

2/2/24 Friday

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Police Say Human Remains Found on Canadian Beach Could Be Linked to 1800s Shipwreck

It's not the first time human remains from a historic shipwreck have washed ashore Canadian land. In 2019, it was reported that the human remains of 21 individuals were unearthed in Gaspé, Quebec.

Royal Mounted Canadian Police ([RCMP](#)) say human remains were discovered on a cliff in western Prince Edward Island. The remains were first reported to be found last weekend at around 4 PM, according to the RCMP.

Corporal Gavin Moore said the remains revealed themselves after the cliff had eroded over time. The RCMP is continuing to investigate the findings, but the remains are thought to be linked to a shipwreck from the 19th century. [Officials](#) from the coroner's office say a significant amount of work must be done to determine who the remains could belong to.

"Police are investigating, and have not ruled out that the remains could be connected to a historical shipwreck burial," the [RCMP](#) said, adding that human remains had also been found in the West Cape in the 1950s and the 1960s. But they have not specified which shipwreck the remains are connected to.

"Those human remains were of course a separate investigation [but] very similar to this one," Moore said. "As it was reported at that time, it was believed that it was possibly connected to a shipwreck from the 1800s."

In [2019](#), it was also reported that the human remains of 21 individuals were unearthed in Gaspé, Quebec, believed to be from a 1847 shipwreck. The ship had left Ireland and sank off the coast of Gaspé, killing at least 150 people who were fleeing the Potato Famine.

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Hubble Captures an Image of Spiral Galaxy ESO 420-G013

The galaxy is classified as a Seyfert galaxy, and is harboring a powerful black hole that is responsible for forming new stars at a high rate.

NASA announced that their Hubble Space Telescope, which has been orbiting Earth for more than two decades, observed the spiral galaxy named ESO 420-G013 last week as part of a study of Luminous Infrared Galaxies (LIRGs). According to the administration, LIRGs are known to be extremely bright in the infrared part of the spectrum.

The galaxy ESO 420-G013 is exactly that: an extremely bright spiral galaxy, and it is harboring a powerful black hole. It is located 50 million light-years from Earth in the constellation Sculptor which can be found in the southern sky.

ESOS 402-G013 is classified as a Seyfert galaxy. These types of galaxies were named after American astronomer Carl Keenan Seyfert, who studied the objects in 1943. Seyfert galaxies, for which there are two [types](#), have an extremely bright, point-like active galactic nucleus powered by a supermassive black hole, according to [NASA](#).

But this spiral galaxy is a rare sight to behold. The image captured by Hubble shows a spiral galaxy with a bright core and brownish filaments of dark dust. ESO 420-G013's most notable feature, though, is a nearly perfectly round disk. This is because Hubble has a face-to-face view of the galaxy.

Hubble is able to see these types of galaxies—which are only visible in the infrared—thanks to its Wide Field Camera 3.

Some galaxies are hidden by the radiation of their active galactic nuclei host black holes, but ESO 420-G013 is different from these galaxies because its surrounding galaxy structure can be more easily seen. However, this galaxy's black hole still emits powerful levels of radiation, and is also forming new stars at a high [rate](#).

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Second Atmospheric River Slams Into California Leaving Nearly 1 Million Without Power

Atmospheric rivers are long, narrow regions in the atmosphere that transport water vapor outside of the tropics. These “rivers in the sky” reach land and then release the water vapor in the form of rain or snow, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

A state of emergency has been declared in the US state of California after a severe winter storm powered by an atmospheric river slammed into the state on Sunday. The storm brought with it heavy downpours, flooding, and hurricane-force winds leaving nearly 1 million Americans without power.

On Sunday, at about 8:20 PM EST nearly 1 million Californians were without power due to the powerful winter storm, according to [poweroutage.us](#).

The power outages did not discriminate, hitting counties that stretched between Northern and Central Coast California. The counties of Santa Clara, San Joaquin, Sacramento, Solano, Sonoma, Placer, Mendocino, Yuba, Yolo, San Mateo, Monterey, and San Luis Obispo, were badly hit by the power outages.

On Sunday, a rare Level 4 of 4 risk of excessive rainfall was expanded to include Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, and Oxnard in Southern California. A warning was issued for life-threatening flash and urban flash flooding that could remain in effect until 12 AM on [Tuesday](#). A Level 3 risk of excessive rainfall also remains in effect for areas in coastal California, including San Francisco.

Los Angeles received 2.49 inches of rain on Thursday after an atmospheric river hit the state last week, which means the city could see almost a year's worth of rain in the first week of February during this second atmospheric river.

On Sunday the National Weather Service (NWS) in San Francisco reported that a landslide had already occurred. Roads were also under threat of flooding and an [official](#) with the NWS urged drivers to turn around if they came across a flooded roadway so as to not “drown”.

Throughout California, the storm is expected to bring winds of 40 to 60 miles per hour (18 to 27 meters per second), with some gusts as high as 95 mph (42 meters per second) expected between the Monterey Peninsula to the northern section of San Luis Obispo County.

San Francisco experienced its first ever hurricane force wind warning since records have first been kept. And those who live in the mountains along the border of eastern California and Nevada should expect heavy snowfalls as well as dangerous wind gusts.

Governor Gavin Newsom proclaimed a state of emergency for eight counties in the southern region of the state, including: Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

According to the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES [News](#)), doing so should make it easier for out-of-state contractors to repair damage caused by the storm. It will also help facilitate unemployment benefits to impacted residents, and enable a response from the California National Guard if needed.

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Zelensky-Zaluzhny Feud Proves Kiev Has ‘No Center of Power’

Over the past week, there have been reports in Western media outlets that Volodymyr Zelensky asked Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valery Zaluzhny to resign, but Zaluzhny refused. There have since been conflicting reports in Western media outlets that Zelensky may have promised to fire Zaluzhny but couldn’t find a suitable replacement or his potential replacements refused to take the post. Some reports say that Zelensky still [plans to fire Zaluzhny](#), while others imply Western leaders ordered him not to.

Mark Sleboda, an international relations and security analyst [told Sputnik’s Fault Lines](#) on Thursday that the kerfuffle shows that “if [US President] Joe Biden is the ‘emperor with no clothes’, then that kind of makes Zelensky the ‘butt-naked king.’

“The president has failed to fire his own commander-in-chief. That means there is no center of power within the regime at the moment, or perhaps Zaluzhny has more power than Zelensky. Or, the West is just running the show and Zelensky [has] been revealed as nothing but a puppet middle manager with no agency or control in his own country.”

Sleboda suggested that “either [Zelensky has] to correct the situation and get rid of Zaluzhny, or the center of power in the country [will continue] spiraling out of control.”

The actions taken by people ostensibly serving under Zelensky showcased the tenuousness of his power. “That the entire military apparatus, the generals, even those viewed as close to Zelensky, have shown defiance. I mean, you can’t really count this as anything but defiance, a refusal to follow the wishes of the president, certainly in the way that most countries regard the relationship between the executive and the military branches of the country,” Sleboda explained.

“So Zelensky faced a challenge to his presidential authority, one from the West, which is dictating what happens from above, and two, from his own military establishment united against him. ... they all said ‘no’ to him,” Sleboda described.

The situation reminded Sleboda of Zelensky’s argument with a soldier in the Azov battalion in 2019, implying that Zelensky has always had a shaky grasp on his own military.

“Right after he became president. ‘I’m not some loser off the street,’ he said. And [the] Azov commander is like, ‘Yeah, okay, whatever, dude.’ And it was after that that he gave up on any attempts to complete the Minsk protocols, which initially he made some gestures, some small gestures towards [that]. That’s what he was there to do to get Azov to stop firing artillery shells into Donetsk and they refused.”

Sleboda also discussed the situation on the ground in Ukraine and the growing prospect of war between Iran and the US.

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US Has ‘Overstayed’ Its ‘Effectiveness’ in Middle East

Days after the US State Department announced that three US troops were killed in a drone attack on a base near Jordan, US President Joe Biden blamed Iran, arguing that they provided weapons to the militants and promised a strong response, including hitting Iranian targets. Iran, in turn, said it would respond to any attack.

Critics have started to ask if the US military presence in the Middle East is serving US interests. “What is the reason why we’re still there, either in Iraq or Syria? [In] Syria we’re illegally there, we were never invited. In Iraq, we were and now there’s talk about us getting out,” Michael Maloof, a former senior security policy analyst for the Secretary of Defense and author asked on [Sputnik’s Final Countdown](#) on Wednesday.

“Clearly, we have overstayed our effectiveness in our influence [in the Middle East] because everyone uniformly hates us,” Maloof explained. “We really have to reevaluate what our policies are, and that’s not happening. All we’re doing is reacting now to events and what it’s doing is putting us on more of an escalatory approach and having us dig deeper holes than we ever wanted.”

Maloof doubts the US will strike inside Iran, with the hope that it will prevent a full response by the Iranian military. “I think the deep, dark secret is where they’re going to hit. I don’t think it’ll be Iran, per se. And I think that that’s what Iran was warning about - don’t hit our sites,” he explained. “If we in fact do it,” the chance for “greater escalation... is very high,” Maloof added. Maloof called for a flexible foreign policy that reevaluates the situation and adjusts to changing conditions. “We’re sucking the oil resources of Syria and making money off it and not giving a dime to the Syrians. It’s their oil. It’s their resource, and they can’t seem to kick us out,” Maloof prefaced. “This is why this is a perpetual problem. We have to reevaluate what we’re doing.”

