

2/1/24 Thursday

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'We Shot Ourselves in the Head': Mass European Farmer Protests Blowback for Ukraine Support

After farmers blocked highways leading into Paris last week, farmers from several other European countries have followed suit, protesting against their countries' dropping of fuel subsidies, green regulations and dropping sale prices.

Veteran war correspondent Elijah Magnier told [Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) on Wednesday that the root causes of the protests stem from Europe's decision "to follow the United States policy and join the war against Russia."

"We shot ourselves in the foot, basically that's very soft – we shot ourselves in the head and now we are paying the price," Magnier said.

He noted how everything from [energy](#) to [consumer food prices](#) has skyrocketed in Europe, but that has not caused European leaders to change course. "Now, they are attacking the heart of Europe that are the farmers ... they can no longer stand on their feet with the difference of prices, with the increase of price [for consumers and] the lower price that the markets are buying off of them."

Co-host Jamarl Thomas asked Magnier [what demands the farmers have](#). Magnier replied that they want protection from [cheap products coming out of Ukraine](#), subsidies on diesel fuel to be reinstated, the rollback of European Green New Deal regulations that limit when and what crops are allowed to be planted and a fair price from the supermarket that matches the cost of living. Part of the issue, says Magnier is that the EU hamstringing what the individual countries' leaders can do to respond to their population.

"It's a serious issue today in Europe, where the European leaders are no longer able to rule Europe as it used to be, and we see how the [countries in the union are] going really down the slope and nobody's stopping it," Magnier explained.

In particular, Magnier explained, farmers are angry that they have to follow the new regulations but Ukraine is allowed to skirt them under the guise that they are at war.

"When you say 'you cannot plant this kind of vegetable at this particular time of the year because of the CO2 and because of the climate change and because we need to transform Europe into a green environment,'" Magnier explained. "You cannot [also] say, 'Okay, this is applicable only on the Europeans [with] the exception of Ukraine,' that doesn't go, it doesn't work.

"The farmers today are waking up [to] the consequences of the Ukrainian conflict and they are saying 'we have to be completely detached from what is happening in Ukraine because this is not our war,'" he added.

Instead of fighting with the farmers, Magnier said he believes the EU should at least pause the Green New Deal regulations until after the conflict in Ukraine is over and talk to the farmers

about what they need and can accommodate, but he noted that trust between the two parties has already been severed.

“So what [European Commission President] Ursula von der Leyen is saying is, 'Well, I'm ready to talk to you to see what we need and how we can work together.' But it is too late. [The EU should] stop all [their] procedures and say, 'let us talk.' But you don't negotiate with the knife at the throat of the farmers saying, 'Well, now I have to think what I can lift, what I cannot lift.'”
“If the leaders in Brussels don't start talking and listening to the farmers, they cannot achieve their [Green New Deal] plan, so the plan is unachievable,” he added.

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Corruption & Selling Out to Deep State Drive Ukraine to 'Failed State' Status

Earlier this week, Ukraine's security service announced that five Ukrainians, including the current head of a department in Ukraine's Defense Ministry, had been served with notices of suspicion related to the embezzlement of nearly \$40 million that was supposed to be spent on artillery shells.

The news was the latest in a consistent pattern of fraud and corruption being reported in Ukraine since Russia's special military operation began nearly two years ago. Former Ukrainian ambassador and whistleblower Andrii Telizhenko told [Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) that corruption is rife in Kiev and is only getting worse.

“So this whole [scheme of \\$40 million](#) is just a small little example,” Telizhenko explained.

“Ukraine became a failed state,” Telizhenko said, “because of the corruption and because Ukraine was sold off to the people inside Ukraine, [was sold off to its Western allies](#), and people in Ukraine are suffering from this.”

Telizhenko noted that despite all the aid that has been sent to Ukraine, which he estimated to be over \$200 billion, the army itself is woefully ill-equipped for battle. “People are still collecting money to buy medical kits and drones for the soldiers,” Telizhenko said. “[This is] what is happening in Ukraine, total corruption.”

Telizhenko noted that there was another case in which more than [\\$1 billion worth of military equipment](#) that the US Department of Defense authorized to be sent to Ukraine never arrived and the DoD was unable to locate them. “So this is a great example where equipment is being lost for billions of dollars, equipment is not being made for hundreds of millions of dollars, and it's all being stolen by the Kiev regime, and I think, with the help of the deep state government in Washington.”

The actions by Ukrainian authorities to arrest those involved in the motor scandal are token gestures, says Telizhenko, “It's all a big show.”

The corruption in Ukraine has always been there but grew exponentially after the West began meddling in Ukrainian affairs, he explained.

“Corruption, which was inside Ukraine, which [already] was pretty big, but then it came from the outside, from people like [US President Joe] Biden in Washington, the deep state, which said,

'Oh, why [don't] we also make money on this together with the Ukrainian politicians?'" Telizhenko blasted the Ukrainian officials calling them "hypocrites" and "so-called patriots." The corruption is so entrenched, Telizhenko said, that it will take more than the removal of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to root it out. "It [is] coming to a situation where a change of government in Washington, DC, a change of national policy issues in Washington, people like [Former US President Donald] Trump [could] come in," Telizhenko explained. "He spoke about making peace in 24 hours, that's a possibility." "The end game... for Ukraine is to have a new government inside Ukraine and to see what government comes from Washington, maybe that will give some stability in the world," he concluded.

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Hungary Being 'Punished for Being Right' as EU Eyes 'Sabotage' Over Blocked Ukraine Aid

According to a report in US media, the European Union is considering a plan to harm Hungary's economy in order to pressure it to allow the transfer of EU funds to Ukraine. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has been a consistent opponent of Western sanctions on Russia, and has vowed to block using EU funds to provide weapons to the Kiev regime.

Dr. George Szamuely, a senior research fellow at the Global Policy Institute and the author of "Bombs for Peace: NATO's Humanitarian War on Yugoslavia," told [Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) that Hungary is being punished for being correct about the conflict in Ukraine.

"No one ever gets punished for being wrong. You only get punished for being right," Szamuely explained, noting that Hungary's position on Ukraine "has been nothing if not consistent from the beginning."

After the EU earlier threatened to remove Hungary's voting power - all votes in the EU must be unanimous, Slovakia defended Hungary, vowing to prevent any attempts to remove Budapest's voting rights. The turn of events has since led to an [alleged plan](#) by the EU to destroy the Hungarian economy, a plot that was leaked to the media and published on Sunday.

The focus of the drama is a €50 billion funding package intended to prop up the Kiev regime through 2027, and which Orban blocked. Over 100 of the European Parliament's members signed onto a letter urging for pressure to be placed on Hungary.

While Szamuely says the EU certainly has the ability to significantly harm Hungary's economy, that has been blunted somewhat by actions Orban has already taken.

"[Orban] has managed to make the Hungarian economy much less dependent on others, particularly Europe," Szamuely detailed. "For instance, he's brought much of the Hungarian finance under his own personal control. Therefore, the Europeans are not really able to bring the Hungarian financial markets into turmoil. He's made himself much more available for investment from China, from Russia, from other parts of the world. So he's not so dependent on investment from Europe."

However, Szamuely admitted that Hungary still depends somewhat on European investment, particularly from Germany. "That might certainly hurt Hungary, but again, there's a reason why

Orban keeps traveling around the world, particularly in Asia. He does it precisely in order to anticipate what the Europeans might do to him,” Szamuely speculated.

Szamuely said the plan’s objective is to “make the Hungarian economy scream,” but noted there are alternatives for European countries if they really want to fund Ukraine.

“No one is stopping individual EU states from handing over funds to Ukraine... What they want to do is make this a kind of collective fund so that everybody, every single member of the EU is responsible for pissing away all this money,” Szamuely remarked, pointing to the worker and farmer [protests](#) in Germany and France as evidence their populations would not stand for it. “If [leaders] were to go to the French Parliament to say, 'We want to send another €10, €20 billion to Ukraine.' How would the farmers react? They would say, 'You gotta be kidding. Are you insane? You don't have money for us but you have money for Ukraine?’”

Farmer protests that [shut down French highways](#) around Paris have since spread to Germany, Spain and Italy, among other countries. Demonstrations have been held against a reduction in subsidies and skyrocketing fuel costs the working-class is not able to meet.

Asked about Hungary's response to the EU’s attempts to force Orban into approving aid to Ukraine, Szamuely suggested Hungary may eventually follow the UK’s lead in leaving the European bloc.

“The EU continues to follow policies that Hungary obviously objects to, its foreign policy, its policy towards Russia, its policy on Ukraine. ... [the] EU [is] flagrantly interfering in Hungary's domestic affairs on how it selects its judges, how it conducts its education policy, its social policy,” Szamuely detailed.

“So the next step is, well, why not follow the lead of Great Britain and just leave, and that's a bridge too far [right now] ... But it could come. There's the point at which Hungary would have to say, 'Well, this makes no sense to remain in this club that doesn't seem to like us very much,’” Szamuely argued.

The senior research fellow further explained that Orban has always said Ukraine cannot win in its conflict with Russia no matter how much Western countries pour into it.

“Therefore, this €50 billion, how long is that gonna last? That's going to last three months, through to about Easter,” Szamuely estimated. “Then [Ukraine has] to come back for another €50 billion. So it's like an alcoholic, he's had his fix and now he wants another drink.”

But Orban’s assessment, which appears more correct with every passing day, will not stop the EU from pushing for endless funds to be [sent down the Ukrainian black hole](#).

“That's the policy of the EU. ‘Well, let's throw away some more money, even as our own people are protesting and are actually on the brink of bankruptcy’ in the case of some of these German farmers,” he explained.

