever recorded."

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Pentagon Says Number of Ships Protecting Red Sea 'Significant,' More Coming

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) – The number of coalition military ships protecting commercial shipping lanes in the Red Sea against Houthis' attacks is "significant" and Washington expects it to become even larger, Pentagon press secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"There are a significant number of ships with the ability to counter some of these attacks and there are more coming," Ryder said during a press briefing.

According to Ryder, more than 20 nations have agreed to take part in the US-led operation Prosperity Guardian to protect international shipping lanes in the Red Sea amid continued Houthi attacks.

Earlier in the day, the US Central Command said in a statement that the Houthis have attacked commercial ships in the Red Sea 27 times since November 19 when they announced their plans to prevent the passage in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until the latter's military actions in the Gaza Strip end.

In December, the US launched what it calls 'Operation Prosperity Guardian,' an international operation aimed at protecting commercial ships in the Red Sea from the attacks of Yemen's

Ansar Allah rebel movement, also known as the Houthis. The United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, Spain, and Italy will take part in the operation.

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Pentagon Says Welcomes Inspector General Review of US Defense Chief's Hospitalization

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon welcomes and supports the US Defense Department Inspector General's (DoD IG) review of Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's hospitalization and related notification procedures, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"The department welcomes the DoD IG's review and will fully support," Ryder said during a press briefing.

On Wednesday, the DoD IG sent a memorandum to Austin and other senior Pentagon officials to notify them of the review, which will assess whether the Pentagon's policies and procedures are sufficient to ensure timely notification of authority transfers.

However, the DoD IG may revise or expand the scope of the review as it proceeds, the memorandum said.

Austin was hospitalized in early January due to an infection, following cancer surgery in late December. The Defense Department failed to communicate Austin's hospitalization to the White House for several days, prompting bipartisan calls for him to leave his leadership role.

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US State Dept. Approves \$75 Mln Sale Of Javelin Missiles to Kosovo - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The US State Department approved a possible \$75 million sale of Javelin missiles and related equipment to Kosovo, the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Republic of Kosovo of Javelin Missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$75 million," the statement said.

The DSCA delivered all required documentation to Congress, it added.

The Kosovo government has requested to buy 246 Javelin FGM-148F missiles, including six fly-to-buy missiles and 24 Javelin Lightweight Command Launch Units (LWCLU), as well as different types of equipment. The deal also includes training and other services, according to the statement.

"The proposed sale will improve Kosovo's long-term defense capacity to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity to meet its national defense requirements. Kosovo will have no difficulty

absorbing this equipment into its armed forces," the DSCA said, adding that it will not alter the basic military balance in the region.

The potential sale will also support US foreign policy goals and national security, it added.

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US Condemns Iran's Seizure of Oil Tanker in Gulf of Oman – White House

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The US condemns the seizure of an oil tanker by Iran in the Gulf of Oman, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday.

Iran's Tasnim news agency reported earlier in the day that the country's naval forces detained an oil tanker in the waters of the Gulf of Oman under a court order.

"We condemn this apparent seizure. The Iranian government should immediately release the ship and its crew," Kirby said during a White House press briefing.

Iranian forces legally impounded the St. Nicholas, owned by the Greek shipping company Empire Navigation, in response to the "theft" of Iranian oil by the US government, Tasnim said.

The tanker earlier sailed under the name Suez Rajan and was embroiled in a years-long dispute that ultimately led to the US Justice Department seizing its cargo of 1 million barrels of Iranian crude oil.

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Kirby Says No Update on Issue of Confiscating Russia's Frozen Assets

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - National Security Council (NSC) spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday that he had no new update regarding the issue of confiscating Russia's frozen assets.

Bloomberg reported, citing a note from the NSC to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, saying the White House supports a bill that would allow Russia's frozen assets to be confiscated and transferred to the Kiev regime.

"I don't have an update for you on that," Kirby said when asked whether the United States supports confiscating Russia's frozen assets and whether Washington is currently discussing ways in which that could be done.

Earlier on Thursday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik that Washington has not notified Moscow of its support for the bill on confiscating Russia's frozen assets and that Moscow has almost no communication channels with Washington.

The White House's support for confiscating the assets is a step toward undermining the US-based international financial authority and the trust of global investors, Peskov said.

By supporting such an action, the United States attempts to exert pressure on the Europeans,

given that the key Russian assets are located in Europe, Peskov added.