The cause, according to Maloof, is that the US continually looks at and acts in the Middle East from a single perspective.

“We’re looking at the Middle East completely through the prism of Israel and look [at] what it’s gotten us. It started with Iraq... we spent trillions there, and what [do] we have to show for it? Nothing.”

Furthermore, the situation in the Middle East could quickly get out of hand, Maloof explained. “It could bring in Russia and China. I mean, this thing could get out of control completely. ... Why do we want to continue on? We have Saudi Arabia and UAE saying, ‘Look we want normalization. We want to get this war over with so we can have normalization and bring some sanity to the region again’ but instead we’re provoking and continuing to agitate even further.” A war with Iran, even a cold one, would have disastrous consequences for the world, Maloof warned. “Iran could go the full length, shutting down the Strait of Hormuz. Between that and shutting down Bab al-Mandab, the other strait in the Red Sea, you shut off both the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. [It would halt] a tremendous [amount of] trade [of] oil and gas – it would create a worldwide depression... and no one’s talking about it.”

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US Created Ukraine Conflict to Keep Europe ‘Under Its Thumb’

On Thursday, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban relented to pressure from the EU and finally allowed €50 billion in military and financial aid to be transferred to Ukraine after blocking the funding for more than a month. The funds are ostensibly planned to fund Ukraine until 2027 and came as US aid remains stalled in Congress.

Before the latest aid package was approved by the EU, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg remarked at a Monday news conference in Washington, DC, that “weapons are – in fact – the way to peace [in Ukraine],” but that’s not quite the case, an analyst told Sputnik. Dr. David Oualaalou told [Sputnik’s Critical Hour](#) on Wednesday that Stoltenberg’s assertion “defies logic” and asserted that Ukraine is already “gone.”

Oualaalou argued that Europe was pushed into supporting Ukraine by the US, which is not “paying the price” of that support in the same way Europe is. He added that the economic situation in Europe, largely brought on by the consequences of their support of Ukraine and sanctions on Russia, [makes the continent reliant on the US](#).

“[The US] created the conflict to ensure that Europe will stay under [its] thumb by dictating the terms and complicating matters for them,” Oualaalou explained. “One way you do that, [is] you complicate the economic outcome for an entity, doesn’t matter who, that’s how you do it.”

He added that his family members in Europe acknowledge that European countries are “going down faster than we can even imagine,” and pointed to the farmer and worker protests breaking out across the continent.

Complicating matters further, Oualaalou argued, is that even with monetary aid being sent to Ukraine, Europe is too [short on ammunition to give Ukraine](#) much that will help them on the battlefield. “I hope your listeners know that the [UK cannot fight the Houthis](#), for example,” Oualaalou said, referring to the growing conflict in the Red Sea. “The reason? They don’t have firepower, they don’t have enough. That is why they are just riding with the US.”

Oualaalou also argued that even the US and UK combined will not be able to defeat the Houthis.

“We couldn't defeat the Taliban, we couldn't defeat the militias in Iraq. What makes us think we're going to defeat the Houthis? And the Houthis, to my knowledge, and I've been on the ground, I was there. They are fierce fighters.”

Co-host Garland Nixon suggested that the real goal in funding Ukraine was to line politicians' “filthy pockets” with money, an assertion Oualaalou agreed with. But he also reiterated that it is also part of the US geopolitical strategy.

“[The] Ukraine conflict was created by design for us to keep the Europeans down because we were concerned about their economy moving up because they were getting cheap Russian energy - that's what's at the heart of it,” he said.

Asked about the narrative and media attention shifting from Ukraine to the Middle East, even as the conflict continues, Oualaalou admitted that it's simply part of the larger plan, and that there could be more on the horizon.

“That's usually how the narrative goes because that is the aim - you move from one conflict to the next one because you're already preparing [for] the next conflict. ... what I see on the horizon, is what's going on too, in Asia,” he explained. “It [has] become clear in the West that Ukraine is a failed state. The objective has been accomplished. Let's move to the next conflict. And once that's settled, we're going to move to a third one and so forth.”

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The United States created the conflict in Ukraine to keep Europe “under its thumb,” Dr. David Oualaalou told Sputnik's Critical Hour on Wednesday.

“[The US] created the conflict to ensure that Europe will stay under [its] thumb by dictating the terms and complicating matters for them,” Oualaalou explained. “One way you do that, [is] you complicate the economic outcome for an entity, doesn't matter who, that's how you do it,” Oualaalou added, noting the rise in food and energy prices in Europe.

Oualaalou comments came after NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said during a press conference that “Weapons are – in fact – the way to peace [in Ukraine,]” an assertion that Oualaalou said “defies logic” and said that Ukraine is already “gone” with or without further aid from the West.

In fact, according to Oualaalou, money is not the only issue facing the Ukrainians, there are also ammunition shortages, something Europe cannot help them with.

“I hope your listeners know that the UK cannot fight the Houthis, for example,” Oualaalou said, referring to the growing conflict in the Red Sea. “The reason? They don't have firepower, they don't have enough. That is why they are just riding with the US.”

Oualaalou warned that there were likely more conflicts planned by the US security apparatus.

“That’s usually how the narrative goes because that is the aim - you move from one conflict to the next one because you’re already preparing [for] the next conflict. ... what I see on the horizon, is what’s going on too, in Asia,” he explained. “It [has] become clear in the West that Ukraine is a failed state. The objective has been accomplished. Let’s move to the next conflict. And once that’s settled, we’re going to move to a third one and so forth.”

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The US has “overstayed” its “effectiveness in our influence” in the Middle East, Michael Maloof, a former senior security policy analyst for the Secretary of Defense and author told Sputnik’s Final Countdown on Wednesday while speaking about the drone strike in Jordan that killed three US soldiers and injured dozens more.

“Clearly, we have overstayed our effectiveness in our influence [in the Middle East] because everyone uniformly hates us,” Maloof explained. “We really have to reevaluate what our policies are, and that’s not happening. All we’re doing is reacting now to events and what it’s doing is putting us on more of an escalatory approach and having us dig deeper holes than we ever wanted.”

Maloof called for a flexible foreign policy that reevaluates the situation and adjusts to changing conditions. “We’re looking at the Middle East completely through the prism of Israel and look [at] what it’s gotten us. It started with Iraq... we spent trillions there, and what [do] we have to show for it? Nothing,” he explained.

Maloof also warned the situation could escalate quicker than the US is prepared for. “It could bring in Russia and China. I mean, this thing could get out of control completely. ... Why do we want to continue on? We have Saudi Arabia and UAE saying, ‘Look we want normalization. We want to get this war over with so we can have normalization and bring some sanity to the region again’ but instead we’re provoking and continuing to agitate even further.”

He also warned that if Iran shut down the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea, “it would create a worldwide depression... and no one’s talking about it.”

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's failure to fire his Commander-in-Chief Valery Zaluzhny shows that there is no "center of power" in Kiev, international relations and security analyst Mark Sleboda told Sputnik's Fault Lines on Thursday.

"if [US President] Joe Biden is the 'emperor with no clothes', then that kind of makes Zelensky the 'butt-naked king.'

"The president has failed to fire his own commander-in-chief. That means there is no center of power within the regime at the moment, or perhaps Zaluzhny has more power than Zelensky. Or, the West is just running the show and Zelensky [has] been revealed as nothing but a puppet middle manager with no agency or control in his own country."

Sleboda said that the Ukrainian general's reported refusal to resign at the behest of Zelensky, as well as the reported refusal by his potential replacements to take the post, showcase that the "military establishment united against [Zelensky]. ... they all said 'no' to him," describing it as "defiance."

Sleboda said it reminded him of a situation in 2019, when an Azov commander got into an argument with Zelensky on video.

"Right after he became president. 'I'm not some loser off the street,' he said. And [the] Azov commander is like, 'Yeah, okay, whatever, dude.' And it was after that that he gave up on any attempts to complete the Minsk protocols, which initially he made some gestures, some small gestures towards [that]. That's what he was there to do to get Azov to stop firing artillery shells into Donetsk and they refused."

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Biden's Justification For Hitting Iran 'Would Justify Russian Attacks on NATO'

On Friday, US President Joe Biden fulfilled his promise to strike Iranian targets in Syria and Iraq, further escalating the region even as the White House insists that it does not seek war with Iran. Michael Maloof, a former senior security policy analyst for the Office of the Secretary of Defense with nearly 30 years of experience, told [Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) that the justification used by the White House could easily be applied by Russia to NATO countries supporting Ukraine.

"You're hearing from congressmen and senators saying 'but we need to hit Iran for supplying the Houthis and Hamas and Hezbollah,'" Maloof explained. "Well, does Russia then have a right to hit US and NATO allies, as a result of supplying weapons to Ukraine to battle Russians?"

The United States has placed the blame on Iran for the Sunday drone attack that killed three US service members and injured dozens more on the border of Syria and Jordan. While the US admits that it has no evidence Iran helped plan the attack, the Biden administration has been clear it blames Iran because the country allegedly funds those groups and other militants.

"This afternoon, at my direction, U.S. military forces struck targets at facilities in Iraq and Syria that the IRGC and affiliated militia use to attack U.S. forces," US President Joe Biden said in a statement released Friday by the White House.