In the end, Szamuely warned that EU countries will have to address the concerns of their people or face dire consequences.

“Anyone who knows about French history, Russian history, knows when [farmers] get angry, then terrible things happen. And that's what's going on now.”

The farmer blockade protests that are spreading across Europe are the result of the EU’s support of Ukraine in the NATO-proxy war against Russia, veteran war correspondent Elijah Magnier told Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Wednesday.

“We shot ourselves in the foot, basically that’s very soft – we shot ourselves in the head and now we are paying the price,” Magnier said.

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The EU prevents the individual leadership in EU member states from properly responding to the concerns of their population, Magnier added.

“It’s a serious issue today in Europe, where the European leaders are no longer able to rule Europe as it used to be, and we see how the [countries in the union are] going really down the slope and nobody’s stopping it,” Magnier explained.

Magnier believes European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen should speak with the farmers and come to an agreement, but that she should first suspend all New Green Deal regulations. “You don’t negotiate with the knife at the throat of the farmers saying, ‘Well, now I have to think what I can lift, what I cannot lift,’” he said.

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Hungary is being punished for being right about Ukraine, Dr. George Szamuely, a senior research fellow at the Global Policy Institute and the author of “Bombs for Peace: NATO’s Humanitarian War on Yugoslavia,” told Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Tuesday.

Referring to a leaked alleged plan by Brussels to damage Hungary’s economy in response to Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s promise to veto European Union aid to Ukraine, Szamuely said that “No one ever gets punished for being wrong. You only get punished for being right,” he also noted that Hungary’s position on Ukraine “has been nothing if not consistent from the beginning.”

But European countries could easily fund Ukraine without tapping EU funds, Szamuely said, if such a move were popular on the continent.

“No one is stopping individual EU states from handing over funds to Ukraine ... What they want to do is make this a kind of collective fund so that everybody, every single member of the EU is responsible for pissing away all this money,” Szamuely remarked, pointing to the worker and farmer protests in Germany and France as evidence their populations would not stand for it.

“If [leaders] were to go to the French Parliament to say, ‘We want to send another €10, €20 billion to Ukraine.’ How would the farmers react? They would say, ‘You gotta be kidding. Are you insane? You don’t have money for us but you have money for Ukraine?’”

Szamuely pointed to the farmer protests in France, which have expanded to several other European countries as a sign of discontent in the country.

“Anyone who knows about French history, Russian history, knows when [farmers] get angry, then terrible things happen. And that's what's going on now.”

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Ukraine is a “failed state” that is being sold off to the “deep state” through corruption, former Ukrainian ambassador and whistle blower Andrii Telizhenko told Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Tuesday.

“So this whole scheme of \$40 million is just a small little example,” Telizhenko explained, referring to reports that artillery shells Ukraine paid for never materialized. “The former minister of defense of Ukraine who left his post, Mr. [Oleksii] Reznikov has bought himself a villa in France for \$10 million, bought his daughter a villa in France for \$7 million, [and] bought himself an estate in Miami after he gave up this post.”

These “hypocrites” and “so-called patriots” are selling off the country to Western interests, which Telizhenko described as the “deep state.”

“Ukraine became a failed state,” Telizhenko said, “because of the corruption and because Ukraine was sold off to the people inside Ukraine, was sold off to its Western allies, and people in Ukraine are suffering from this.”

The only way to solve the issue, according to Telizhenko is not only a change in government in Kiev but also Washington, DC.

“The end game... for Ukraine is to have a new government inside Ukraine and to see what government comes from Washington, maybe that will give some stability in the world,” he concluded.

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Less Than 40% of US Voters Say Biden Deserves Reelection - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) – Fewer than 40% of American voters believe US President Joe Biden deserves to be reelected, according to a Gallup poll out Friday.

"The 38% of voters who say Biden deserves a second term is slightly lower than the 41% of

Americans who approve of the job he is doing in the same survey," the poll said.

The vast majority of Democrats (82%) think Biden deserves reelection to presidency, with 29% of the independents and 3% of Republicans sharing this view.

Biden is in a relatively weak position compared with prior incumbents, the pollster observed.

"Although Biden's current rating ranks lowest among the readings for the past six presidents, his 38% is most similar to [Bill] Clinton's 44% and [Barack] Obama's 43%, both of whom won a second term," the poll said.

Congressional reelection figures, however, are even lower.

"The 24% who believe most members deserve reelection is lower than in all recent presidential election years except 2012, when 20% held that view in the late 2011 survey," the poll said.

The poll was conducted by phone from January 2-22 among 1,011 adults in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

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US Announces New Iran-Related Sanctions - Treasury Department

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is sanctioning five individuals and five entities linked to Iran, the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said on Friday.

The five sanctioned individuals, all Iranian nationals, are linked to the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Cyber-Electronic Command, OFAC said in an update to its specially designated nationals list.

Four of the five sanctioned entities are based in China, including China Oil and Petroleum Company, Advantage Trading Company and FY International Trading Company.

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Canada's Joly in Ukraine to Advance Talks on Long-Term Security Commitments – Ministry

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) – Canadian Foreign Minister Melanie Joly is visiting Ukraine on Friday to advance talks on long-term security commitments to Kiev, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said.

On Monday, GAC confirmed that the Canadian and Ukrainian governments were negotiating bilateral security guarantees in line with the Group of Seven (G7) Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine.

"To help deter Russian aggression and threats of future re-invasion, Canada will provide long-term bilateral security commitments to Ukraine alongside our G7 partners. While in Kyiv, Minister Joly will meet with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba, to advance important negotiations on these commitments," GAC said in a

statement.

Joly's stopover in Kiev was added to her tour of Eastern Europe. From January 29 and February 1, she visited Moldova and Poland to discuss the Ukraine conflict and regional security.

In August, Zelenskyy said he was preparing a package of security guarantees that would be in effect until Ukraine secures NATO membership. Ukraine also plans to sign a number of bilateral agreements with the United States and 12 European countries in the near future, including with Belgium, Denmark and the Czech Republic.

In response to Zelenskyy's statement about security guarantees, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said handling the matter would likely be one-sided, disregarding Russia's security concerns and thus making it an unviable initiative.

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California Prisons on Lockdown After Riot Leaves Nine Injured - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Prisons across the US state of California have been put on lockdown after a riot at a local prison left nine people injured, The Mercury News reported on Friday.

On January 31, some 200 inmates at Ironwood State Prison in the city of Blythe assaulted corrections officers, attacking them with fists and rocks.

The incident started when a prisoner head-butted corrections officers who had detained him as part of a contraband probe and were escorting him across the prison yard, according to the report. That head-butting prompted other prisoners to start the attack on the staff.

As a result of the incident, eight staff members and one prisoner were hospitalized with injuries, and later released, the report said.

As of now, the authorities have identified 30 suspects and the investigation is ongoing, the report said.

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Half of US Adults Think Israel Has 'Gone Too Far' in Gaza War - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Half of American adults believe that the Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip have "gone too far," according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research released on Friday.

Another 31% of respondents say that the military campaign has "been about right," and 15% think that it has "not gone far enough."

The poll was conducted among 1,152 US adults from January 25-29.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against

Israel from Gaza and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages.

Almost 27,000 people have been killed in the Gaza Strip as a result of Israeli strikes, local authorities said.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the prisoners and hostages, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The ceasefire was extended several times and expired on December 1.

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US Adds 353,000 Jobs in January vs Previously Published 216,000 for December - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States added 353,000 jobs in January, the Labor Department said Friday, publishing a number nearly twice the level expected by Wall Street economists and bucking the Federal Reserve's plans to cool the labor market adequately in order to cut interest rates.

Wall Street economists polled by US media on the average had expected 185,000 new jobs for last month. The Labor Department also boosted December's jobs growth to 333,000 from a previously published 216,000.

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IMF Projects China's Economic Growth to Slow to 4.6% This Year, Further By 2028

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a report that it projects China's economic growth to slow to 4.6% this year.

"Looking ahead, growth is projected to slow to 4.6 percent in 2024 amid the ongoing weakness in the property sector and subdued external demand," the report stated on Friday.

The IMF expects China's economic growth will gradually decline further to about 3.5% in 2028 as a result of headwinds from "weak productivity and population aging."

The report added that while inflation fell in 2023 largely due to lower energy and food prices, it is expected to increase gradually to 1.3% in 2024 as the output gap narrows and the base effects of commodity prices recede.

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Former Senator Says Biden in 'No Position' for War With Iran Amid Looming Election

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has no intention of seeking a war with Iran and expanding the crisis in the Middle East as he enters an election year, former Virginia State Senator Richard Black told Sputnik.

"An all-out war between the U.S. and Iran is the holy grail of Israeli foreign policy. But with elections looming and Democrat voters growing weary of backing wars, Biden has come out firmly against war with Iran," Black said. "Iran appears determined to avoid conflict too; it emphatically denies any involvement in the drone strike. The U.S. is in no position to expand the Mideast wars."

According to Black, the question facing Biden, with the politics of an election year overshadowing everything, is how to react to war hawks in the Republican Party that are demanding vengeance, despite scant evidence that Iranian officials even knew about the drone attack.

Given the determination of the United States and Iran to avoid expanding the war, Black believes it will be contained, although it remains uncertain as to whether the White House will feel compelled to hit Iran directly or to bomb Iraq and Syria.

"For now, the administration has wisely chosen to announce that they will respond to the deaths of U.S. soldiers in Jordan at a time and place of their choosing, which allows an emotional cooling off period," he said, adding that under no circumstances should Biden commit ground troops.

"The president would be wise to avoid war with Iran. When he eventually responds, the Pentagon should choose targets that minimize death and destruction so that Iran can respond in kind."