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the countries of the collective West imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, including the freezing of nearly half of the country's foreign currency reserves. Russia has maintained that any attempt by the West to confiscate its frozen assets would violate international law.

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Trump Seeks Information About Georgia Election Case Prosecutor's Talks With Biden Aides

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump is trying to get details about Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis' discussions with White House aides about the Georgia election interference case, The New York Times reported on Thursday.

Trump also wants details about meetings Willis had with the House committee that investigated the January 6 riot at the US Capitol, the report said.

According to the report, Trump is skeptical about the meetings that took place since at least 2022 and the influence it may have on the case.

Earlier this week, Trump asked the Superior Court of Fulton County to dismiss the Georgia election interference case against him, arguing that he is protected by presidential immunity.

Trump has pleaded not guilty to the charges he faces in Georgia.

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Trump Speaks Briefly at Civil Fraud Trial Before Judge Cuts Him Off

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump was permitted to speak for five minutes during the closing remarks of his civil fraud trial in New York before a judge cut him off, CNN and NBC reported on Thursday.

"The facts are the financial statements are perfect, that there are no witnesses against us. The banks got all their money paid back. There were great loans ... This was a political witch hunt," Trump was quoted as saying by CNN.

Trump went on to deny all wrongdoing and to demand that he receive damages, NBC reported. Additionally, Trump set his sights on New York Attorney General Letitia James, accusing her of election interference and her office of not providing appropriate documentation proving her allegations about Trump's supposedly inflated financial statements.

"They found nothing and now she comes in and says she wants to make a \$250 million fine a [\$370 million], for what!?" Trump was quoted as saying by NBC.

On Wednesday, Justice Arthur Engoron told Trump's attorneys that he wouldn't be permitted to speak at the trial after his attorneys missed an agreement deadline, but on Thursday during the trial Trump's attorneys asked the justice to reconsider letting the former president speak for two

to three minutes, the report said. Engoron relented on the condition that Trump promise to only comment on the facts of the case.

The civil fraud case against Trump was brought by New York Attorney General Letitia James for allegedly lying about the value of Trump properties, for which James is seeking \$370 million in fines and to ban Trump from the New York State real estate industry. Trump has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing in the case.

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Houthis' 27 Attack on Commercial Ship in Red Sea Unsuccessful – US CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, JANUARY 11 (Sputnik) – The US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Thursday that the Houthis' 27 attack on commercial shipping lanes in the Red Sea earlier in the day was unsuccessful.

“On Jan. 11 at approximately 2 a.m. 'Sanaa time', the Iranian-backed Houthis fired an anti-ship ballistic missile from Houthi- controlled areas in Yemen into international shipping lanes in the Gulf of Aden. One commercial vessel reported visually observing the missile impact the water; however, there were no injuries or damage reported. This is the 27th Houthi attack on international shipping since Nov 19,” CENTCOM said in a statement.

In November, the Houthis vowed they would continue to prevent the passage in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until the latter's military actions in the Gaza Strip end.

In December, the US launched what it calls 'Operation Prosperity Guardian,' an international operation aimed at protecting commercial ships in the Red Sea from the attacks of Yemen's Ansar Allah rebel movement, also known as the Houthis. The United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, Spain, and Italy will take part in the operation.

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Canada Has 'Social Capacity' to Welcome Immigrants - Finance Minister

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - Canadian Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland said on Thursday that Canada is fortunate to have the "social capacity" to welcome immigrants.

Earlier on Thursday, media reported that a 2022 analysis by the Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship on the consequences immigration could have on the Canadian economy, housing and services, showed that the country's population growth was outpacing new housing.

Government officials have since been warned by federal public servants that rapid demographic growth would add heightened pressure on the country's healthcare and housing

affordability at a time when the population increase was already outpacing the supply of new housing.

"We are extremely fortunate as a country that we have the social capacity to welcome immigrants," Freeland said. "If we want to be a country that welcomes new Canadians ... we have to build more homes faster."

Freeland expressed her belief that Canada is one of the most welcoming countries for immigrants and that the newcomers are an economic strength for the country, driving its economic growth.

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US Sees Little Impact Of Red Sea Attacks On Its Economy – White House

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration sees very little impact of Houthis' attacks on ships in the Red Sea on the US economy, National Economic Advisor Lael Brainard said on Thursday.

"So far, we really have seen a very little effect on the US economy," Brainard told reporters.