"I think that if Biden were to follow through, then that raises a whole new specter of opening up NATO countries to potential attack," he continued, adding that the US is simply hoping Russian President Vladimir Putin "doesn't follow through" with that justification.

Maloof argued that the US should [reevaluate the situation in the Middle East](#) but it's difficult because the US looks "at the Middle East through the prism of Israel all the time."

"We've got to somehow figure a way out of it. Instead, we're digging that hole deeper and even though there might be some attempts to try and persuade [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu to calm down and have a ceasefire and try to resolve things, it's doing just the opposite.

"The problem is that Biden has left the conduct of the war up to Netanyahu, and Netanyahu knows this and he's basically dragging us along – we're captives of Netanyahu," Maloof explained.

"You don't have any, there's no leadership [the US] left it up to Netanyahu. He's the tail wagging the dog," he added later.

Maloof further argued that Israel has been getting the United States to do its dirty work for decades. "We always hear Netanyahu wanting the United States involved, or us to bomb the sites... This is the way we've been conducting ourselves since... 2003 when we invaded Iraq." Asked by Co-host Melik Abdul how the US should have responded to the attack, Maloof argued that the US should leave the region.

"I think we shouldn't even be in those locations. And I think we should have gotten out some time ago."

Otherwise, Maloof warns "This thing has unlimited possibilities of escalation very rapidly."

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Staffers Speaking Against US' Gaza Stance Shows How 'Morally Bankrupt' Biden Admin Has Grown

On Thursday, the head of the US Agency for International Development, Samantha Power, who is a world-renowned scholar on genocide, was confronted during a public event over her complicity in the Biden administration's support of Israel and its actions in Gaza.

"You wrote a book on genocide and you're still working for the administration: You should resign and speak out," Agnieszka Skyes told US media after recently leaving her job at the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Dr. Margaret Flowers, the co-editor of Popular Resistance, [told Sputnik's The Critical Hour](#) that the disconnect between the Biden administration and its employees shows how "morally bankrupt" the administration's stance on Gaza has become.

"You have congressional staffers, hundreds of them, that called upon their bosses to support a ceasefire. You have White House staffers, executive office staffers protesting outside of the

White House, calling on President [Joe] Biden to demand, you know, to push for a ceasefire,” Flowers summarized. “The fact that people within the administration who are risking their jobs often to take these actions are speaking out, I think, is important and just shows a real shift in this country and just how morally bankrupt this administration is for supporting genocide.” Co-host Garland Nixon noted that, particularly among the USAID employees, they have previously supported policies that “killed unmentionable thousands of people,” but this seems “too far” even for them.

“I think also [that] some of the people that go to work in these institutions don't fully have a good political analysis of what it is that they're actually working for,” Flowers responded. “We know that the the USAID, which has 'AID' in its name, is an institution that has really worked hand-in-hand with the CIA to undermine governments all around the world to, you know, put in place support for organizations, media, nonprofit groups within countries that are strictly there to destabilize the countries so that the United States can try to overthrow their governments.” “This is an overreach point. I think we're seeing that in so many different areas, though, right now, the kind of overreach of the United States and its Western allies and the whole world is seeing it but it's great that folks are seeing it here, too,” Flowers explained.

The shift, according to Flowers, comes because Israel's actions in Gaza are on display for the entire world to see.

“We know that ... all of these main, mainstream corporate media outlets are really in place to defend the status quo, and they've been doing that. But at a certain point, when you have the rest of the media world publishing the truth about what's happening and you have public opinion shifting, they can't continue on that same line as strongly as they were, because they can't save face by doing that when the rest of the world actually sees what's going on,” Flowers argued. “This is a huge issue for people, whereas foreign policy has not typically been a strong factor that folks care about. Things have gone so far that people do now,” she added.

Flowers believes that if the [International Court of Justice \(ICJ\)](#) had failed to move forward in the genocide case against Israel, the Global South would have moved to replace it and other institutions with ones that would be able to.

“I think the Global South is ready to build alternative institutions and find alternative mechanisms,” she said. “We've reached a point now where people, either these institutions are going to have to do what they say they're doing or they're going to be replaced.”

Co-host Wilmer Leon asked about the US and Israeli government's response to the ICJ and how they made clear that they have no plans to abide by it.

“This is not unusual. The United States typically says that things are illegitimate when they don't serve the interests of the United States, and then when they do, suddenly they are legitimate again,” Flowers explained.

“As Canada and the United States continue to say that these allegations are 'unfounded.' The rest of the world is looking at them and shaking their heads and saying, 'What do you mean? We're watching genocide happen before us.'”

Flowers pointed to the US and other Western countries' decision to [stop funding](#) the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which she described as “one of the last lifelines for Palestinians in Gaza.”

“So not only did they deny [Israel's genocide], but they doubled down on the genocide of Palestinians,” she added.

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US Airstrikes Hit Iranian Targets in Syria and Iraq - CENTCOM

The attack comes in response to a drone strike on a US garrison on the border of Jordan and Syria that killed three US service members and injured dozens more. On Thursday, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said that the US response would be "multi-tiered," implying that more strikes are likely in the coming days.

The US Central Command (CENTCOM) confirmed that US forces have conducted airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, hitting forces "Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and affiliated militia groups," according to a statement by the agency.

The strikes hit 85 targets according to the statement and utilized more than 125 precision munitions from "numerous aircraft" including long-range bombers.

"At 4:00 p.m. (EST) [21:00 GMT] Feb. 02, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) forces conducted airstrikes in Iraq and Syria against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and affiliated militia groups. US military forces struck more than 85 targets," the statement said on Friday.

There have been questions about how forceful the US response would be, and exactly where the attacks would take place. The US blames Iran for the drone attack, arguing that Iran provided the weapons that the militant group used to carry out the attack. Iran has continually insisted that it does not control the groups, who say their attacks are in support of Palestinians in Gaza.

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, which encompasses multiple Iran-linked groups, claimed responsibility for the drone attack.

According to the CENTCOM statement, the attacks hit "control operations centers, intelligence centers, rockets, missiles, unmanned aerial vehicle storage, and logistics and munition supply chain facilities," of the militia groups "and their IRGC sponsors."

Western media has reported that B-1 bombers were used in the attack, citing an unnamed official.

Syrian state media described the attacks as "American aggression" and reported several casualties and injuries.

Previously, Iran warned that it would respond to any attack on "Iran's territory, or its interests or citizens abroad" will result in a "decisive response."

On Thursday, it was reported that US President Joe Biden authorized attacks in Iraq and Syria, but there was no mention of attacks inside of Iranian territory. It has been speculated that the Biden administration hopes that will lessen the risk of a full-blown war between the two countries.

However, the attacks are certain to increase tensions and raise fears that Israel's war in Gaza, now over three months old, will spread across the Middle East.

On Tuesday, the Kata'ib Hezbollah group, which has been blamed for the attacks by the US, said it would stop targeting US sites, but that promise did not seem to lessen the calls for retaliatory strikes coming out of Washington.

On Wednesday, US Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) urged Biden to strike targets inside of Iran, and predicted that a war between the two countries would occur this year, "the only thing the Iranian regime understands is force," the senator posted on X.

Hours before the attack, Biden met with family members of the three slain US service members as their remains arrived in the US. The event was also attended by the First Lady Jill Biden and Austin.

A statement released by the White House promised further attacks. "Our response began today. It will continue at times and places of our choosing," the statement reads, while also claiming that "The United States does not seek conflict in the Middle East or anywhere else in the world." The attack comes one day after US and UK forces hit Houthi targets in Yemen, the latest in a series of attacks that the US says is in response to Houthi attacks on commercial shipping vessels in the Red Sea.

On Friday local time, before the recent US attack in Syria, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi told crowds that "Iran will not initiate a war but will answer bullies firmly and authoritatively," noting that the IRGC "it not a threat" but that "regional countries can rely on [its] power."

Michael Maloof, a former senior security policy analyst for the Office of the Secretary of Defense with nearly 30 years of experience, told Sputnik's Fault Lines that the justification used by the White House could easily be applied by Russia to NATO countries supporting Ukraine.

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"You're hearing from congressmen and senators saying 'but we need to hit Iran for supplying the Houthis and Hamas and Hezbollah,'" Maloof explained. "Well, does Russia then have a right to hit US and NATO allies, as a result of supplying weapons to Ukraine to battle Russians?"

The United States blames Iran for a drone attack that killed three US service members and injured dozens more. Iran denies any responsibility for the attack and the US admits it has no evidence it directed the attack, which was claimed by a militant group. However, the Biden administration insists that Iran is responsible for the attack because it accuses the country of funding those groups.

On Friday, the US hit several sites in Iraq and Syria that it said were related to Iran, including Iran's Quds Force, an elite branch of Iran's military and, importantly, not a militant group.

"I think that if Biden were to follow through [with an attack on Iran soil], then that raises a whole new specter of opening up NATO countries to potential attack," he continued, adding that the US is simply hoping Russian President Vladimir Putin "doesn't follow through" with that justification.

“I think we shouldn’t even be in those locations. And I think we should have gotten out some time ago.”

Otherwise, Maloof warns “This thing has unlimited possibilities of escalation very rapidly.”

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Dr. Margaret Flowers, the co-editor of Popular Resistance, told Sputnik’s The Critical Hour that the disconnect between the Biden administration and its employees shows how “morally bankrupt” the administration’s stance on Gaza is.