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Former Senator Says Difficult for Biden to Leave Iraq, Syria Despite Military Shortages

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Despite the US military suffering from deficiencies and shortages, it is difficult for US President Joe Biden to withdraw from Iraq and Syria, former Virginia Senator Richard Black told Sputnik.

"These deficiencies and shortages provide powerful incentives for Biden to withdraw from Syria and Iraq, but doing so is difficult, even for a determined president," Black said.

Black also recalled that in 2018, when then President Donald Trump announced plans to pull US troops from Syria, the decision led to his own general resigning.

"Secretary of Defense James Mattis resigned to break the chain of command, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Trump's National Security Advisor, John Bolton, both made statements contradicting the president's announcement. Our troops did not leave," Black said.

Despite that, the former Senator said that there are several reasons for Washington to leave Iraq and Syria.

"DoD is overstretched across the globe. Our soldiers have been taught critical race theory,

making them distrustful of one another," he explained.

In addition, Black pointed out that a vast amount of arms and ammunition has been squandered by the Biden administration on fighting distant campaigns in Ukraine and Gaza, leaving America's borders open to foreign invasion.

Senator Black also noted that Americans have grown weary of the non-stop wars and some members of Biden's administration would not be opposed to him leaving Iraq and Syria.

"However, the Israeli lobby is powerful, and Netanyahu fiercely opposes any such U.S. withdrawal," Black said. "Even if he wanted to withdraw, Biden faces resistance from the entrenched foreign policy establishment that could prevent his exit just as they blocked President Trump from carrying out his plan to exit Syria."

When asked to comment on the possible impact of the US withdrawal from Syria on the Kurds, Black noted, ". Survival of the Kurdish SDF is solely dependent on American might. It will dissolve once the American occupation ends."

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Voter Stance on Immigration Shifted, Making Republican Wave 'Distinct Likelihood-Ex Senator

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Biden's open border policy has caused US voters to change their position on immigration, turning a Republican wave election into a definitive prospect, former Virginia State Senator Richard Black told Sputnik.

"Voters have shifted dramatically against immigration, making a Republican wave election a distinct likelihood," Black said. "Both parties now agree that Biden's open borders policy is a disaster. People are fed up and won't take it much longer."

US Customs and Border Patrol reported that over 300,000 migrants crossed the US border in December 2023.

"The Biden White House planned and facilitated a massive migrant invasion at the southern border in order to fundamentally transform the demographic makeup of the United States," he said. "By rushing migrants through the border, Biden hopes to shift the nation's makeup with huge numbers of foreign racial minorities. By watering down the traditional American population, Democrat politicians hope to cement their permanent single-party political control over the country for all time."

According to Black, the nationwide backlash against Biden started brewing after Texas Governor Gregg Abbott began sending thousands of migrants to northern cities controlled by Democrats.

Texas recently blocked US federal agents from accessing a zone on the state's portion of the US border with Mexico that was a hot spot for illegal migration.

The Biden administration, in turn, had asked the Supreme Court to prevent the Texas National Guard from blocking federal Border Patrol agents from accessing a stretch of land along the US southern border town of Eagle Pass, Texas. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton vowed to continue the state's efforts "to protect the border against every effort by the Biden administration

to undermine the state's constitutional right of self-defense."

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Former CIA Officer Jailed For 40 Years Over Espionage, Child Pornography - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - A federal judge has sentenced former CIA officer Joshua Adam Schulte to 40 years in jail for the biggest data breach in the agency's history, espionage and child pornography, the Department of Justice announced in a press release.

*...Schulte was sentenced to 40 years in prison by US District Judge Jesse Furman for crimes of espionage, computer hacking, contempt of court, making false statements to the FBI, and child pornography," the release said on Thursday.

Schulte was convicted at trials that concluded on March 9, 2020 and September 13, 2022, the Justice Department said. "Schulte's theft is the largest data breach in the history of the CIA, and his transmission of that stolen information to Wikileaks is one of the largest unauthorized disclosures of classified information in the history of the United States." the release said.

According to court documents, from 2012 to 2016, Schulte was employed as a software developer in the Center for Cyber Intelligence (CCI). In 2016, Schulte used his access to steal copies of the entire CCI tool development archives and then transmit them to WikiLeaks. The effect was described at trial by the former CIA Deputy Director of Digital Innovation as a "digital Pearl Harbor" that caused exceptionally grave harm to the national security of the United States, the release said.

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Zelenskyy Wants Zaluzhnyi Out Over Alleged Effort to Pursue Ceasefire With Russia - Hersh

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wants to remove Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi from his post because of his alleged involvement in secret talks with Western officials about pursuing a ceasefire with Russia, US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh reported.

On Monday, Ukrainian lawmaker Oleksiy Goncharenko said, citing sources, that Zaluzhnyi was allegedly ordered to resign. The Ukrainian Defense Ministry and Zelenskyy's spokesman denied the claims.

"Zelensky's desire to fire his commanding general is the result, some Americans believe, of his knowledge that Zaluzhnyi had continued to participate - whether directly or through aides is not known - in secret talks since last fall with American and other Western officials on how best to achieve a ceasefire and negotiate an end to the war with Russia," Hersh said on Thursday.

The New York Times reported on Tuesday, citing sources, that the Ukrainian government had

postponed the dismissal of Zaluzhnyi due to a leak of information about his possible resignation. The government planned to fire Zaluzhnyi, but on Monday evening, when information leaked, it decided to back off, the report said, adding that now, the government is slowing down the process.

According to reports, Zelenskyy was forced to reverse his decision as international partners, including the United States and the United Kingdom, expressed concern about Zelenskyy's actions.

Zelenskyy reportedly met with Zaluzhnyi to inform the general of the decision to fire him. Instead, Zelenskyy offered Zaluzhnyi the post of secretary of the country's security council, but Zaluzhnyi turned it down.

The head of Ukraine's military intelligence service, Kyrylo Budanov, and the commander of the Ukrainian ground forces, Oleksandr Syrskyi, were named candidates for the post of commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces, the report added.

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Former Senator Says Biden in 'No Position' for War With Iran Amid Looming Election

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has no intention of seeking a war with Iran and expanding the crisis in the Middle East as he enters an election year, former Virginia State Senator Richard Black told Sputnik.

"An all-out war between the U.S. and Iran is the holy grail of Israeli foreign policy. But with elections looming and Democrat voters growing weary of backing wars, Biden has come out firmly against war with Iran," Black said. "Iran appears determined to avoid conflict too; it emphatically denies any involvement in the drone strike. The U.S. is in no position to expand the Mideast wars."

According to Black, the question facing Biden, with the politics of an election year overshadowing everything, is how to react to war hawks in the Republican Party that are demanding vengeance, despite scant evidence that Iranian officials even knew about the drone attack.

Given the determination of the United States and Iran to avoid expanding the war, Black believes it will be contained, although it remains uncertain as to whether the White House will feel compelled to hit Iran directly or to bomb Iraq and Syria.

"For now, the administration has wisely chosen to announce that they will respond to the deaths of U.S. soldiers in Jordan at a time and place of their choosing, which allows an emotional cooling off period," he said, adding that under no circumstances should Biden commit ground troops.

"The president would be wise to avoid war with Iran. When he eventually responds, the Pentagon should choose targets that minimize death and destruction so that Iran can respond in kind."

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Trump Surges to 58% Support Among Potential GOP Primary Voters - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump leads in the contest for the Republican party's presidential nomination, garnering 52% support from potential Republican primary voters while competitor Nikki Haley has gained 32%, a new Washington Post/Monmouth University poll revealed.

The results of the poll showed that seven in ten voters believe Trump would definitely or probably beat current President Joe Biden in the presidential election in November.

The results of the poll also showed that confidence in Nikki Haley's prospects would decrease if she were to become the Republican party nominee and 21% of voters believe she would definitely beat Biden, while 42% say she probably would.

Last month, Trump won the Republican party primary in the US state of New Hampshire, following his record-setting win in the Iowa caucus.

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Washington Has to Change Foreign Policy to Address Migration Crisis in US - Activist

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The foreign policy pursued by the US government has created the migration crisis in the United States and Washington has to recognize this fact in order to be able to resolve the crisis at the US border with Mexico, human rights activist Phil Wilayto told Sputnik on Thursday.

"The solution has to be a recognition that addressing the deep problems caused by many decades of US foreign policy is the only way to 'solve the crisis at the border,'" Wilayto, a founding member of the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice and Equality, said.

Wilayto pointed out that he has been urging the US government to also acknowledge that foreigners have the right to flee poverty and violence in their home countries and try to find a better life.

In fact, the descendants of those who came to North America from different parts of the world centuries ago cannot deny others the right to come here as well, Wilayto added.

The migrant crisis in the United States recently entered a new phase as Texas erected barbed wire fences along its portion of US border with Mexico in an effort to stop the record number of migrants crossing into the United States. Texas also introduced measures such as detention, prosecution and imprisonment of undocumented migrants.

Last week, the US Supreme Court issued a temporary order to allow the Border Patrol to remove the barriers placed by Texas. Homeland Security Department General Counsel Jonathan Meyer then sent a letter to Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton requesting that the state confirm federal access to border sites.

Wilayto emphasized that the migration problems have accumulated in the United States over the decades and addressing them is the only way to solve the crisis. However, such a course of action would require implementing serious steps just as all other great social changes require, he added.

The Biden administration is putting pressure on Mexico to slow the flow of migrants through its territory to the United States, but the desperation of the migrants will prove stronger than the determination of the Mexican or US governments," Wilayto said.