The attacks urged shippers to find different ways to avoid the Red Sea. That leads to longer shipping times but did not affect the US economy, she added.

Brainard pointed out that the US national security team is focusing on the attacks and monitoring the situation very closely.

Yemen's Houthis rebels have launched multiple attacks against commercial ships sailing the Red Sea in recent weeks in a show of solidarity with the Palestinians in the Gaza enclave who are under attack by Israel.

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US Demands Iran Immediately Release Oil Tanker Seized in Gulf of Oman - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The United States urges Iran to immediately release an oil tanker and its crew seized by Iran in the Gulf of Oman, State Department deputy principal spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Thursday.

"The Iranian government must immediately release the ship and its crew," Patel said during a press briefing.

Patel stated that Iran's "unlawful" seizure of a commercial vessel is "just the latest behavior by Iran or enabled by Iran aimed at disrupting international commerce."

"Iran and Iran-abled provocative actions like this are a menace to the global economy and it must cease," Patel said.

Earlier in the day, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) said it had received a report that four to five armed persons wearing "military style black uniforms with

black masks" boarded a vessel in the Gulf of Oman. The incident occurred at around 3:30 GMT some 50 nautical miles off the city of Sohar in Oman, the authority said.

A security officer reported hearing "unknown voices" over the phone along with the captain's voice, UKMTO said. The vessel later changed course toward Iranian territorial waters and communications with it were lost.

The oil tanker St Nikolas belongs to Greek shipping company Empire Navigation. The tanker earlier sailed under the name Suez Rajan and was embroiled in a years-long dispute that ultimately led to the US Justice Department seizing 1 million barrels of Iranian crude oil.

Iran has said that the seizure followed an order from an Iranian court and was in response to the "theft" of Iran's oil.

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White House, Senate Negotiators 'Very Close' to Deal on Ukraine Aid-Border Bill - Senator

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - White House and Senate negotiators are very close to reaching a deal on a supplemental bill to fund Ukraine aid and border security, among other national security priorities, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema said on Thursday.

"We are very close, we're dealing with last one or two items, but we're working productively with a shared focus on getting to an agreement," Sinema told local news broadcaster KGUN 9.

Sinema added that she's feeling very confident about the status of the negotiations and hopes a draft text of the bill may be available for other lawmakers to see soon.

The White House has asked Congress to provide more than \$100 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.

The White House is reportedly willing to work with Senate Republicans on including provisions in the legislation that will significantly tighten immigration policies as a means to deter record migration at the US-Mexico border.

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Alabama Prisoners' Families Lawsuit Alleges Bodies Returned Without Organs - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The families of deceased Alabama inmates have filed a lawsuit against the Alabama Department of Corrections in which they claim a distressing pattern of missing hearts and other organs in the returned bodies of their loved ones, CBS News reported on Thursday.

According to the report, Brandon Clay Dotson's death at the Ventress Correctional Facility last year raised suspicions of foul play, leading his family to hire a pathologist for a second autopsy that revealed his heart was missing, the report said.

The Dotsons then discovered that other families have experienced that their deceased sons who served sentences in Alabama were missing organs, the report said.

In a recent court filing, the daughter of Charles Edward Singleton disclosed that her father's body lacked all internal organs upon his body's return in 2021, the report said.

The lawsuit alleges the possibility of Dotson's heart being preserved during the state autopsy for potential research at the University of Alabama at Birmingham medical school, the report added.

However, this claim was dismissed by the university attorneys, according to the report.

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FAA Says Investigating Boeing After Door Plug Falls Off Alaska Airlines Plane Midair

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) – The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said on Thursday that it is conducting an investigation of Boeing following a recent incident when an Alaska Airlines passenger plane door fell off midair.

"FAA formally notified Boeing that it is conducting an investigation to determine if Boeing failed to ensure completed products conformed to its approved design and were in a condition for safe operation in compliance with FAA regulations. This investigation is a result of an incident on a Boeing Model 737-9 MAX where it lost a 'plug' type passenger door and additional discrepancies," the agency said in a statement.

The statement emphasized that the timeline of Boeing 737-9 Max's return to service would depend only on the safety of the aircraft, and not on the desire to quickly get it back in the air.

On Friday, Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 with 171 passengers and six crew members on board made an emergency landing in Portland in the US state of Oregon after a chunk of the fuselage, including one window, detached midair. No injuries were reported.