The comments came after the head of the USAID, Samantha Power, was interrupted by former members of her staff, demanding that she call for a ceasefire in Gaza.

“You have congressional staffers, hundreds of them, that called upon their bosses to support a ceasefire. You have White House staffers, executive office staffers protesting outside of the White House, calling on President [Joe] Biden to push for a ceasefire,” Flowers summarized. “The fact that people within the administration who are risking their jobs often to take these actions are speaking out, I think, is important and just shows a real shift in this country and just how morally bankrupt this administration is for supporting genocide.”

After co-host Garland Nixon pointed out that USAID is responsible for killing “unmentionable thousands of people,” even before Israel’s war on Gaza, Flowers agreed and said this illustrates how despicable the situation is.

“I think [that] some of the people that go to work in these institutions don’t fully have a good political analysis of what it is that they’re actually working for,” Flowers responded. “We know that the the USAID, which has ‘AID’ in its name, is an institution that has really worked hand-in-hand with the CIA to undermine governments all around the world.

“This is a huge issue for people, whereas foreign policy has not typically been a strong factor that folks care about. Things have gone so far that people do now,” Flowers explained.

She also condemned the decision by the US and other Western countries to cut funds off from the UNRWA. “Not only did they deny [Israel’s genocide], but they doubled down on the genocide of Palestinians,” she said.

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Newly Discovered Dwarf-Galaxy Upending Conventional Wisdom

Dwarf galaxies, classified as a galaxy with less than 100 billion stars. Our Milky Way has more than 200 billion stars and the largest galaxies can have more than 100 trillion stars.

A team of astronomers out of Arizona State University has identified a dwarf galaxy that should not exist with our current understanding of the universe.

Identified as PEARLDG in a [recently released study](#), the dwarf galaxy is unique in that it is no longer producing new stars, but it also is not interacting with any larger galaxies.

While dwarf galaxies are the most common in the observed universe, they are typically young and continue to produce new stars, or they interact with a larger galaxy, causing a “quenching” of their production.

There have been a handful of dwarf galaxies discovered that are no longer producing stars and aren’t interacting with another galaxy, just like PEARLDG, but they remain close to another galaxy and scientists have largely assumed they interacted with another galaxy recently and that halted their star production.

According to the study, PEARLDG is unique because it is not as close to another galaxy, implying that either an internal factor caused it to stop producing stars or it interacted with another galaxy at a “very high velocity” sometime in the past.

Arizona State University Assistant Research Scientist Tim Carleton said that PEARLDG should “not [be] expected to exist given our current understanding of galaxy evolution.”

Even PEARLDG’s discovery was unique. Described as “serendipitous” in the study, it was picked up by the James Webb Space Telescope but wasn’t the primary objective when the images were captured. Amazingly, the images did allow researchers to study individual stars inside the galaxy, and use that to determine its distance from Earth: about 98 million light-years. After discovering PEARLDG, the researchers observed it further using the DeVeney long-slit optical spectrograph on the Lowell Discovery Telescope in the Coconino National Forest in Arizona.

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House Speaker Johnson Says Stand-Alone Israel Bill Coming Next Week

Without a bill forthcoming from Congress, US President Joe Biden has continued to supply weapons to Israel and Ukraine using emergency provisions and old stocks to bypass Congressional approval.

The US House of Representatives is set to vote on a “clean, standalone” Israeli aid package next week, House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) announced on Saturday.

The bill will include \$17.6 billion in aid for Israel and will not include any other funding or offsets. A previous Israeli aid bill passed by the House included \$14.3 billion for Israel and offset that with a corresponding cut to the IRS.

That bill stalled in the Senate, with Democrats in the upper chamber complaining that the cuts to the IRS would actually increase the deficit according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Johnson hopes that removing that offset will push Democrats into supporting the bill.

“During debate in the House and in numerous subsequent statements, Democrats made clear that their primary objective to the original House bill was with its offsets,” the Speaker wrote in a letter to colleagues on Saturday. “The Senate will no longer have excuses, however misguided, against swift passage of this critical support for our ally.”

Meanwhile, the Senate is set to reveal the text of its supplemental spending bill that is said to include aid for Israel, Ukraine, Taiwan and border security. Republicans previously demanded that any bill including funding for Ukraine would have to include major concessions from Democrats on border security.

Last month, it appeared that Senate leaders from both parties had struck a deal on the border, but after former President Donald Trump blasted the bill on social media, several other Republicans came out against the bill, seemingly killing its chances to pass in the House where the former President holds significant sway.

“Please blame [the bill’s potential failure] on me, please, because they were getting ready to pass a very bad bill,” Trump said at a campaign rally in Nevada last week.

Johnson said that if the Senate bill includes what it is rumored to, it is dead on arrival in the House. Regardless, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) said he plans to bring the Senate bill to the floor for a procedural vote on Wednesday.

“Given the Senate’s failure to move appropriate legislation in a timely fashion, and the perilous circumstances currently facing Israel, the House will continue to lead,” Johnson wrote. “Next week, we will take up and pass a clean, standalone Israel supplemental package.”

In October, US President Joe Biden asked Congress for \$108 billion in financial aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, but no spending bill including those packages has made it through Congress as of yet.

It is unclear if Schumer will bring the House stand-alone bill to the floor. He previously expressed hesitation to take up any issues covered in the Senate supplemental bill.

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Israel Has ‘Lost the War’ Says Former Security Analyst

Last month, Israel withdrew a significant number of troops from Northern Gaza and recent media reports indicate that Hamas officials have returned to the area, including police officers and other civil servants.

That shows that Israel failed in its goal to eliminate Hamas, former security analyst and international geopolitical consultant Dr. David Oualaalou [told Sputnik’s Political Misfits on Friday](#).

“Israel has lost the war. Not just yesterday, but way back,” Oualaalou argued. “They don’t want to come forward and say publicly that defeating Hamas is wishful thinking. Hamas will always be there. So what Israel is doing [is] bombing those places, that’s for me personally, that’s not a strategy, that’s a failure.”

Oualaalou told co-hosts Michelle Witte and Ben Zinevich that US President Joe Biden's decision to impose sanctions on four Israeli settlers made the US look even worse in the eyes of the world, rather than its intention to make the administration look more balanced.

"[If] you are to do this, why didn't you support the ceasefire against the atrocities that [the] Israeli government is committing against the Palestinians? Because to me, it just doesn't make any sense. When you behave like this on the international stage, you really demonstrate your lack of credibility," Oualaalou said, describing Biden as "our incompetent president."

Oualaalou says that the international community has given up trying to parse America's foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East.

"The Middle East, or the world for that matter, is kind of ... just shrugging their shoulders about where American foreign policy is, given that we never had a foreign policy strategy, at least to my knowledge, for the last 30 or 40 years."

Despite this, and a recent bombardment of Brussels' development agency in Gaza, which caused Belgium to summon the Israeli ambassador to the country, Oualaalou doesn't see much light between the European and American governments. "Europeans are under the same umbrella with the US because they are under the thumb of the US," he said, adding that the United States continues to "pressure them one way or another."

"I'm telling you, in geopolitics or international relations, it's not what you see, it's what's behind the scenes that matters."

Oualaalou also discusses the commander of the Ukraine's military Valery Zaluzhny's on-again-off-again [dismissal](#) and the situation on the ground in Ukraine.

Israel's decision to withdraw from parts of Gaza and Hamas' resurgence in the area shows that Israel failed in its goal to eliminate Hamas, former security analyst and international geopolitical consultant Dr. David Oualaalou told Sputnik's Political Misfits on Friday.

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"Israel has lost the war. Not just yesterday, but way back," Oualaalou argued. "They don't want to come forward and say publicly that defeating Hamas is wishful thinking. Hamas will always be there. So what Israel is doing [is] bombing those places, that's for me personally, that's not a strategy, that's a failure."

Oualaalou also said that US President Joe Biden's decision to place sanctions on four Israeli settlers rang hollow for the rest of the world.

"[If] you are to do this, why didn't you support the ceasefire against the atrocities that [the] Israeli government is committing against the Palestinians? Because to me, it just doesn't make any sense. When you behave like this on the international stage, you really demonstrate your lack of credibility," Oualaalou said, describing Biden as "our incompetent president."

He also said that despite their more critical messaging, European countries are in the same boat as the US.

“Europeans are under the same umbrella with the US because they are under the thumb of the US,” he said, adding that the United States continues to “pressure them one way or another.”

“I’m telling you, in geopolitics or international relations, it’s not what you see, it’s what’s behind the scenes that matters.”

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National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan suggested the United States is “prepared” for war with Iran Sunday, vowing the country would take “more action” after US strikes in Iraq and Syria have already killed 40.

“This was the beginning of our response, there will be more steps,” Sullivan declared during an appearance on US television. “Some of those steps will be seen, some may not be seen,” he added cryptically.

Meanwhile the Iraqi and Iranian foreign ministries blasted the move. “Iraq reiterated its refusal that its lands be an arena for settling scores or showing force between warring countries,” read a statement from Iraq.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said the US strikes are “another adventurous and strategic mistake by the United States that will result only in increased tension and instability.”

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Republican lawmakers criticized US President Joe Biden’s recent retaliatory strikes in Iraq and Syria this weekend.