Migration to the United States will continue to increase unless the economic and political situations in Central and South America improve, yet the US right wing continues to use the issue to spread fear and xenophobia, he said.

"A starving person goes to where there is food, no matter how unwelcome they may be once they get there," Wilayto added.

The human rights defender expressed confidence that Texas authorities' decisions to allow law enforcement agencies to arrest migrants, the decision to install dangerous barriers on the border, and forbid US Border Patrol staff from accessing certain areas where migrants are gathering contradict the law.

"All this is unconstitutional and a direct challenge to federal authority, in addition to being especially cruel," Wilayto said.

Specifically, Wilayto accused Texas Governor Gregg Abbott of using this situation to increase his personal political prestige among the right-wing Republican base of voters.

Wilayto did not rule out that reaching an agreement on the migration issue with lawmakers in Congress during the ongoing negotiations would allow President Joe Biden to stop migration completely.

"It is now being reported that the immigration deal he is working on with the Republicans would give him the authority to completely close the border with Mexico, which he says he would do, which would condemn thousands of migrants to temporary and inadequate camps on the Mexican side of the border," Wilayto said.

In October, the Biden administration requested from Congress more than \$100 billion in supplemental funding, including more than \$60 billion for Ukraine. However, Republican lawmakers refused to approve the request without including substantive measures to strengthen US border security and address the record levels of illegal immigration into the United States numbering in the millions.

In December 2023, the US documented a record 302,000 migrants at the southern border, which is the highest number in a single month. Furthermore, record numbers of illegals have been recorded in all three years that US President Joe Biden has led the country.

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Seven Illegal Migrants Arrested For Assaulting Police Officers in New York - NYPD

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - A total of seven migrants were arrested in connection to their alleged role in assaulting two New York police officers this past weekend and the

investigation remains ongoing, the New York Police Department (NYPD) confirmed to Sputnik. "The investigation remains ongoing," NYPD said on Thursday.

The NYPD in response to Sputnik's request for comment on the matter identified the seven individuals involved in the incident.

The suspects have been identified as Yoheny Brito, 24; Jandry Barros, 21; Yorman Reveron, 24; Darwin Andres Gomez-Izquierel, 19; Wilson Juarez, 21; Kelvin Servita Arocha, 19; and Jhoan Boada, 22.

According to NYPD, all of the individuals face assault charges in addition to other crimes like robbery and obstructing governmental administration.

On Saturday night, two NYPD officers were assaulted by alleged illegal immigrants outside of a migrant shelter in New York City.

New York Governor Kathy Hochul told reporters it should be looked into whether the migrants can be deported.

According to CNN, some of the individuals arrested have only been in the United States for about a year and have already racked up extensive arrest records for crimes including robbery, larceny, and strangulation.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the assault on the two NYPD officers is "absolutely unacceptable," and that President Joe Biden is "outraged."

The migrants have reportedly been released from jail and one of the suspects was seen flashing his middle fingers to the media after his release.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott has sent buses with tens of thousands of migrants to so-called sanctuary cities like New York as means to put pressure on Democrats to change their views on pro-immigration policies. New York's government leaders have felt the pressure on their resources which have been overwhelmed by efforts to provide shelter to migrants.

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US Nuclear Security Chief Says Must Make Reactor Advancements to Maintain Naval Edge

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States must make advancements in nuclear reactor technology in order to maintain naval superiority, US National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) chief Jill Hruby said during remarks at the 2024 Nuclear Deterrence Summit.

"Additionally, to maintain naval superiority, advancements in nuclear reactors must continue to provide the US a competitive edge," Hruby said on Thursday.

The US will need to restart a highly enriched uranium capability in the next few decades, given global dynamics, Hruby said.

The US is beginning to implement an Energy Department strategy for uranium enrichment for both civil nuclear power and future defense needs, Hruby said.

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Talks on Canada-Ecuador Free Trade Agreement Might Begin in Coming Months - Ministry

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Canada and Ecuador might begin formal negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in the coming months, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement.

The possibility of launching official discussions on an FTA was addressed during a virtual meeting between Canadian Minister of International Trade Mary Ng and her Ecuadoran counterpart Sonsoles Garcia, held earlier on Thursday.

"The ministers discussed the possible launch of formal negotiations in the coming months on an ambitious, high-standard free trade agreement between Canada and Ecuador," the statement said. "Minister Ng expressed gratitude for Minister Garcia's invitation to visit Ecuador, and conveyed her interest in meeting again."

Ng conveyed Canada's commitment to expanding the fast-growing trade relationship between Canada and Ecuador, the statement said.

Ng also expressed her support for Garcia's leadership in strengthening common interests and the country's commercial environment, including by supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, the statement said.

Canada remains interested in continuing to be Ecuador's largest foreign investor and to further collaborate in the responsible extraction of critical minerals - an area considered as key for Canadian-led investments in the country, the statement added.

Ng also told Garcia that Canada fully supports measures by the Ecuadoran government aimed at ensuring the protection of its citizens, safeguarding human rights and fighting organized crime.

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At Least 8 Arrested at Washington Protests Against War in Gaza - Police

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Police arrested at least eight protesters who blocked off several key streets in the US capital of Washington to demand a ceasefire in Gaza, the Metropolitan Police Department told Sputnik.

"MPD officers made 8 arrests during this morning's demonstrations," police said on Thursday. "All of these arrests occurred near the intersection of 23rd Street and Constitution Avenue NW. The individuals arrested face charges for Crowding, Obstructing or Incommoding."

US Park Police and US Capitol Police made several more arrests as well, local media reported. The Palestinian Youth Movement, which took part in the protests, stated on social media that it blocked off five major roadways into Washington, DC, as part of a demonstration against the conflict in Gaza.

The group called for a ceasefire in Gaza, an end to US aid to Israel, reinstating UNRWA funding, and a halt to US strikes on Yemen.

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US Plan to Increase Duties on Canadian Softwood Lumber 'Unwarranted' - Trade Minister

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US Commerce Department's intention to increase duties on Canadian softwood lumber products from 8.05% to nearly 13.86% is entirely unwarranted, Canadian Minister of International Trade Mary Ng said.

In early October, a North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) panel ruled that elements of the United States' import duties on softwood lumber from Canada were inconsistent with US law and directed the Commerce Department to review key aspects of its determination. However, the US International Trade Commission ruled in late November that Washington could continue to impose duties on Canadian softwood lumber products.

"Canada is extremely disappointed that the US Department of Commerce has signaled its intention to significantly increase its duties on softwood lumber from Canada from 8.05% to an estimated 13.86%. This measure is entirely unwarranted," Ng said as quoted by Global Affairs Canada on Thursday.

Increased duties will further harm an already impacted Canadian softwood lumber industry, workers and communities, Ng reiterated, and is going to make housing less affordable in the United States.

In 2006, the two countries reached a settlement under which the United States agreed to suspend lumber duties. The deal expired in 2015 and the administration of former US President Donald Trump subsequently imposed new tariffs on Canadian lumber.

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Total Power Outage at BP Oil Refinery in Indiana Causes Emergency Flares, Site Evacuation

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - A total power outage at the BP Whiting Refinery in Indiana has resulted in the release of emergency flares and a complete site evacuation, city officials said.

"BP has notified the City of Whiting that they are in the process of safely shutting down the refinery after a suspected power outage. BP has activated their emergency response team and evacuated refinery office buildings out of an abundance of caution. Local fire departments are assisting with the evacuation by closing nearby roads," the city said in a statement.

The statement added that as a result of the outage, additional product was being burned and would cause flaring of the refinery's stacks.

"This flaring is a safety release to burn off the extra product and is a normal process during an

event. BP is working to resolve the power outage as quickly as possible," it added.

The Whiting refinery is the largest in the US Midwest and BP's largest anywhere worldwide, processing around 440,000 barrels of crude every day, according to company's website.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) -

HOUTHIS ATTACKS IN RED SEA

* Yemen's Houthis shelled a United Kingdom commercial ship in the Red Sea that was heading to a port in Israel, Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree said on Thursday.

* Current tensions in the Middle East and in the Red Sea seriously affect the situation on the global market, so it is important to keep monitoring the situation, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.

GAZA

* Israel has agreed to the proposal for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, and a positive reaction has also been received from the Palestinian movement Hamas, Qatari Foreign Ministry spokesman Majed Ansari said.

* The allegations against 12 UNRWA employees should not be used to collectively punish the whole agency, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Thursday.

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit the Middle East next week amid ongoing efforts to free the remaining hostages from the Gaza Strip, a senior Biden administration official said.

ATTACKS ON US TROOPS IN JORDAN, SYRIA

* The US Defense Department does not know how deeply Iran was engaged in the deadly drone attack on a US base in Jordan, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday.

* The United States is still doing the forensics on whether the drone used in the attack on US troops in Jordan was made by Iran, Austin said.

* The United States is not considering withdrawing its troops from Syria amid a surge of attacks on its bases in the country and the region, Austin said.

* The US base at the Omar oil field in the province of Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria was attacked by a drone, a local source told Sputnik.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* If imports from Ukraine destabilize the European market and create unfair competition for farmers then the EU may return customs duties for Ukraine, French President Emmanuel Macron said on Thursday.

* International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi will visit the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant next week to discuss the unstable situation regarding nuclear

safety, the IAEA said.

* The European Council called for reaching an agreement on increasing the financial ceiling on military support for Ukraine by early March.

OPEC+ MEETING

* The OPEC+ Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee recommended keeping oil production quotas unchanged during a meeting on Thursday, OPEC said.

* - The OPEC+ ministers agreed to continue to closely monitor the situation on the global oil market, today it is stable, but if necessary, additional decisions on the deal can be made in any direction, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.