The next day following the incident, FAA ordered the grounding of all Boeing 737 MAX 9 planes in the United States.

This is the second incident involving the MAX aircraft recently. In late December, Boeing asked operators to inspect its 737 MAX airplanes for a "possible loose bolt" that is part of the rudder control system after discovering a bolt with a missing nut during routine maintenance.

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US House Speaker Says Made No Commitments to Abandon Government Funding Deal Topline

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Thursday that he has made no commitments with other lawmakers to abandon a deal on a topline government funding figure with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.

“We’re having thoughtful conversations about funding options and priorities,” Johnson said, when asked about changes to the agreement. “We’ll continue having cross sections of members in, and while those conversations are going on, I’ve made no commitments.”

Earlier this week, Johnson and Schumer announced a deal to advance government funding negotiations by agreeing to a topline spending figure of \$1.59 trillion for fiscal year 2024. The US Congress has until January 19 and February 2 to fund separate portions of the federal government, lest they shut down.

The deal came under fire by the House Freedom Caucus, who called the agreement a “total failure” and alleged that the real spending level is \$1.658 trillion.

On Wednesday, a group of lawmakers including Congressman Matt Rosendale and Senator Mike Lee said that they will not approve additional federal government funding until the US Congress and the Biden administration secure the United States’ southern border.

A group of House Republicans are also delaying passage of other legislation in the lower chamber of Congress as a form of opposition to the agreement. House Freedom Caucus Chair Bob Good said that the lawmakers are making clear that they will not accept a deal that does not secure the border and cut spending.

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Blinken to Visit Switzerland Jan. 15-17 to Take Part in World Economic Forum - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Davos, Switzerland on January 15-17 to participate in the annual World Economic Forum and discuss issues of global concern with leaders, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

“Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Davos, Switzerland January 15-17 to attend the World Economic Forum. During the World Economic Forum, Secretary Blinken will meet with leaders to discuss issues of global concern,” Miller said in a statement.

During the forum, Blinken is expected to emphasize the need to achieve lasting peace and security in the Middle East, the United States’ enduring commitment to the people of Ukraine, and the US commitment to transatlantic security and the rules-based international order, the statement said.

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US Putting Record Numbers of Migrants Through Expedited Removal Process - DHS

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has been putting a record number of illegal migrants through the expedited removal process since the COVID-era public health emergency was lifted in May, the assistant secretary of homeland security for border and

immigration policy said on Thursday.

"We are putting record numbers of people through the expedited removal process," Blas Nunez-Neto told a briefing. "As a result, since May 12, when our public health emergency was lifted and the Title 42 public health emergency authority stopped being in place at the border, we have undertaken more than 482,000 returns, repatriations and removals since then."

Nunez-Neto said that these are removals to countries all over the world.

The Trump-era Title 42 public health policy, which allowed authorities to expel migrants arriving from regions with a high risk of coronavirus infection, expired at midnight on May 11.

The US has faced a record number of migrants arriving at the southern border during the Biden presidency, with over 2.3 million people entering the country.

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Mayorkas' Testimony Timing Sparks Dispute With US House Homeland Security Committee

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The US House Homeland Security Committee will move forward with hearing from victims of the crisis on the US border with Mexico next week after Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas failed to accept the panel's invitation to testify, committee Chairman Mark Green said on Thursday.

"After failing to accept our invitation or offer an alternative time to testify, the Committee is moving forward with hearing from victims of Secretary Mayorkas' border crisis next week," Green said in a statement.

The Homeland Security Department issued a letter saying that Mayorkas looks forward to working with the committee staff on the date of the hearing, but his schedule is "quite committed" and includes meetings with Mexican officials to discuss border enforcement.

Last week, Green said the Homeland Security Committee's investigation found sufficient evidence to impeach Mayorkas for ignoring border security measures and misusing taxpayer funds.

The impeachment probe comes amid a record surge in illegal immigration on the US southern border. According to media reports, US officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters on the border in December - the highest figure recorded in a single month.

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HRW Says Arms Supplies to Israel Violate US Laws Conditioning Aid on Int'l Law Compliance

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's transfer of arms to Israel amid the Gaza war violated US domestic laws and policies that require that recipients of weapons must abide by international law, Human Rights Watch said in its World Report 2024.