“If the goal is to deter Iran, you’re failing miserably,” said Senator Lindsay Graham (R-SC) during an interview on US television. “If you’ve convinced Iran you don’t want a wider war, they believe you.”

“They’re not afraid of us. They were afraid of [former US President Donald] Trump,” he added.

Meanwhile, House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) blasted the US president in a statement Friday for waiting a week to launch the strikes, which have killed at least 40.

“Unfortunately, the administration waited for a week and telegraphed to the world, including to Iran, the nature of our response,” the official stressed.

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The Iraqi and Iranian foreign ministers released statements criticizing the destabilizing potential of the US’ retaliatory blitz in the Middle East as the United States seeks revenge for an attack on its base near the Syria-Jordan border.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani called the US strikes in Iraq and Syria “another adventure and strategic mistake by the American government, which will have no result other than the escalation of tension and instability in the region.”

Iraqi spokesman Bassem al-Awadi also criticized the attacks as an infringement on the country’s sovereignty, saying “Iraq reiterates its refusal to let its lands be an arena for settling scores, and all parties must realize this... The Iraqi government will make every effort required by moral, national, and constitutional responsibility to protect our land, our cities, and the lives of our children in all types of armed forces.”

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US President Joe Biden is urging congressional support for newly-unveiled border legislation in the Senate as he seeks to secure lethal aid for US-backed regimes in Ukraine and Israel.

The bill was the result of Senate negotiations between Senators Chris Murphy (D-CT), James Lankford (R-OK), and Kyrsten Sinema (I-AZ). In an indication that the Biden administration plans to continue to provoke China on the issue of Taiwan “independence,” the bill also sends funds to Taiwan’s government.

Some progressive Democrats are critical of the legislation’s concessions to the right on border policy, while conservative Republicans in the House have promised to scuttle the bill entirely.

“This bill is even worse than we expected, and won’t come close to ending the border catastrophe the President has created,” said House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA), who called the bill “dead on arrival.”

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US 'Prepared' for War With Iran, Will Take 'More Action' Says Official as US Strikes Kill 40

National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said recent retaliatory strikes are “just the beginning,” claiming the United States is prepared for the “contingency” of increased tensions with Iran. “This was the beginning of our response, there will be more steps,” [said](#) US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan during an appearance on US television Sunday, claiming the United States was “prepared” for increased tension with Iran.

“Some of those steps will be seen, some may not be seen,” he added cryptically. “But there will be more action taken to respond to [the tragic death](#) of the three brave U.S. service members.” The United States has launched a massive wave of strikes in recent days to avenge the killing of three US troops near the Syria-Jordan border last week. The country has blamed Iran for the attacks, claiming they were launched by militants funded by Tehran. Iran has denied responsibility.

The United States reportedly hit some [80 targets](#) in a less than hour-long blitz on Friday, killing almost 40 people. The three US troops killed last Sunday were the first American casualties in the region in recent months as anger boils over in the Middle East over US support for Israel’s Gaza incursion, which has killed more than 27,000. The United States itself has killed dozens of people across the region as it lashes out against strikes from militant groups.

Many countries throughout the Middle East have expressed outrage over the [US aggression](#).

“Iraq reiterated its refusal that its lands be an arena for settling scores or showing force between warring countries,” [read](#) a statement from Iraq’s foreign ministry.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said the US strikes are “another adventurous and strategic mistake by the United States that will result only in increased tension and instability.”

Sullivan also took the opportunity to reiterate the Biden administration’s alleged support for a so-called “two-state solution” for Palestinians and Israelis, insisting any arrangement must include “security guarantees for Israel.” Sullivan didn’t clarify what security guarantees would be necessary for a Palestinian state existing alongside Israel. Israel has [killed Palestinian Arabs](#) and driven them from their homes [since the establishment of the country in 1948](#).

“From our perspective, security of Israel should be sacred,” said Sullivan. “It should not be a political game.”

Anonymous Biden administration officials [recently told US media](#) that the White House is allegedly looking for ways to convince Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to pull back from the country’s deadly Gaza assault, but the comments were met with suspicion as Biden has proclaimed throughout his career to be a strong “Zionist.”

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Pressure on Joe Biden Mounts Amidst Criticism of Strikes in Syria, Iraq

The US president has received criticism from both sides of the aisle for his response to the intensification of the Palestine-Israel conflict in recent months.

US President Joe Biden was criticized by Republican lawmakers Sunday for his response to a strike by militants killing 3 US troops on the Syria-Jordan border last week.

"If the goal is to deter Iran, you're failing miserably," [said](#) Senator Lindsay Graham (R-SC) during an interview on US television. "If you've convinced Iran you don't want a wider war, they believe you. 'Oh, I don't want a war with you.' They got the message... [they're not afraid of us](#). They were afraid of [former US President Donald] Trump."

Graham criticized the timing of Biden's retaliatory strikes late last week, which killed some 40 people on Friday, claiming the US President gave groups "a week's notice."

"People are not afraid of us," he insisted. "This idea of hitting hundreds of targets... doesn't matter. The only Iranian we killed in Syria or Iraq... is some dumbass that doesn't know to get out of the way."

The United States has alleged Iranian support for [militant attacks on US bases](#) throughout the Middle East in recent weeks amidst opposition to [US backing of Israel](#). Iran has denied responsibility.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) offered a similar criticism in a statement released Friday.

"The tragic deaths of three U.S. troops in Jordan, perpetrated by Iran-backed militias, demanded a clear and forceful response," said Johnson. "Unfortunately, the administration waited for a week and telegraphed to the world, including to Iran, the nature of our response. The public handwringing and excessive signaling undercuts our ability to put a decisive end to the barrage of attacks endured over the past few months."

White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan responded to Johnson's criticism Sunday, saying he found his comments "somewhat strange."

"The president made clear before we were attacked... before our brave services members were tragically killed, that if we were attacked, we would respond," [said](#) Sullivan during an appearance on US television.

"So, Iran and its military groups knew that the United States was going to respond. We also said we'd do it at a time and place of our choosing. We planned the attack. We executed the attack," he said of the massive blitz on Friday.

Some 40 people were reportedly killed during US strikes, although the number of deaths is still being assessed. Sullivan has [claimed more attacks](#) are being planned.

The US also continued its [strikes on Houthi targets](#) in Yemen over the weekend, hitting 13 locations. The Houthis are resisting Israeli action in the Gaza Strip, which has killed more than 27,000, via a blockade of ships associated with Israel in the Red Sea.

The Houthi attacks have not resulted in any casualties as the group responds to Israel's ongoing violent incursion, which many international figures and groups have deemed a "[genocide](#)."

Meanwhile, polling has [suggested](#) Democrats are also displeased with Biden's handling of the Palestine-Israel conflict in recent months, with a survey in November showing that 46% disapprove of his response.

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Iraq Cites 'Unforeseen Consequences' of Strikes in Region as US Lashes out at Iran

The Iraqi and Iranian foreign ministers released statements criticizing the destabilizing potential of the US' retaliatory blitz in the Middle East as the United States seeks revenge for an attack on its base near the Syria-Jordan border.

Iran and Iraq released statements over the weekend condemning the US' retaliatory blitz in the region, which has killed some 40 people.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani [called the strikes](#), which hit targets in Syria and Iraq, "another adventure and strategic mistake by the American government, which will have no result other than the escalation of tension and instability in the region."

Meanwhile Iraqi spokesman Bassem al-Awadi criticized the attacks as an infringement against Iraqi sovereignty; the country's parliament passed a resolution in 2020 calling for US-led coalition forces to [leave Iraq](#).

"Iraq reiterates its refusal to let its lands be an arena for settling scores, and all parties must realize this," [said](#) al-Awadi. "Our country's land and sovereignty are not the appropriate place to send messages and show force between opponents."

"At the same time, we affirm that the presence of the international coalition, which has deviated from the tasks assigned to it and the mandate granted to it, has become a reason for threatening security and stability in Iraq and a justification for involving Iraq in regional and international conflicts," he added. American forces have operated in Iraq since 2003 amidst US military action in the region that has [contributed](#) to at least 4.5 million deaths, according to a recent study.

The United States also continues to maintain an [illegal presence in Syria](#) in a regime change effort against President Bashar al-Assad as some 500,000 people have been killed in the country's civil war.

"The Iraqi government will make every effort required by moral, national, and constitutional responsibility to protect our land, our cities, and the lives of our children in all types of armed forces," said al-Awadi.

Biden administration officials said the recent US strikes were targeted against Iran's covert Islamic Revolutionary Guard Quds Force. [The White House](#) claimed the US consulted with members of the Iraqi government before the attacks, but al-Awadi denied Iraqi officials had been given prior warning.

Relations between the United States and Iran have reportedly deteriorated over the last week as the US has blamed Iran for an attack near the Syria-Jordan border last week that [killed three US troops](#).

"I do hold... them [Iran] responsible in the sense that they're supplying the weapons to the people who did it," [said](#) President Biden Tuesday.

The United States continues to [supply weapons to Israel](#) as the country's military action in Gaza has killed over 27,000.

Kanaani identified “the occupation of the Israeli regime” as the underlying cause of recent and ongoing tensions in the Middle East, blasting “the [genocide of the Palestinians](#) with the [unlimited support of the United States](#).”