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Ukraine Cannot Boost Military Manpower Without Taking 'Unpopular Measures' - Zaluzhnyi

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Ukraine cannot ramp up its military manpower without resorting to "unpopular measures," Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi wrote in an opinion piece for CNN, citing Russia's manpower advantage.

The opinion piece comes amid multiple reports of Zaluzhnyi's looming dismissal. The article was written before the reports emerged, CNN said. According to The Washington Post, the scale of further mobilization is at the heart of widening differences between Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Zaluzhnyi. The latter reportedly wants to mobilize about 500,000 additional troops, while Zelenskyy considers the figure impractical, citing lack of uniforms, weapons and training facilities for such a great number of new recruits.

"We must acknowledge the significant advantage enjoyed by the enemy in mobilizing human resources and how that compares with the inability of state institutions in Ukraine to improve the manpower levels of our armed forces without the use of unpopular measures," Zaluzhnyi said in the article released on Thursday.

He stated that the Ukrainian forces remain in a difficult position due to the "imperfections of the regulatory framework" in the country and the partial monopolization of the defense industry. These issues result in production bottlenecks, especially in ammunition, which increase Ukraine's dependence on supplies from foreign allies.

"Our combat experience, particularly since 2022, is unique – but in the interests of victory, we must constantly find new ways and new capabilities to help us gain an advantage over the enemy," Zaluzhnyi said.

He described the development of unmanned weapons systems as a "central driver of this war." These systems are critical for Ukraine to "avoid being drawn into a positional war, where we do not possess the advantage," he observed.

Zaluzhnyi stressed the need to completely redesign battlefield operations and forget outdated and stereotypical thinking.

The Ukrainian government introduced a new mobilization bill in the Rada on January 30. Ukrainian media reported that the document obliges people liable for military service to report to

military commissariats to clarify their information within 60 days. However, it does not imply a call-up of people with disabilities and clearly defines the service life of those mobilized during martial law, according to the reports.

Martial law was introduced in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The next day, Zelenskyy signed a decree on general mobilization. Under martial law, men aged from 18 to 60 are prohibited from leaving Ukraine.

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US Nuclear Security Admin. Chief Says Doing More Now Than Any Time Since Manhattan Project

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) chief Jill Hruby said on Thursday that worldwide security challenges have necessitated the biggest increase in the organization's activity since the end of the Second World War.

"Today, we live in a world with significant nuclear security challenges both at home and around the world. As a result, NNSA is being asked to do more than at any time since the Manhattan Project," Hruby said on Thursday.

Because of these challenges, which include nuclear deterrence, nonproliferation, counterterrorism and naval propulsion, the United States needs to revitalize relevant infrastructure in order to keep up with emerging technology, Hruby said.

Despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 measures, which made large-scale construction difficult, it is critical that the United States creates a modern, fully capable enterprise that is flexible and resilient for the next half-century or more, Hruby added.

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US Efforts to Impose Price Cap on Russian Oil 'Not Working' - American Petroleum Institute

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The US government's efforts to impose a \$60 price cap on Russian crude oil have proven to not be working and unsuccessful, American Petroleum Institute head Mike Sommers said on Thursday.

"It's proven already that it's not working," S&P Global cited Sommers as saying in an interview.

On Friday, US President Joe Biden paused the approval of new liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports, citing a need to better assess climate, health and economic considerations of pending licenses, prompting criticism from US industry.

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UN Security Council Expected to Hold Meeting on Ukraine Later in February - Guyanese Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 1 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is expected to hold a meeting on Ukraine later this month but the exact date is getting finalized, Guyanese Ambassador to the United Nations Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett said on Thursday.

"On Ukraine - I can confirm that there will be a meeting - we are finalizing the date at this point in time," Rodrigues-Birkett said in a press briefing.

The UN Security Council is not expected to come up with any "product or resolution" on Ukraine at the present time, Rodrigues-Birkett added.

Guyana is presiding over the UN Security Council during the month of February, taking over the role held by France the previous month.

Russia has said that it was not very pleased with the French presidency, noting that it had issues with France scheduling meetings on Ukraine at the last minute.

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Schumer Says Will Release Text of US Senate Ukraine Aid, Border Proposal by Sunday

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Thursday that lawmakers will release the text of a supplemental funding bill with Ukraine aid and border security measures by Sunday.

"We plan to post the full text of the national security supplemental as early as tomorrow, no later than Sunday," Schumer said during floor remarks.

Schumer plans to hold the first vote on the legislation no later than Wednesday, Schumer said.

Senators have been negotiating a supplemental funding bill with aid to Ukraine and Israel, which was requested by the Biden administration in October. Republican members of Congress have insisted on the inclusion of more stringent border security measures in the bill, amid an increase in illegal migration at the United States' border with Mexico.

Some issues on the bill still require resolution, but negotiators are close to an agreement, Schumer said.

Last week, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that the legislation would be "dead on arrival" in the House of Representatives, based on draft proposals of the bill.

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Ukraine Military Must Focus on Mastering New Combat Capabilities in 2024 - Gen. Zaluzhnyi

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The Ukrainian military must focus on mastering new combat capabilities and creating new approaches to training in 2024, Commander-in-Chief Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi said on Thursday.

"In 2024, we must focus our main efforts in three areas. Creating a system to provide our armed forces with high-tech assets. Introducing a new philosophy of training and warfare which takes account of restrictions in assets and how they can be deployed. And mastering new combat capabilities as soon as possible," Zaluzhnyi wrote in an article published by CNN.

Zaluzhnyi said Ukraine has to maximize the accumulation of the latest combat capabilities as such an approach will allow Kiev to commit fewer resources to inflict maximum damage.

The general also emphasized that the development of unmanned weapons systems remains a central factor of the conflict with Russia and pointed out that Ukraine's priority is mastery of an entire arsenal of modern, inexpensive and highly effective unmanned aerial vehicles and other technologies.

On Monday, Ukrainian lawmaker Oleksiy Goncharenko said that Zaluzhnyi had been ordered to resign. However, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry said the reports about Zaluzhnyi's alleged resignation were not true. Zelenskyy's spokesperson Serhiy Nykyforov also denied rumors about the possible resignation of the commander-in-chief.

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Russia Using 'Shadow Fleet' to Circumvent Energy Sanctions - Oil Price Cap Coalition

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Russia is using a so-called "shadow fleet" to circumvent sanctions on oil products, the oil price cap coalition said on Thursday.

"There is ample evidence that Russia has utilized these vessels to transport its oil and oil products. Whilst these vessels may be compliant with relevant laws, or not covered by them, these vessels have given Russia an outlet for its oil exports and a means to circumvent sanctions in a more unfettered way, with arguably limited exposure and without clear attribution," the coalition said in a compliance and enforcement alert.

The alert outlines evasion methods and provides recommendations to ensure compliance with the oil price cap. The price cap coalition includes the Group of Seven (G7), European Union and Australia.

Industry stakeholders should undertake enhanced due diligence of vessels that fit the shadow fleet description, the alert said. Shadow fleet vessels are typically older and anonymously owned, or have opaque corporate structures, according to the alert.

Stakeholders should also conduct enhanced monitoring of vessels and regions which display evidence of voyage irregularities, the alert said.

The alert includes a list of governmental points of contact to report suspected violations of the price cap coalition.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said that Russia does not recognize the G7 oil price cap and will not sell oil to countries supporting the ceiling.

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Police Responding to Shooting at High School in State of Georgia - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Law enforcement officers are responding to reports of a shooting at a high school in the state of Georgia, the Cobb County Police Department said on Thursday.

"We are responding to McEachern High School to assist campus police. There is a shelter in place and all traffic on New Macland Road has been diverted and closed until further notice," police said in a statement.

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White House Says Will 'Look Into' Reports of US Covert Operations in Venezuela

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The White House will look into reports of a years-long US campaign of sending undercover operatives into Venezuela to build drug trafficking cases against the country's leadership, Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"I don't have anything to share on that at this time, obviously we can look into it," Jean-Pierre said during a briefing, when asked if the White House can confirm reports of such a campaign.

The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) conducted a multi-year spy operation in Venezuela to build drug trafficking cases against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and other top officials, The Associated Press reported earlier in the day, citing a secret 2018 memo. The operation arguably flouts both Venezuelan and international law, the report said.

In an annual address to the nation in January, President Maduro said several plots to assassinate him and other top officials were thwarted in 2023. He accused ultra-right forces, drug trafficking groups, the DEA and the CIA of conspiring against him.

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US Shoots Down Houthi UAV, Destroys Explosive Drone Boat in Red Sea - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US forces shot down a Houthi UAV and an explosive uncrewed surface vehicle (USV) in the Red Sea region on Thursday, the Central Command (CENTCOM) said.

"On Feb. 1, at approximately 5:00 a.m. (Sanaa time), U.S. Central Command forces engaged and shot down one UAV over the Gulf of Aden," the release said. "There were no injuries or damage reported."

Also on Thursday morning, CENTCOM forces carried out strikes and destroyed a Houthi USV in the Red Sea, according to the release.

"U.S. forces identified the USV heading toward the international shipping lane and determined it presented an imminent threat to merchant vessels and the U.S. Navy ships in the region," the release said. "U.S. Forces subsequently struck and destroyed the USV in self-defense resulting in significant secondary explosions. There were no injuries or damage reported."

In the afternoon, two anti-ship ballistic missiles were launched from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen. The command said they were likely launched toward the M/V Koi in the Red Sea.

"The missiles impacted in the water without hitting the ship," the release said. "There were no injuries and no damage reported to the M/V Koi or coalition ships in the area. M/V Koi is a Liberian flagged, Bermuda-owned cargo ship."