"President Biden strongly criticized the Hamas-led attack on southern Israel on October 7 that

resulted in the killing of hundreds of Israeli and other civilians. He committed increased support for Israel's defense beyond already approved annual military aid," the report stated. "Such security assistance and arms transfers violated US domestic laws and policies that condition US military aid on ensuring partners are not in violation of international law."

After the October 7 Hamas attack, the Biden administration requested \$14.3 billion for further arms to Israel in addition to the \$3.8 billion in US military aid Israel receives annually, HRW recalled.

The US also either transferred or said it is going to transfer small diameter bombs, Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) guidance kits, 155mm artillery shells, and 1 million rounds of ammunition, among other weapons.

However, the US halted small arms shipments out of concern that they could be transferred to settlers responsible for violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, the report added.

Since October 7, the Biden administration has not imposed conditions on how Israel could use its military aid amid the ongoing war with Hamas. Both the Pentagon and the White House have said they trust that Israel will use this aid properly.

In November, President Joe Biden said that putting conditions on military aid to Israel was a "worthwhile thought."

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US Expects More Ukrainian Grain to Go Through Moldova Danube River This Year - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The United States expects more Ukrainian grain will be able to be transported through Moldova's Danube River this year, US State Department Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Elizabeth Allen said on Thursday.

The Turkey- and UN-mediated Black Sea Grain Initiative, which provided for a humanitarian corridor to allow safe sea exports of Ukrainian and Russian agricultural products and fertilizers, expired July 18, 2023 after Russia refused to extend its participation, citing persistent violation of the package deal's component to facilitate Russian grain and fertilizer exports.

"Working with Moldova and the the openness of the Danube River, actually, we've seen quite a bit of grain travel through the Danube route, and we're really optimistic and we see signs that in 2024 will be able to do even more and so there's a lot of attention being paid to that," Allen said during a panel discussion with the Center for Strategic and International Studies about Black Sea security.

Earlier in the day, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Viktoria Abramchenko told Sputnik Russia does not yet see any prospects for resuming the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

The grain deal was an integral part of a package agreement. The second part - the Russia-UN memorandum, designed for three years - envisioned the unblocking of Russian exports of food and fertilizers, the reconnection of the Russian Agricultural Bank (Rosselkhozbank) to SWIFT, the resumption of supplies of agricultural machinery, spare parts and services, the restoration of the Togliatti-Odessa ammonia pipeline and a number of other measures. Moscow repeatedly said this part of the package agreement was not being implemented.

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US Army Experiences Steep Drop in Number of White Recruits - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The US Army has experienced a steep decline in the number of white people recruited to the service in recent years, Military.com reported, citing internal Defense Department data.

In 2018, the Army categorized more than 44,000 new recruits as white, but that figure has fallen every year, to approximately 25,000 white recruits in 2023, the report said on Wednesday. The share of white people among Army recruits dropped from 56.4% in 2018 to 44% in 2023, the report said.

There was a 6% drop in white recruits from 2022 to 2023 - the most significant year-on-year decrease, the report said.

Non-Hispanic white people constitute 58.9% of the population in the United States, according to July 2023 US Census data.

The decrease in white Army recruits coincides with a larger recruitment shortfall in the service, the report said.

The Army failed to reach its 2023 recruitment goal of 65,000 people by approximately 10,000 recruits, the report added.

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CORRECTION - Racism, Anti-Immigrant Sentiments, Threats to Democracy Remain in US- Human Rights Watch

(adds correction to headline)

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - Racism, anti-immigrant attitudes as well as threats to democracy continue to be outstanding human rights issues in the United States, Human Rights Watch stated in its World Report 2024.

"Racism, anti-immigrant sentiments, and threats to democracy remained pressing human rights problems in the United States in 2023," the reports said.

The report pointed out that the national poverty rate increased dramatically amid the expiration of a pandemic-period child tax credit, while economic inequality also rose, with the racial wealth gap remaining high.

"The incarceration rate also increased, despite the US already having one of the highest rates in the world, with Black people vastly over-represented in prisons and jails," it said.

The report went on to say that while Washington held human rights abusers accountable worldwide via targeted sanctions, it undermined its stated commitment to human rights by providing military aid to human rights-abusing countries.

HRW also criticized in the report US state and federal authorities for pursuing policies aimed at deterring people from seeking asylum in the United States. "A federal task force documented harassment and threats against election officials, revealing the need to better protect election administrators from intimidation and to address the spread of misinformation and disinformation," the report said.