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Biden Urges Passage of Border Bill to Secure Lethal Aid to Ukraine, Israel

Immigration policy is among the most controversial issues in US politics, but the US president hopes to pass compromise legislation to secure funding for allied regimes in Ukraine and Israel. US President Joe Biden is urging congressional support for newly-unveiled border [legislation](#) in the Senate as he seeks to secure lethal aid for US-backed regimes in Ukraine and Israel. “Now we’ve reached an agreement on a [bipartisan national security deal](#) that includes the toughest and fairest set of border reforms in decades,” Biden said in a statement Sunday. “I strongly support it.”

The Senate bill is the result of negotiations by Senators Chris Murphy (D-CT), James Lankford (R-OK), and Kyrsten Sinema (I-AZ). In exchange for the desired funding for foreign military prerogatives, the bill includes several concessions to conservative demands on immigration, which has [angered](#) many progressives as the legislation takes shape.

Among the provisions of the bill are new presidential powers to close the border when crossings are high and reforms to the handling of asylum claims.

In addition to funding for Ukraine and Israel, the bill also [includes](#) aid for Taiwan as the United States backs the island’s renegade government in violation of the understanding arrived at in the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué. The diplomatic negotiation guaranteed the United States’ commitment to the “One China” policy.

“This is one of the most necessary and important pieces of legislation Congress has put forward in years to ensure America’s future prosperity and security,” said Senate Majority Leader [Chuck Schumer](#) (D-NY), who said he would bring the bill to the floor this week. Schumer called the legislation “a monumental step towards strengthening America’s national security abroad and along our borders.”

But as some Democrats have questioned the bill’s provisions, Republicans in the House have also signaled resistance.

“I’ve seen enough. This bill is even worse than we expected, and won’t come close to ending the border catastrophe the President has created,” said House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) on the X social media platform (formerly Twitter) Sunday. “As the lead Democrat negotiator proclaimed: Under this legislation, ‘the border never closes.’” Johnson said the bill would be “dead on arrival” in the House.

President Biden criticized Republican opposition to the bill. “House Republicans have to decide. Do they want to solve the problem? Or do they want to keep playing politics with the [border](#)?” he said in his Sunday statement.

Efforts to pass renewed [border policy](#) and immigration reform have consistently faltered since former US President George W. Bush proposed legislation in 2004. Biden hopes this year will

be different. But the US president is up against a long record of congressional dysfunctionality on one of the most contentious issues in American politics.

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US Lawmaker Says Influx of Illegal Chinese Migrants Threatens Guam

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) - US Republican Rep. James Moylan said on Monday that the flow of illegal Chinese migrants to Guam poses a threat to the island, adding that he is seeking assistance from the White House to deal with the issue.

Guam's delegate to Congress said in an interview with Fox News Digital that the US island territory in Micronesia has been infiltrated by illegal Chinese migrants embarking on its shores for "years." The majority of those coming are often from the Northern Mariana Islands, he said. "It's a great threat," Moylan said in the interview.

Moylan claimed that the Chinese could be working to collect intelligence on behalf of Beijing in Guam and around the US military bases on the island.

Guam's local authorities are limited in the action they can take, and are not getting necessary assistance from the Biden administration to address the problem, he said.

"With the rising tensions of the PRC within the Indo-Pacific region, where Guam's proximity plays an integral role, it is concerning that PRC Nationals are entering the island through such precarious routes," Moylan said in his January letter to ICE, as quoted by Fox News Digital. "While we are certain that some are here to find a means to earn an income through under the radar jobs, there are still the risks at play with bad actors coming to the table with other intentions."

Moylan alleged during the interview that there has been hacking of malware on Guam from China.

"They're continuously trying to work their way in," Moylan said. "And I knew what I know, we're doing what we can to protect, but the attention needs to be really put back on Guam to protect our U.S. citizens there, to protect our military there as well."

The Chinese Defense Ministry previously said the US was using "non-existent threats" as pretext to advance forward military deployment in the Asia-Pacific, including in Guam.

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US Treasury Delegation Heads to Beijing for Economic Talks - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) – A high-level delegation of US Treasury officials is visiting Beijing this week for two days of economic talks, The New York Times reported on Monday, citing a Treasury official.

The first meeting in Beijing of an economic working group established last September, it will

include frank discussion about China's government subsidies, industrial overcapacity, and relief for low-income countries' sovereign debt burdens, a Treasury official said.

Officials will also discuss combating climate change and investment screening programs.

Five Treasury officials are in the delegation, led by Under Secretary for International Affairs Jay Shambaugh.

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US Senate Releases \$118Bln Bipartisan Deal on Border Security, Ukraine, Israel Aid

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Sunday released the \$118 billion proposed deal on border security, including aid for Ukraine and Israel.

The draft text of the bill proposes some \$60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine and \$14 billion for Israel.

The legislation includes \$48.43 billion to provide Ukraine with military training, intelligence sharing, increased US presence in the European Command area of responsibility, and other US support activities through December 31, 2024.

According to a summary of the spending, some \$19.85 billion would go toward replenishing US military weapons and equipment provided to Ukraine from US stockpiles, \$13.8 billion to allow Ukraine to rearm itself through the purchase of weapons and munitions from the US defense industrial base.

Some \$14.8 billion would be used for the continued US support to Ukraine through military training, intelligence sharing, increased presence, and other support activities, the summary stated.

The bill also includes \$7.85 billion for direct budget support to Ukraine.

The proposed bill also includes \$8 million for the US Defense Department Inspector General (IG) to continue to exercise oversight over US assistance to Ukraine.

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House Majority Leader Scalise Says House Will Not Vote on Senate Border-Ukraine Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - US House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said on Sunday that the House of Representatives would not vote on the Senate's bipartisan Ukraine aid-border security bill if it reaches the lower chamber.

"Let me be clear: The Senate Border Bill will NOT receive a vote in the House," Scalise said in a statement

Scalise explains that the bill would allow 5,000 illegal immigrants a day in the United States and give automatic work permits to asylum recipients, which he considers a magnet for more illegal immigration.

US Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said the bipartisan deal reached on President Joe Biden's supplemental request provides an immediate solution to the crisis on the US southern border.

According to Republican Senator James Lankford, one of the key negotiators of the supplemental bill, the changes to US border policy proposed in the bill include ending Biden's use of parole catch-and-release at the southern border, which is believed to stop over half a million border crossings each year.

Earlier on Sunday, the Senate, after weeks of negotiations with the White House, released the \$118 billion national security supplemental bill that includes some \$60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine, \$14 billion for Israel, and about \$20 billion for border security, among other priorities.

The proposed legislation would also immediately deport migrants who enter the US illegally, further restrict asylum eligibility, provide \$650 million to build more border wall, and require a shutdown of the border to illegal migrants when illegal crossings exceed an average of 5,000 a week.

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McConnell Says Deal on Supplemental Bill Provides Immediate Solution to US Border Crisis

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - US Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said on Sunday that the bipartisan deal reached on President Joe Biden's supplemental request provides an immediate solution to the crisis on the US southern border.

"I am grateful to [Republic] Senator [James] Lankford for working tirelessly to ensure that supplemental national security legislation begins with direct and immediate solutions to the crisis at our southern border," McConnell said in a statement.

McConnell urged his Senate colleagues to "carefully consider" the legislation and "prepare to act," citing a sense of urgency at home and abroad.

"America's sovereignty is being tested here at home, and our credibility is being tested by emboldened adversaries around the world," McConnell added.

US House Republican Conference Chair Elise Stefanik said that the deal reached on the Senate's border security-foreign aid bill is a "non-starter" and suggested that the House has a better border security bill in HR2 - the Secure Our Border Act, which has already passed the lower chamber.

However, the American Civil Liberties Union rights group opposes the Senate's supplemental bill because its "anti-immigrant policies" would remove protections for migrants seeking asylum.

According to Lankford, one of the key negotiators of the supplemental bill, the changes to US border policy proposed in the bill include ending US President Joe Biden's use of parole catch-and-release at the southern border, which is believed to stop over half a million border crossings each year.

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US House Lawmaker Stefanik Says Senate Border-Foreign Aid Bill 'Absolute Non-Starter'

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - US House Republican Conference Chair Elise Stefanik said on Sunday that the deal reached on the Senate's border security-foreign aid bill is a "non-starter" as it would encourage thousands of undocumented migrants to cross the borders of the United States daily.

"This Joe Biden/Chuck Schumer Open Border Bill is an absolute non-starter and will further incentivize thousands of illegals to pour in across our borders daily. House Republicans have already passed HR2 - the Secure Our Border Act, which would actually secure the border and return to the effective [former US President Donald]Trump policies with the most secure border in our nation's history," Stefanik said in a statement.

President Joe Biden's lax immigration policies on the southern border have been blamed for three consecutive years of record migration.

Republican US lawmaker Matt Rosendale, in a separate statement, also suggested that the House has a better border security proposal in the Secure Our Border Act.

"I will not support legislation that makes securing our border contingent on sending more money to Ukraine," Rosendale added.

According to Republican Senator James Lankford, one of the key negotiators of the supplemental bill, the changes to US border policy proposed in the bill include ending US President Joe Biden's use of parole catch-and-release at the southern border, which is believed to stop over half a million border crossings each year.

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US Senator Says Lawmakers Should Reject Vote on \$118Bln Ukraine, Israel Aid Bill This Week

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - US Senator Mike Lee said Sunday that any self-respecting senator should reject a vote this week on a \$118 billion supplemental funding bill with aid for Ukraine and Israel, as well as border security and national security measures.