The Houthis vowed in November to attack any ships associated with Israel until it halts military actions in the Gaza Strip. This led US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to announce the creation of a multinational operation to secure navigation in the Red Sea. The United States and the United Kingdom later launched major strikes against Houthi positions in a bid to degrade the rebels' ability to target commercial vessels.

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Biden Thanks European Commission President, EU for Ukraine Aid Package - Kirby

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has called European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen to thank her for the 50 billion euro (\$54 billion) financial aid package the European Union will provide to Ukraine, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday.

"President [Biden] placed a call to the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to thank her and the European Union for a significant financial aid package that they just approved for Ukraine," Kirby said during a briefing.

Earlier in the day, the European Union leaders reached an agreement to allocate 50 billion euros as part of macro-financial assistance to Ukraine.

The total amount of EU macro-financial assistance to Ukraine last year amounted to 18 billion euros, transferred in monthly payments in the amount of 1.5 billion euros. This assistance was provided to Kiev regardless of the implementation of reforms and the fight against corruption.

Western countries, including EU member states, have been providing financial and military aid to Kiev since the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. The EU has so far provided a total of almost 85 billion euros in humanitarian, economic and military support to Ukraine, the European Commission said in late December.

Russia has consistently warned against the West's continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

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

US Nuclear Security Administration Chief Says Gave Pentagon Over 200 Modernized Weapons

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) Administrator Jill Hruby said on Thursday that NNSA has given more than 200 modernized nuclear weapons to the US Defense Department in the past year.

"This past year alone, NNSA has delivered more than 200 modernized weapons to the Department of Defense," Hruby said during remarks at the 2024 Nuclear Deterrence Summit.

NNSA is modernizing the US nuclear stockpile on-schedule and at pace, Hruby said.

It is critical to rebuild national nuclear infrastructure to create a modern, capable, flexible and resilient enterprise, Hruby said.

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Austin Says Time Has Come to 'Take Away' More Adversary Capability in Mideast

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said Thursday that following the attack on American troops in Jordan, the time has come to destroy even more of the capabilities of militant groups in the Middle East than before.

"Kataib Hezbollah and other elements continue to attack our troops and, again, I think, at this point, ... it's time to take away even more capability than we've taken in the past," Austin said during a press briefing.

On Monday, Pentagon deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh said that the attack on a US military outpost in Jordan has "the footprints" of Kataib Hezbollah, but the United States is not yet ready to conclude that.

The next day, Iraqi-based Kataib Hezbollah issued a statement announcing "the suspension of military and security operations" against the United States in Iraq in order "to prevent embarrassment to the Iraqi government."

Three US soldiers were killed on Sunday and more than 40 were injured in a drone attack on the US military outpost in the northeast of Jordan near the border with Syria. President Joe Biden blamed unspecified allegedly Iran-backed militant groups but said the United States was still gathering the facts about the attack. Iran has denied playing any role in it.

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Austin Says Still Recovering From Hospitalization, Doing Physical Therapy for Leg Pain

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) – During his first press conference since hospitalization, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said Thursday he was still recovering and undergoing

physical therapy over lingering leg pain.

"I'm recovering well, but as you can see, I'm still recovering. Still having some leg pain, physical therapy to get past it," Austin said during the press conference.

The secretary acknowledged that he was currently moving around using a golf cart, as the pain persists in one of his legs and he continues to recover. He also said that there was no specific time frame for his full recovery.

Austin admitted he "did not handle this right" and should have told President Joe Biden about his cancer diagnosis.

"I apologize to my teammates and to the American people," he said.

Austin was hospitalized on January 1 over complications following a December surgical procedure to treat prostate cancer. The US Defense Department failed to communicate Austin's hospitalization to the White House for several days, prompting a Pentagon Inspector General probe and bipartisan calls for him to leave his leadership position.

The secretary returned to work from the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on January 5. Ten days later, he was released from the hospital. On January 29, Austin returned to performing his duties from the office at the Pentagon.

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Austin Says He Did Not Direct Aide to Order Ambulance to Drive With Lights, Sirens Off

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Thursday that he did direct his assistant to call an ambulance, but did not order it to drive with lights and sirens off.

"I asked my assistant to call the ambulance. I did not direct him to do anything further than just calling an ambulance," Austin said during a press briefing.

In mid-January, media reported that Austin's assistant asked the ambulance to not show up with lights and sirens on when coming to pick up Austin at his residence.

According to a report by The Daily Beast, the dispatchers acquiesced to the request, noting that sirens are usually turned off once the ambulance enters a residential neighborhood. However, ambulances are required by law to run the sirens and lights on main streets.

The aide then told the dispatchers that Austin was experiencing "nausea with severe abdominal, hip, and leg pain" as quoted in the report. These symptoms were later revealed by medical staff to result from a urinary tract infection and impaired small intestine functioning.

Austin was hospitalized on January 1 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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Austin Says He Has No Plans to Resign After Controversy Over His Hospitalization

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - United States Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday that he has no plans to resign due to the recent controversy over his hospitalization last month.

"In terms of resignation, the answer's no," said Austin during a press briefing.

The comments come after reporters questioned whether or not Austin would consider stepping down after the recent controversy surrounding his hospitalization last month for prostate cancer treatment.

Austin has also recently stressed that he never directed anyone to keep his January hospitalization from the White House and that he did not handle the situation right as he should have told the President, the team and the people about the diagnosis and the treatment. Austin shared that he is now recovering well, but still is having some leg pain and is doing physical therapy.

Austin was hospitalized on January 1 due to an infection following prostate cancer surgery in late December and has not been in office since then, prompting numerous calls for his resignation. Austin was released from the hospital on January 15.

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Attacks on US Troops Not Driving Washington to Consider Withdrawing From Syria - Austin

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is not considering withdrawing its troops from Syria amid a surge of attacks on its bases in the country and the region, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday.

"What has happened in the last couple of weeks is not driving us to consider withdrawing troops from Syria," Austin said during a press briefing.

Austin also said the US Defense Department is in talks with the Iraqi government on the US military footprint in that country.

Three US soldiers were killed on Sunday and more than 40 were injured in a drone attack on the US military outpost in the northeast of Jordan near the border with Syria. President Joe Biden blamed unspecified allegedly Iran-backed militant groups, but said the United States was still gathering the facts about the attack. Iran has denied playing any role in the attack.

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US Sanctions 4 Israelis for Role in Violent, Destabilizing Acts in West Bank - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is sanctioning four Israeli citizens for their role in violent and destabilizing activities in the West Bank, the US State

Department said on Thursday.

"The Department of State is imposing financial sanctions on four individuals pursuant to a new Executive Order that President Biden announced today to promote accountability for certain harmful activities that threaten the peace, security, and stability of the West Bank," the State Department said in a statement.

The United States is imposing sanctions on David Chai Chasdai for initiating and inciting a riot, which involved assaulting Palestinian civilians and setting vehicles and building on fire, the statement said.

The US is sanctioning Einan Tanjil for assaulting Palestinian farmers and Israeli activists with stones and clubs. The US is also sanctioning Shalom Zicherman for assaulting Israeli activists, the statement said.

Lastly, the US is sanctioning Yinon Levi for leading a group of settlers who created an "atmosphere of fear" in the West Bank, including assaulting Palestinian and Bedouin civilians, burning their fields and destroying their property, the statement said.

The sanctions block all property and property interests of designated persons, as well as blocks their entry to the US, the statement said.

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US Still Doing Forensics on Whether Drone Used in Jordan Attack Was Iran-Made - Austin

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) – The United States is still doing the forensics on whether the drone used in the attack on its US troops in Jordan was made by Iran, Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin said on Thursday.

"We are still doing the forensics," Austin said during a press briefing when asked to confirm if the drone used in the Jordan attack was made in Iran.

Three US soldiers were killed on Sunday and more than 40 were injured in a drone attack on a US military outpost in the northeast of Jordan near the border with Syria. President Joe Biden blamed unspecified allegedly Iran-backed militant groups but said the United States was still gathering the facts about the attack. Iran has denied playing any role in the attack.

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Pentagon Does Not Know How Deeply Iran Engaged in Attack on US Troops in Jordan - Austin

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department does not know how deeply Iran was engaged in the deadly drone attack on a US base in Jordan, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday.

"We believe that this [attack] was done by an element of what is known as the Axis of Resistance, and these are Iranian proxy groups, and how much Iran knew [about this attack] we

don't know," Austin said during a press briefing.

The drone attack on a US military outpost in the northeast of Jordan near the border with Syria took place on Sunday. President Joe Biden blamed unspecified, allegedly Iran-backed militant groups, but said the United States was still gathering facts about the attack.

Iran has repeatedly denied playing any role in the deadly attack on the US troops in Jordan.

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US in Talks With Iraq On Countering Militia Groups, Wants to See More Action – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is holding talks with Iraq on the activity of the allegedly Iran-affiliated militia groups in the country and wants to see "more action from Baghdad for holding them accountable," Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf said on Thursday.

"It is an issue on which we consult very closely with the Iraqi government," Leaf told reporters when asked to comment on the Iraqi efforts to prevent attacks by Iran-backed groups.

She expressed confidence that the attacks by these groups represent an assault on the sovereignty of Iraq, "It is a threat to the Iraqi state," she added.

Leaf acknowledged that maintaining security in Iraq is the responsibility of the country's government, "But we would like to see action that prevents and holds people to account," she said. Iran has repeatedly denied accusations of supporting militia groups operating in Iraq.