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Schumer Says Will Push Stopgap US Government Funding Measure to Avoid Shutdown

(Updates with more details in paras 5-8)

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Thursday that he is pushing a temporary federal government funding measure in a bid to avert a government shutdown on January 19, due to lawmakers needing more time to pass full appropriations measures.

"Unfortunately, it has become crystal clear that it will take more than a week to finish the appropriations process, so today, I am taking the first procedural step for the Senate to pass a temporary extension of government funding, so the government does not shut down on January 19," Schumer said during remarks on the Senate floor.

Schumer explained that will file cloture on a shell bill for members to act on next week. Passing a temporary extension could take approximately a week of work, he added.

Schumer also said that he is in talks with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell on the matter.

The US House of Representatives may also end up considering a continuing resolution to temporarily fund the government, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries said on Thursday.

"From my perspective, let's cross that bridge when we get to it, but it's a question that I think is going to be before us, as to the need for a continuing resolution, sooner rather than later," Jeffries said during a press conference.

Jeffries said that he has not spoken to House Speaker Mike Johnson about a potential continuing resolution.

On Wednesday, Johnson said that he is confident that lawmakers can pass appropriations bills before the January 19 and February 2 government shutdown deadlines.

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Senior US Official Says Blinken Planning to Visit Bulgaria 'In Short Order'

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is planning to visit Bulgaria "in short order," Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Elizabeth Allen said on Thursday.

"We are looking to have Secretary Blinken visit Bulgaria in short order," Allen said during a panel discussion with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) about security in the Black Sea.

Allen explained that Bulgaria has been a really important US ally and a visit to the country by a high US official "really matters" in light of the fact that neighboring Romania and other NATO allies have received US visitors.

The State Department leadership team is trying to prioritize showing up and making allies feel like the United States cares and respects its partnership with them, Allen said.

Bulgarian Defense Minister Todor Tagarev is currently in Washington and was scheduled to meet with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, but it is unclear if the two will talk given that the Pentagon chief is still hospitalized after undergoing cancer treatment.

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Racism, Anti-Immigrant Sentiments, Threats to Democracy Remain US- Human Rights Watch

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - Racism, anti-immigrant attitudes as well as threats to democracy continue to be outstanding human right issues in the United States , Human Rights Watch stated in its World Report 2024.

"Racism, anti-immigrant sentiments, and threats to democracy remained pressing human rights problems in the United States in 2023," the reports said.

The report pointed out that the national poverty rate increased dramatically ceasing a pandemic-period child tax credit, while economic inequality also rose, with the racial wealth gap remaining high.

"The incarceration rate also increased, despite the US already having one of the highest rates in the world, with Black people vastly over represented in prisons and jails," it said.

The report went on to say that Washington held human rights abusers accountable worldwide via targeted sanctions, however, undermined its stated commitment to human rights by providing military aid to human rights-abusing countries.

HRW also criticized in the report US state and federal authorities for pursuing policies aimed at deterring people from seeking asylum in the United States.

"A federal task force documented harassment and threats against election officials, revealing the need to better protect election administrators from intimidation and to address the spread of misinformation and disinformation," the report said.

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Toronto Man Arrested for Inciting Hatred by Displaying 'Terrorist Flag' - Police

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The Toronto Police Service said on Thursday that it had arrested an individual for publicly inciting hatred by waving a flag of an organization designated as terrorist by the Canadian government.

The incident happened on January 7 as the individual participated in a large demonstration in Toronto over the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian organization Hamas. The individual is set to appear before the Ontario Court of Justice on February 23, at 2:00 p.m. (EST).

"On Sunday, Maged Sameh Hilal Al Khalaf, 41, of Toronto, was arrested and charged after he allegedly marched in the Queen Street West and Bay Street area waving a flag of an organization listed as a terrorist group by Public Safety Canada," the police said in a statement.

However, the police did not provide any specifics about the flag and whether it represented a particular terrorist group.

Toronto Police Chief Myron Demkiw warned that hatred and intimidation have no place in Toronto and the authorities are committed to restoring public safety and not tolerating behaviors that cross the line of criminal activity.

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Canadian Emergency Rooms Overcrowded, Waiting Times Up to 20Hrs – Medical Association

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) – Several emergency rooms across Canada are currently overcrowded, with patients forced to wait up to 20 hours before receiving care, the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) said on Thursday.