"No self-respecting senator should agree to vote on this 370-page bill this week. Any 41 senators can prevent the bill from proceeding. If you agree that senators should have this bill for at least a few weeks (and certainly more than a few days) before voting on it, say so!" Lee said in a statement on X.

Earlier on Sunday, the US Senate Appropriations Committee released a draft copy of the legislation, which includes billions of dollars in aid for Ukraine and Israel. The bill also provides billions in funding for border security and national security issues, such as capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region and domestic uranium enrichment.

Last week, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said he plans to hold the first procedural votes on the bill no later than Wednesday.

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US Senate Releases \$118Bln Bipartisan Deal on Border Security, Ukraine, Israel Aid

(Adds details after para 2)

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Sunday released the \$118 billion proposed deal on border security, including aid for Ukraine and Israel.

The draft text of the bill proposes some \$60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine and \$14 billion for Israel.

The legislation includes \$48.43 billion to provide Ukraine with military training, intelligence sharing, increased US presence in the European Command area of responsibility, and other US support activities through December 31, 2024.

According to a summary of the spending, some \$19.85 billion would go toward replenishing US military weapons and equipment provided to Ukraine from US stockpiles, \$13.8 billion to allow Ukraine to rearm itself through the purchase of weapons and munitions from the US defense industrial base.

Some \$14.8 billion would be used for the continued US support to Ukraine through military training, intelligence sharing, increased presence, and other support activities, the summary stated.

The bill also includes \$7.85 billion for direct budget support to Ukraine.

The proposed bill also includes \$8 million for the US Defense Department Inspector General (IG) to continue to exercise oversight over US assistance to Ukraine.

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Senate Supplemental Bill Proposes \$20.2Bln to Address Crisis on US Southern Border

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The bipartisan agreement reached on the Senate supplemental bill proposes providing \$20.2 billion to address the crisis on the southern border of the United States, a draft text of the legislation showed Sunday.

"The \$118.28 billion national security supplemental package includes...\$20.23 billion to address existing operational needs and expand capabilities at our nation's borders, resource the new border policies included in the package, and help stop the flow of fentanyl and other narcotics," a summary of the bill said.

According to Republican Senator James Lankford, one of the key negotiators of the bill, the changes to US border policy proposed in the bill include ending US President Joe Biden's use of parole catch-and-release at the southern border, which is believed to stop over half a million border crossings each year.

The proposed legislation would also immediately deport migrants who enter the US illegally, further restrict asylum eligibility, provide \$650 million to build more border wall, and require a shutdown of the border to illegal migrants when illegal crossings exceed 5,000 a week.

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US Senate Supplemental Bill Provides \$2.72Bln for Domestic Uranium Enrichment - Summary

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - A draft supplemental funding proposed by the US Senate on Sunday includes \$2.72 billion to support domestic uranium enrichment in the United States, according to a summary of the legislation released by the Senate Appropriations Committee.

The bill provides \$2.72 billion in repurposed funding to support domestic uranium enrichment to bolster the production of civil and advanced nuclear fuel, the summary said.

On Thursday, US National Nuclear Security Administration chief Jill Hruby said the US will need to restart a highly enriched uranium capability in the next few decades to address global dynamics.

Russia is currently the world's only commercial producer of high-assay low-enriched uranium (HALEU), which is used in advanced nuclear reactors. Last month, the US Energy Department issued a request for uranium enrichment services to establish a reliable domestic supply.

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Senate Bill Proposes \$2.5Bln to Bolster Capabilities in Indo-Pacific Region, Deter China

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The bipartisan agreement reached on the Senate supplemental bill proposes \$2.5 billion to bolster US and allied capabilities in the Indo-Pacific

region and deter China, a summary of the legislation showed Sunday.

"The bill includes \$2.58 billion to bolster US and allied capabilities in the Indo-Pacific and deter China," the summary read.

Of the \$2.5 billion, some \$1.9 billion would be used to invest in the US industrial base to replenish US weapons provided to Taiwan.

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US Senate Supplemental Bill Includes Billions of Dollars for Israeli Missile Defense - Doc

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Appropriations Committee's draft supplemental funding bill includes billions of dollars to bolster Israel's missile defense capabilities and procure the Iron Beam missile defense system, a summary of the legislation showed Sunday.

The bill provides \$10.6 billion to support Israel, including \$4 billion to bolster missile defense capabilities, according to the summary. The legislation also includes \$1.2 billion for Iron Beam procurement, the summary said.

Additionally, the bill provides \$2.44 billion to support the United States' operations in the Central Command area and replace combat expenditures for weapons in the Red Sea, the summary said.

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US Senate Releases \$118Bln Bipartisan Deal on Border Security, Ukraine, Israel Aid

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Sunday released the \$118 billion proposed deal on border security, including aid for Ukraine and Israel.

The draft text of the bill proposes some \$60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine and \$14 billion for Israel.

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US Congressman Massie to Vote Against \$14.3Bln Package for Israel: 'It Has No Offsets'

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Thomas Massie said on Saturday that a newly proposed spending bill for Israel would only increase the US debt by \$14.3 billion and that he would vote against it.

"This spending package has no offsets, so it will increase our debt by \$14.3 billion plus interest.

I'm a No," Massie said on X.

Israel has a lower debt-to-GDP ratio than the United States, he said.

"Most of this money will go directly to the U.S. Military Industrial Complex (MIC), which, if you're keeping up, prefers to be referred to as the Defense Industrial Base (DIB) now. Watch for those stocks to go up Monday," Massie said.

The congressman further explained that "the bill will spend over \$17 billion, but some goes to replace weapons we've given to Israel, and some goes for other random costs in the Middle East," adding that, "in addition to this \$17+ billion bill, we will probably give them the customary \$3+ billion in the omnibus!"

US House Speaker Mike Johnson announced earlier on Saturday that Congress will vote on a "clean, standalone supplemental Israel package" and accused the Senate of failing to move appropriate legislation in a timely fashion while Israel continued to face "perilous circumstances" in its fight against Palestinian movement Hamas. Johnson clarified the decision by saying that the Senate was taking too long to take action and that Senators did not include the US House in the negotiations. Johnson added that this needs to be addressed promptly due to Israel being a close ally.

The announcement comes as the Senate and the White House prepare to release a compromise legislative text that seeks to marry the Israel aid to border security funding and further assistance to Ukraine.

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US Strikes on Iraq, Syria Will Not Contribute to Stabilizing Regional Situation - Expert

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The recent US strikes on Iraq and Syria in response to an attack against a US military base in Jordan will in no way contribute to stabilizing the situation in the Middle East, but may, on the contrary, escalate tensions with local militia, Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus, retired US Army Lt. Col. Earl Rasmussen told Sputnik on Saturday.

"The US response does nothing to help stabilize the situation in the region ... US actions will not provide stability to the region, it will likely further heighten the tensions both with militia groups as well as with Iran, Iraq and Syria," Rasmussen, who is also former vice president of the Eurasia Foundation, said.

He also fully agreed with the opinion that the US strikes signaled "a dangerous escalation" in the region, the exact scale of which would depend on "the extent of the US attacks and the manner they are carried out."

At the same time, the military expert expressed his belief that US President Joe Biden had no other choice but to respond in some way to the drone attack that killed three soldiers at a US base in Jordan.

"We have no evidence that Iran was involved at all other than providing support to the accused militias. Yet, we provide support to many 'proxy' forces ourselves. A direct attack on Iran, as our rhetoric often implies, would be very unwise and definitely, would result in a greater regional conflict. However, a limited response targeting organizations involved and prior notification of

parties such as Syria and Iraq would likely meet political objectives while mitigating an escalation," Rasmussen explained.

Despite the claim, the expert acknowledged that the US strikes constituted a violation of the sovereignty of Iraq and Syria and that US forces "continue to illegally occupy areas within Iraq and Syria," making local facilities targets of militia groups, especially amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict in the Gaza Strip.

"Let's hope that we have some adults in the region to prevent it [the situation] from further escalation, the US and Israel definitely do not appear to be seeking deescalation or stability," Rasmussen added.

Meanwhile, when asked whether Russia or Iran were likely to respond to the US strikes in any significant way, the expert said it depended on "what facilities are hit and injuries that occur."

"I think there will likely be a response by local militia. However, I do not see any significant response from Russia or Iran — both are strongly seeking greater stability in the region," Rasmussen added.

The United States launched airstrikes late on Friday against some 85 targets allegedly belonging to Iran's Revolutionary Guard and affiliated militias in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi prime minister's office confirmed on Saturday there were casualties among its military personnel and civilians. The Iraqi parliament's Security and Defense Committee called on the country's authorities to quickly sign an agreement on the withdrawal of the international coalition troops from the country. Following the US strikes, Russia requested an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council to be held on February 5 to discuss the events.

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Pentagon Says No Info on Whether US Notified Russia on Strikes in Syria

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) – The US Defense Department has no information if the deconfliction line with Russia has been used to notify Moscow about airstrikes in Syria, a Pentagon spokesperson said in a statement.

"We have no additional details to provide at this time," the spokesperson responded to Sputnik on Friday to a media request on whether the Washington-Moscow deconfliction line was used ahead of a series of latest US strikes in Syria.