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Belarusian National Klimenka Indicted for Money Laundering Conspiracy - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Aleksandr Klimenka, a national of Belarus and Cyprus, has been indicted for participating in a conspiracy to launder money and for operating an unlicensed money services business, the US Justice Department said in a statement on Thursday.

"An indictment was unsealed on Tuesday charging a Belarusian and Cypriot national with money laundering conspiracy and operation of an unlicensed money services business," the statement said.

The Justice Department alleges that Klimenka controlled the digital currency exchange BTC-e and had control over the technology services company Soft-FX as well as the financial company FX Open, between 2011 and July 2017, the statement said.

"The indictment alleges BTC-e was a significant cybercrime and online money laundering entity that allowed its users to trade in Bitcoin with high levels of anonymity and developed a customer base heavily reliant on criminal activity," the statement said.

Klimenka was arrested in Latvia on December 21, 2023, at the request of the US government

and was extradited on Wednesday to California, where he remains in custody, the statement added.

If Klimenka is found guilty, he will face a maximum penalty of 25 years in prison, according to the statement.

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Canadian Spy Agency Was Aware of Alleged Chinese Interference in Past Elections - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) was aware that China allegedly sought to interfere in the country's 2019 and 2021 federal elections, Global News reported.

The report comes amid the ongoing public inquiry into foreign interference in Canada's federal elections and democratic institutions, which seeks to examine allegations of electoral meddling by China, Russia and other states in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections.

"We know that the PRC [People's Republic of China] sought to clandestinely and deceptively influence the 2019 and 2021 federal elections," the declassified CSIS briefing from February 24, 2023, obtained by Global News, said.

CSIS alleges in the report, dubbed Briefing to the Minister of Democratic Institutions on Foreign Interference, that China is by far the most significant threat to Canada's elections.

China's activities were allegedly broad in scope and significant in terms of financial resources, the report said, further noting that they were significant, pervasive and directed toward all governmental and civil society echelons.

China's Embassy in Ottawa and the Chinese government have repeatedly and unequivocally denied the allegations concerning the supposed election interference.

China has emphasized that if Canada continued to mislead its citizens and undermine bilateral relations, it would have to bear the consequences for such actions.

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There Are Reasons of Concern Over Use of Chinese Fishing Fleets in Americas- Think Tank

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Director of Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors Vanda Felbab-Brown expressed concern on Wednesday over the potential utilization of Chinese fishing fleets for intelligence operations in the Americas.

"I think there are real reasons to be concerned about the extent to which the Chinese fishing fleets can be used for intelligence operations in the Americas," Felbab-Brown said during a Brookings event on illegal and unregulated fisheries, climate change, and armed conflict at sea.

Felbab-Brown added that there is a pressing need for increased US government monitoring and intelligence gathering regarding the Chinese fishing fleets, which she believes may be

involved in transporting drugs like cocaine from Latin America to Chinese markets and potentially precursor chemicals in the opposite direction.

In addition, senior director of WWF's Oceans Futures Sarah Glaser said that she would highlight the surge in maritime dangers, particularly oil bunkering and piracy.

"We're also seeing the rise of oil bunkering and piracy, other kinds of threats on the water, so that's an area that I would absolutely highlight," Glaser said in response to the moderator's question about key geographies that demand attention.

Earlier today, the Brookings Institution and World Wildlife Fund USA hosted a discussion on the changing dynamics of fishing and the options for prevention, providing a roadmap for improved policy and examining progress, opportunities, new data, technologies, and partnerships available to prevent potential conflict.

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US Rejects Displacement of Civilians From Gaza, Will Ensure Does Not Happen - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The United States absolutely rejects the displacement of civilians from the Gaza Strip and will ensure that such a development does not happen, US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf said on Thursday.

"We absolutely reject and will ensure that there is no displacement of Gazans from Gaza," Leaf said.

Leaf also said President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken are addressing this vitally important issue repeatedly and, moreover, the United States has been trying to ensure that the Gaza conflict does not spread to the West Bank, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and other parts of the region.

In December, media reported that Israel had informed several Arab states that it wanted to carve out a post-war buffer zone in Gaza. The US State Department said that there should be no reduction in the size of Gaza and any post-war buffer zone within the region would violate this principle.

Last week, a dozen Israeli ministers, including those from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, reportedly took part in a conference that called for rebuilding Israeli settlements in Gaza and the displacement of Palestinians from the besieged Palestinian enclave.

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Sanctions on Violent West Bank Actors Will Not Target US Citizens - Senior Admin. Official

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - New US sanctions on violent and destabilizing actors in the West Bank are not intended to target citizens of the United States, a senior administration official said on Thursday.

"American citizens are not the intended target of this executive order. The measure is focused on foreign nationals," the senior administration official said.

The Biden administration announced a new sanctions program meant to address violent and destabilizing actions in the West Bank, amid heightened tensions in the area between Palestinians and Israeli settlers.

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Blinken to Visit Middle East Next Week as Hostage Negotiations Continue - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit the Middle East next week amid ongoing efforts to free the remaining hostages from the Gaza Strip, a senior Biden administration official said on Thursday.

"Secretary Blinken is heading out to the region again next week," the official said when asked about the efforts to free the remaining hostages.

The Biden administration is working daily to secure the release of the hostages, the official added.

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Biden Issues Executive Order for Measures to Combat West Bank Violence - White House

(Adds details about four sanctioned individuals in para 4)

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden issued an executive order on Thursday to implement new measures on actors behind violence in the West Bank, including the use of sanctions, according to senior administration officials.

"Today, President Biden is signing a new executive order to implement a set of new measures to address actions that undermine peace, security, and stability in the West Bank. Under this new EO, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Treasury, in consultation with one another, have the ability to sanction foreign nationals engaged in actions that include the directing or participating in acts or threats of violence against civilians, intimidating civilians, to cause them to leave their homes, destroying or seizing property, and acts of terrorism," an official said at a press briefing.

The official added that the State Department will be announcing an initial set of sanctions against four individuals on Thursday, including ones that have "directly perpetrated violence, and those who have engaged in repeated acts of intimidation, property destruction, leading to the forced displacement of Palestinian communities."

One individual "initiated and led a riot which involves setting vehicles and buildings on fire, assaulting civilians, causing damage to property, which resulted ... in the death of a Palestinian civilian." Another assaulted a farmer and Israeli activists with stones, resulting in injuries

requiring medical treatment. A third attempted to break windows of passing vehicles, blocked roads, and other acts of intimidation.

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US Drug Enforcement Agency Targeted Top Venezuelan Officials in Covert Operation - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) – The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) conducted a multi-year spy operation in Venezuela to build drug trafficking cases against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and other top officials, The Associated Press reported on Thursday, citing a secret 2018 memo it obtained last year.

"It is necessary to conduct this operation unilaterally and without notifying Venezuelan officials," the 15-page memo stated about the expansion of "Operation Money Badger," which was first established by the DEA and Miami prosecutors in 2013.

As the expansion of the operation risked violating Venezuelan and international laws, it needed to be approved by the Sensitivity Activity Review Committee, which is comprised of senior officials from the state and justice departments.

Operation Money Badger went on to investigate around 100 Venezuelans, AP reported, citing two unnamed sources. Maduro ally Alex Saab, who was recently released by the US in a prisoner exchange, was one of the people ensnared by the operation.

It is unclear whether the operation is still ongoing.

The memo was accidentally uploaded to a file share website by the US Attorney's Office in Manhattan last year during the bribery conspiracy trial of two former DEA agents. The AP is not publishing the memo or identifying the DEA informants to protect their safety.

In an annual address to the nation in January, President Maduro said several plots to assassinate him and other top officials were thwarted in 2023. He accused ultra-right forces, drug trafficking groups, the DEA and the CIA of conspiring against him.

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US Forces 'Ready' to Support Taiwan Against Any Threat From China - Adm. Paparo

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The US military will be able to come to Taiwan's aid in the event that it is ever militarily threatened or attacked by China, Adm. Samuel Paparo, President Joe Biden's nominee to head the US Indo-Pacific Command, said during his Senate confirmation hearing on Thursday.

"The Department [of Defense] will be ready to come to Taiwan's aid," Paparo told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

Paparo said the US capabilities to confront and deter China had not been damaged in any way by the flow of US weapons and expanded military force posture in Europe in support of Ukraine.

"I will make sure that we maintain the overmatch that ensures stability," Paparo said in reference to the Pacific region.

Russia's failure to achieve its actions have directly aided US deterrence efforts in the Western Pacific and they also directly reassure US partners by providing key strategic competitive advantages to US forces, Paparo added.

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Biden Administration Not Considering Slowing Pace of Arm Deliveries to Israel –State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) – The Administration of US President Joe Biden is not considering the possibility of reducing the pace of its weapon deliveries to Israel, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf said on Thursday.

"In a word: no. We are not contemplating that," Leaf said during a press conference.

The Assistant Secretary was addressing a question on the potential of slowing pace of weapon deliveries to Israel and whether it could be considered as a form of sanction on Tel-Aviv, amid the ongoing conflict with Hamas.

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DeSantis Says Florida Sending State, National Guard Troops to Assist Texas Border Defense

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis said on Thursday that he will send Florida State Guard and National Guard troops to Texas to assist in the state's efforts to address the increased flow of illegal migration at the United States' border with Mexico.

"States have every right to defend their sovereignty and we are pleased to increase our support to Texas as the Lone Star State works to stop the invasion across the border," DeSantis said in a statement. "Our reinforcements will help Texas to add additional barriers, including razor wire along the border. We don't have a country if we don't have a border."

Florida is offering up to a battalion of National Guard troops — approximately 1,000 soldiers — to Texas, who will be deployed based on Texas' needs, the statement said.