"Many emergency rooms across the country are overflowing and patients across Canada are waiting far too long to receive necessary care ... testimonies from around the country illustrate that patients in some jurisdictions are waiting as long as 20 hours or longer to receive care," CMA's statement said.

The current situation is taking a toll on hospitals, which are understaffed, overcrowded, and lack access to high-quality team-based primary care, the statement said.

This situation makes hospitals under-resourced to receive the influx of patients with influenza, COVID-19 or respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), it added.

"Solutions to ease the pain points for patients and providers are crucial," CMA said, noting that that emergency rooms should not operate as substitutes for walk-in clinics or primary care.

CMA added that Canada is facing a primary care crisis and urgent solutions are required to address the situation. Measures should include transforming and rebuilding the health care system.

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UK's Policies Severely Eroded Domestic Human Rights Protections- Human Rights Watch

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - London's policies have seriously ruined domestic human right protections and moreover impaired effort aimed at promoting human rights worldwide, Human Rights Watch stated in a press release upon publication of its World Report 2024.

"The United Kingdom government's policies and practices both severely eroded domestic human rights protections and undermined its efforts to promote human rights globally in 2023," the release said.

The NGO explained that last year, London weakened basic freedoms such as people's right to protest, with its new legislation - the Public Order Act - passed amid an ongoing crackdown on protests against the government's climate change policies.

"The UK's pursuit of its plan to transfer asylum seekers to Rwanda and the introduction of the Illegal Migration Act attacked the rights of refugees and asylum seekers and generally had a corrosive influence on international norms and standards," it went on to say.

The report also criticized London for failing to adopt policies ensuring people's rights to social security and an adequate standard of living in the wake of an ongoing cost of living crisis.

HRW also said emphasized London's double standards when it comes to the international issues.

"On the world stage, the government used its position and influence to call out abuses in Sudan, Ukraine, Iran, Belarus, and elsewhere," the NGO said. "However, it has failed to call out Israel's collective punishment of the people of Gaza by cutting electricity, water, fuel, and food, which are also war crimes, nor signal any concern with Israel's incessant aerial bombardment that has killed thousands of children and other civilians and reduced large parts of neighborhoods to rubble."

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IMF Closely Monitoring Impact of Attacks in Red Sea on Global Trade - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is closely monitoring the impact of the Houthis' attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea on global trade, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"Obviously, this is the issue that we are closely monitoring," Kozack said.

Kozack noted that transportation through the Red Sea accounts for 10% of global trade flows and the continued attacks on commercial vessels have already led to an increase in shipping costs and added time for product deliveries.

"This could renew upward pressure on prices," Kozack said.

The IMF spokesperson also noted that the volume of shipping through the Suez Canal has decreased significantly in recent days.

In November, Yemen's Ansar Allah movement, whose members are also known as the Houthis, announced they would attack any ship associated with Israel and urged countries to recall their crews from those vessels. The Houthis vowed to continue their attacks until Israel ended its military actions in the Gaza Strip.

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Pentagon Inspector General Says Launching Review of Austin's Hospitalization

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US Defense Department Inspector General Robert Storch said in a memorandum that his office is launching a review into Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's hospitalization and related notification procedures, after news of his illness failed to reach the White House for several days.

"The objective of the review is to examine the roles, processes, procedures, responsibilities, and actions related to the Secretary of Defense's hospitalization in December 2023 – January 2024, and assess whether the DoD's policies and procedures are sufficient to ensure timely and appropriate notifications and the effective transition of authorities as may be warranted due to health-based or other unavailability of senior leadership," the memorandum said on Wednesday.

However, the inspector general may revise or expand the scope of the review as it proceeds, the memorandum said. The memorandum, addressed to Austin and other senior Pentagon officials, requests they designate a point of contact for the review within 5 days.

On Tuesday, Walter Reed Army Medical Center officials said that Austin was hospitalized in early January due to an infection, following cancer surgery in late December. The failure to communicate the hospitalization to the White House has prompted bipartisan calls for Austin to leave his position.

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IMF Follows Ongoing Discussions on Seizure of Frozen Russian Assets - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is following the ongoing discussions regarding the potential seizure of frozen Russian assets, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"From the IMF's perspective, we are following the ongoing discussions and the focus of the IMF on such issues is to assess potential economic implications on any of our member countries or implications on the international monetary system," Kozack said.