The troops will join more than 90 Florida law enforcement officers already deployed to the border, the statement said. Additional law enforcement resources are standing by and ready to be deployed as requested by Texas, the statement said.

The Florida State Guard is prepared to deliver rapid emergency response, public safety operations and humanitarian assistance, Florida State Guard Director Mark Thieme said in the statement.

The move comes amid a dispute between Texas state officials and the Biden administration over the federal government's handling of border security.

Last month, the US Supreme Court issued a temporary order allowing federal Border Patrol agents to remove razor wire barriers placed by Texas. However, Texas Governor Greg Abbott maintained the state's right to guard its share of the US border with Mexico, citing the federal government's failure to secure the border.

More than two dozen other state officials from across the US, including DeSantis, have backed Abbott in the dispute.

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Austin Says Apologized to Biden Directly Over Failure to Notify About Hospitalization

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III shared in a press briefing on Thursday that he apologized directly to Biden about failing to notify the President about his hospitalization.

"As a rule, I don't talk about conversations with my boss but I can tell you I have apologized directly to President Biden and I've told him that I'm deeply sorry for not letting him know immediately that I received a heavy diagnosis and was getting treatment," Austin said.

Austin noted that Biden has responded "with grace and a warm heart."

Austin also stressed that he never directed anyone to keep his January hospitalization from the White House and that he did not handle the situation right as he should have told the President, the team and the people about the diagnosis and the treatment. Austin shared that he is now recovering well, but still is having some leg pain and is doing physical therapy.

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US Has Failed to Create Forces to Deter Future War With China in Pacific - Senator

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The US government, military and Congress have failed to build up forces and alliance structures in the Pacific region sufficient to deter China and to carry out possible required military operations in the near future, Senator Roger Wicker said during a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"The Pacific Deterrence Initiative has failed to transition into a real tool of budgetary change at the Pentagon: We have made minimal progress in bolstering deterrence in the Eastern Pacific," Wicker told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

The US alliance structure in the Pacific needs further modernization and it should include command and control and joint planning operations, Wicker said.

"The available infrastructure is not expanding fast enough to support distributed military operations in the near future. We have barely begun building contested logistics plans," Wicker said.

The window for the United States to build up sufficient military force in the Pacific to deter war with China was rapidly closing, Wicker added.

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US House Passes Bill to Ban, Deport Immigrants Convicted of Driving While Intoxicated

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation on Thursday to make immigrants who have been convicted of driving under the influence (DUI) inadmissible to the United States and deportable.

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Protect Our Communities from DUIs Act, in a vote of 274 in favor and 150 opposed.

"It's common sense: Congress should uphold the rule of law and deport illegal immigrants who threaten the safety of our communities and pose a dangerous risk on the roads. American families deserve our protection, and it's our responsibility to deport and bar these migrants to keep our streets safe," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the bill.

Last month, a mother and her son were killed in a car crash by an intoxicated illegal immigrant who had already been arrested three times for DUI and deported four times, the statement said. In 2022, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrested 175 illegal immigrants with

multiple DUI convictions during a two-month national operation, the statement added.

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US Approves Possible \$3.9Bln Sale of MQ-9B SkyGuardian Drones to India - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has approved a possible \$3.99-billion sale of MQ-9B SkyGuardian drones and related equipment to India, the Defense Department announced on Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the government of India of MQ-9B remotely piloted aircraft and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$3.99 billion," the Defense Department said in a release.

The Defense Security Cooperation Agency delivered the required certification notifying Congress of the possible sale earlier on Thursday, the release said.

India had requested 31 MQ-9B SkyGuardian aircraft but also 161 embedded global positioning and inertial navigation systems; 35 L3 Rio Grande communications intelligence sensor suites; and 170 AGM-114R Hellfire missiles, among other military equipment and ammunition, the release said.

The principal contractor will be General Atomics Aeronautical Systems from Poway, California and there will be no adverse impact on US defense readiness as a result of the proposed sale, the release added.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Near 3-Month High Amid Sticky Inflation, Confounding Fed

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims neared a three-month high last week while inflation remained higher than desired by the Federal Reserve, according to data on Thursday that suggested the central bank may be at a crossroads on what to do with interest rates going forward.

The number of Americans who applied for unemployment benefits at the end of January rose to a nearly three-month high of 224,000, data released by the Labor Department showed. That was the highest since the 233,000 weekly jobless reading posted in mid-November.

On a weekly basis, initial jobless claims increased by 9,000 in the seven days to January 27 from 215,000 in the prior week.

"The weakness in the jobless numbers are starting to show up after the surprise dip a few weeks ago helped by weather and holiday disruptions," economist Greg Michalowski said in a reaction posted on the FXLive forum.

The higher unemployment situation is an indication that the incredibly strong post-pandemic

US labor market may be softening.

The softening labor market versus sticky inflation in the United States could further confound a Fed seeking right answers on when to cut interest rates following almost two years of hiking them.

US job numbers for all of January will be released by the Labor Department on Friday. Wall Street economists polled by US media have predicted a jobs growth of 185,000 on the average for last month versus December's 216,000. If the actual number turns out to be sharply off from estimates either way, then it may give the central bank further pause on what to do with rates.

At the conclusion of its January policy meeting on Wednesday, the Fed decided to leave interest rates unchanged at a range of between 5.25%-5.5% for a fourth month in a row.

US rate cuts might also not begin in March as initially thought if inflation remains stickier than anticipated, Fed Chairman Jerome Powell told reporters.

"I am prepared to maintain the current policy rate for longer if needed," Powell said. "If the economy evolves as expected, we will dial back the policy rate this year."

The Fed signaled in December that it could reduce rates as many as six times this year.

Inflation has eased notably over the past year, but remains above the Fed's longer-run goal.

US Inflation, as measured by the Fed's favorite price gauge — the so-called Personal Consumption Expenditures Index, or PCE — rose 2.6% over the 12-month ending in December. Excluding the volatile food and energy categories, core PCE prices rose 2.9%.

While that is way below the PCE Index's four-decade high of 6.5% in 2022, it is still far from the Fed's desired 2% long-term target.

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Biden Says Not Only Praying but 'Actively Working' for Peace for Israelis, Palestinians

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that his administration is not only praying but is also "actively working" for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians amid the ongoing conflict in Gaza

"Not only do we pray for peace. We are actively working for peace, security, and dignity for the Israeli people and the Palestinian people," Biden said at the National Prayer Breakfast.

He stressed the importance of ending the conflict and bringing back Americans who have been held hostage since the October 7 Hamas attack.

"I am engaged in this day and night, working to find the means to bring our hostages home, to ease the humanitarian crisis, and to bring peace to Gaza and Israel, and enduring peace for two states, for two peoples," Biden said.

On October 7, Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack on Israel from Gaza and breached the border, killing about 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. Israel imposed a complete blockade on Gaza, started massive bombardments and a ground invasion of the Palestinian enclave. Almost 27,000 Palestinians have been killed so far and more than 65,000 others wounded.

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US Capitol Police Say Not Bringing Criminal Charges in Senate Sex Tape Incident

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol Police (USCP) said on Thursday that it will not bring criminal charges in connection with a sex tape filmed inside a US Senate office building.

"After consulting with federal and local prosecutors, as well as doing a comprehensive investigation and review of possible charges, it was determined that - despite a likely violation of Congressional policy - there is currently no evidence that a crime was committed," USCP said in a statement.

The two people of interest in the case were not cooperative, the statement said.

One congressional staffer linked to the incident, who has since resigned from his job, exercised his constitutional right to remain silent and refused to talk to police, the statement added.

USCP investigators said they are willing to review new evidence if any emerges, according to the statement.

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Blinken Discusses Gaza Humanitarian Situation With NGOs - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has discussed the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip at a meeting with the CEOs of InterAction and other non-governmental organizations, the State Department said on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met yesterday with InterAction's President and CEO Tom Hart and fellow NGO leaders to discuss the humanitarian situation in Gaza and continued U.S. efforts to increase humanitarian access and assistance for Palestinian civilians," spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a readout.

Blinken stressed the imperative that civilians and humanitarian personnel must be protected, Miller added.

"He thanked the NGO leaders, staff, and local partners for their ongoing, tireless, and life-saving work to assist the people of Gaza and others in need around the world," the spokesperson said.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from Gaza and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Almost 27,000 people have been killed in the Gaza Strip as a result of Israeli strikes, local authorities said.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and

the exchange of some of the prisoners and hostages, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The ceasefire was extended several times and expired on December 1.

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US Deploys B-52 Bombers to Guam for 'Strategic Deterrence' – Pacific Air Forces

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) – US B-52 bombers deployed from North Dakota landed in Guam at the end of January to support "strategic deterrence" in the Indo-Pacific region, according to a Pacific Air Forces release on Thursday.

“B-52 Stratofortress bombers assigned to the 5th Bomb Wing from Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota, landed at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam at the end of January as part of a Bomber Task Force to support strategic deterrence missions aimed at reinforcing the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region,” the release stated.

The B-52 operations and support personnel have been attached to the 23rd Expeditionary Bomb Squadron and will integrate with forces from US allies and partners in the region.

The US has been building up its military presence in Guam and the broader Indo-Pacific region amid ongoing tensions with China.

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US Approves Retaliatory Strikes on Targets in Iraq, Syria – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) – The United States has approved plans for a series of strikes over multiple days against targets in Iraq and Syria in response to recent attacks on US forces in the Middle East, including the drone attack that killed three service members in Jordan last week, CBS reported on Thursday, citing US officials.

The targets will include Iranian personnel and facilities in Iraq and Syria, the officials said. They added that weather will be a major factor in the timing of the strikes.