The IMF spokesperson emphasized that any decisions related to seizing the frozen Russian assets or the imposition of taxes on the interest holdings of these assets are for the relevant countries' authorities to take.

"Any assessment that we would make would depend on the precise details of any actions that are taken," Kozack added.

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the countries of the collective West imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, including the freezing of nearly half of the country's foreign currency reserves. Russia has maintained that

any attempt by the West to confiscate its frozen assets would violate international law.

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US Legislation Proposes Russian Asset Seizure, Decision on Use Remains Undecided-Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The United States proposed legislation aims to authorize the seizure and utilization of Russian assets within its jurisdiction, with the decision on implementation awaiting collaboration with G7 partners, Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Thursday.

"This legislation would allow the US to seize and use the designated assets that are found in our jurisdiction...The decision on whether to do so and how to use them has not been made, and it is one that will be made by the in concert with our G7 partners," O'Brien said during a press briefing.

Last year, the European Council said that it had invited the European Commission to make proposals on how to use Russian assets to support the reconstruction of Ukraine.

Western countries and their allies have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow over its special operation in Ukraine. The measures included freezing Russia's foreign currency reserves and halting international payments from Russian banks. In mid-March, Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov estimated that about half of Russia's gold and foreign currency reserves, worth over \$300 billion, were frozen. In April, the head of the Russian Central Bank, Elvira Nabiullina, said that the bank was preparing protection measures for the frozen reserves, including legal ones.

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IMF on New Members Joining BRICS: 'We Do Welcome Countries Working Together'

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) supports economic cooperation between different countries, the IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday when asked to comment on the expansion of the BRICS intergovernmental organization.

"We do welcome countries working together. We are a supporter of countries working together, finding ways to trade, to become integrated so that more people can benefit from the gains of global integration," Kozack said.

BRICS was established in 2009 as a cooperation platform for the world's largest emerging economies and comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Last summer, BRICS invited Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were invited to join and became full members on January 1. Argentina was also invited to join, but its

newly-elected government declined the invitation last week.

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IMF Expects Ukraine Will Need \$32Bln in 2024 – Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects that Ukraine will need about \$32 billion in support this year, spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"Ukraine's financing needs do remain substantial. For 2024, we estimate that the country needs support of about \$32 billion," Kozack told reporters.

She said it is essential for Ukraine's donors and partners to fulfill their financial commitments so that Ukraine can receive enough money to support its macroeconomic stability.

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Canada Gov't Ignored Warnings on BTNX COVID Tests Before Awarding Contracts - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) – Health Canada ignored several "critical warnings" flagging Toronto-based rapid test supplier BTNX before greenlighting its COVID-19 kits for nationwide distribution, Global News reported on Thursday, citing results of its year-long investigation into federal procurement.

BTNX, which buys rapid tests from China, deleted dozens of specimens or samples from a study it submitted to Health Canada in October 2022, a move that improved the estimate of the rapid test's ability to detect the virus, the report said.

In an October 2020 application for approval to sell its rapid test, the company cited a study that its device would detect 94.55% of COVID cases among individuals experiencing symptoms for less than 14 days.

However, the Peruvian government was told by BTNX two months earlier that the device detected 80.2% of infections. That estimate was based on information provided by the kit's manufacturer, China's Assure Tech, to all its customers worldwide, the report said.

Despite this and Health Canada's assistant deputy minister having flagged other potential issues with previous BTNX applications, federal employees in charge of the company's application chose not to challenge it on data adjustment, the report said, citing correspondence obtained through a freedom of information request.

Health Canada approved BTNX's and Assure Tech applications in mid-February 2021, the report said. Over the next year and a half, the Canadian government procured 404 million test kits for an estimated C\$2 billion (\$1.5 billion).

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Schumer Says US Senate Will Continue Work on AI in 2024 Despite Difficulty of Issue

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The US Senate will continue legislative work to regulate artificial intelligence (AI) technology throughout 2024, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Thursday.

"One of the Senate's top priorities will continue to be legislating on artificial intelligence," Schumer said during remarks on the Senate floor. "AI, for sure, will be one of the most difficult issues that the Senate has ever faced, but if there has been any consensus so far in these forums, it's that Congress must intervene to promote safe AI innovation."

AI will be a big focus of many senators in 2024, Schumer said.

Work on AI remains bipartisan, Schumer added.

The US Senate has held several AI forums with a variety of tech leaders, academics and civil society representatives to discuss the development, impact and regulation of AI technology.