Earlier in the day, the US Central Command said in a statement that the United States conducted its first retaliatory strikes against 85 targets linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and affiliated militia groups in Iraq and Syria by using B1 strategic bombers and 125 precision munitions within about 30 minutes.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Director of Operations Douglas Sims later said that the United States struck three adversary facilities in Iraq and four in Syria.

The Iraqi military issued a statement saying the US strikes on targets in Iraq represent a violation of the country's sovereignty and undermine the Iraqi government's efforts to stabilize the situation, which can have unforeseen consequences for the country and the region.

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US Resumes Deportation Flights of Illegal Migrants to Remote Regions in Mexico— Reports

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) – The United States has quietly resumed the deportation of illegal migrants on flights to remote territories in Mexico after nearly a two-year pause and amid an unprecedented number of illegal migrant encounters on the southern border, The New York Times reported citing US and Mexican officials.

The first flight following the recommencement of deportations by air took off on Tuesday with over 100 Mexicans on board and headed to Morelia, a city located hundreds of miles from the US-Mexico border, the report said on Friday.

The idea behind the move is to dissuade migrants from attempting to cross the border over and over again with a senior Mexican official saying that such flights will be departing regularly, the report added.

Between late 2019 and May 2022, the United States had flown more than 46,000 Mexicans into the central part of the country, according to data compiled by the Washington Office on Latin America.

US Customs and Border Protection recently revealed that there were more than 302,000 migrant encounters on the US southern border in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded. The Biden administration has experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the southern border.

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US Air Force KC-46 Pegasus Air Tanker Still Plagued by Operating Problems - Report

WASHINGTON. February 3 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force's Boeing KC-46A Pegasus long range aerial tanker is still plagued with problems on the boom it needs to use to refuel aircraft and fulfill its mission, the Office of the Director, Operational Test and Evaluation (DOT&E) said in its Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report.

"(R)estrictions persist on boom refueling due to RVS [Remote Vision System] and boom deficiencies," the report said on Friday. "Problems with the RVS also degrade the effectiveness of boom AR under certain lighting conditions."

A problem with the boom telescope actuator control can cause excess loads during receiver contact, making it difficult for some receivers to maintain contact position or lead to contacts outside of the receptacle, the report warned.

"This has prevented boom AR [air refueling] of the A-10 [ground support combat aircraft] until the boom actuator redesign is complete, but the excess boom loads are noticeable even with large aircraft such as the C-17. These shortfalls in RVS and the boom represent three of the remaining six open Category 1 deficiencies the program office is tracking," the report said.

The remaining Category 1 deficiencies in the aircraft involve leaks in the fuel manifold system, cracks and leaks in the refueling receptacle drain line, and cracks in the auxiliary power unit drain mast, the report said.

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US Navy Has Not Assessed Undersea Weapon Threat to Zumwalt Destroyers - Report

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has still not carried out any assessment of threats by undersea weapons or other hostile attackers to its three operational Zumwalt-class destroyers, the Office of the Director, Operational Test and Evaluation (DOT&E) said in a report. "(T)he Navy has not yet funded or planned an adequate ship survivability assessment against underwater threat weapons, to include a demonstration of residual mission capability after such engagements, through a full ship shock trial," the report said on Friday.

The Navy is currently evaluating options for completion of the equipment shock qualification program and conduct of an alternative to shock trial that would sufficiently assess the risk to the warfighter from associated weapon events, the report noted.

However, "The Navy has not yet updated vulnerability and recoverability M&S [modeling and simulation] meant to support the LFT&E [Live Fire Test and Evaluation] survivability assessment of the Zumwalt class to reflect the ship as built," it said.

In its previous Fiscal Year (FY22) Annual Report, the DOT&E recommended that the Navy work to develop an updated M&S strategy that would include survivability model updates, but so far, the Navy has not done so, the report said.

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F-35 Jet Fails to Meet Basic Operating Standards in 65 Areas - Pentagon Report

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint Strike Fighter still suffers at least 65 basic deficiencies where it continues to fail to meet basic testing specifications, the Office of the Director, Operational Test and Evaluation (DOT&E) said in a report.

The JPO [F-35 Joint Project Office] completed the readiness review for JSE [joint simulation environment] trials in September 2023, and certified it as ready for testing, despite 65 deficiencies against the baseline JSE requirements, the report said on Friday.

The F-35 program development cycle continues to experience delays due to immature and deficient Block 4 mission systems software and avionics stability problems with the new Technology Refresh 3 (TR-3) hardware going into Lot 15 production aircraft," the report said.

"As a result, deliveries of production Lot 15 aircraft in the TR-3 configuration are on hold until more testing can be completed and the avionics issues resolved. ...[T]hese delays prevented

the F-35 JPO from adequately planning and programming for hardware modifications ... of the upgraded hardware configuration," the report said.

Also, the necessary flight test instrumentation, including both aircraft and open-air battle shaping instrumentation, for both, the remaining TR-2 configuration and upgraded TR-3 aircraft, are not all on contract and will not be available in time, the report added.

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Texas National Guard Fortifies Shelby Park Border Amid Immigration Crisis

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The Texas National Guard is blockading the border of Shelby Park, securing it with rows of containers and coils of barbed wire along the banks of the Rio Grande, a Sputnik correspondent reports.

The park's perimeter is currently monitored by a small number of soldiers in jeeps, lacking heavy military equipment.

However, the community, predominantly Spanish-speaking with Mexican roots, exhibits mixed feelings toward the developments. One of them, a cafe owner near Shelby Park Victor, believes that Mexico could help with stopping the immigrants.

"I don't wish them bad. I know some come because of the like economic situation or others because of prosecution served threats by cartels. They're like running for their lives. There's a lot of reasons for them to come," Victor told Sputnik.

The shutdown of Shelby Park disappoints locals, impacting pastimes like picnics and festivals, while the Texas Frontier gains the support of every other Republican state, the Republican majority in the House of Representatives, and Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump.

"It is just our country. We're letting everybody cross the border... The elections will stop it, but it needs to happen now," Jack, a 70-year-old resident from Dallas, who came to the border to see it for himself, told Sputnik.

Jack expressed worry about the impact of migrants, housed in motels and parks, on his family's life, citing concerns about the situation affecting the city, especially in colder northern regions where schools are closed, leading to children relying on online schooling without classroom interaction.

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

Pentagon Says Anticipates Casualties From US Strikes on Targets in Iraq, Syria

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States conducted strikes on targets in Iraq and Syria linked to the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with the expectation that there could be casualties, US Joint Staff Operations Director Douglas Sims said.

"We know that there are militants that use these locations, IRGC as well as Iranian-aligned militia group personnel," Sims said during a press briefing on Friday. "We made these strikes tonight with an idea that there would likely be casualties associated with people inside those facilities."

Earlier in the day, the US military struck more than 85 IRGC-linked targets in Iraq and Syria, in response to deadly attacks on US forces in the region. The Iran-linked groups likely anticipated a US response and took defensive movements, Sims said.

The US military selected the targets to avoid civilian casualties, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said. The Defense Department is in the early stages of a battle damage assessment and is currently unaware of the number of militants killed or wounded, Kirby added.

One civilian was killed and another injured as a result of the strikes in the Al-Qa'im District of western Iraq, a source in the Iraqi security services told Sputnik.

The strikes represent a violation of Iraqi sovereignty and threaten the region's security and stability, Maj. Gen. Yahya Rasool Abdullah, a spokesman for the commander-in-chief of the Iraqi military, said in a statement obtained by Sputnik.

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US General Says No Changes in Posture in Middle East Amid Attacks on American Forces

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is not planning to make any changes to its posture in the Middle East amid a surge of attacks on its troops and facilities in the region since October, Joint Chiefs of Staff Director of Operations Douglas Sims said.

"In terms of force structure [in the Middle East], no, no conversation now about adjusting forces in the area of operations," Sims said during a press briefing on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the US Central Command said in a statement that the United States conducted its first retaliatory strikes against 85 targets linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and affiliated militia groups in Iraq and Syria by using B1 strategic bombers and 125 precision munitions within about 30 minutes.

Sims noted that the strikes conducted by the B1 bombers that flew to the region from bases in the United States demonstrate there is no need to add new capabilities to the Middle East to protect US troops or deter adversaries.

The Iraqi military issued a statement saying the US strikes on targets in Iraq represent a violation of the country's sovereignty and undermine the Iraqi government's efforts to stabilize

the situation, which can have unforeseen consequences for the country and the region.

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Pentagon Says Not Tracking at Present 'Any Retaliation' to US Strikes in Syria, Iraq

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is not tracking any retaliatory attacks in response to its strikes on targets in Iraq and Syria linked to the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), US Joint Staff Operations Director Douglas Sims said.

"I'm not tracking any retaliation in eastern Syria right now," Sims said during a press briefing on Friday.

The United States struck more than 85 IRGC-linked targets in Iraq and Syria earlier on Friday in response to deadly attacks on US forces in the region.

A local source told Sputnik that a fire started at a US base at the Conoco gas field in eastern Syria, following reports that the site came under rocket fire in the wake of the US strikes.

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US Has Not Communicated With Iran Since Deadly Attack in Jordan on Sunday - White House

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States has not communicated with Iran since the deadly attack on US forces in Jordan over the weekend, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told reporters.

"There's been no communications with Iran since the attack that killed our three soldiers in Jordan," Kirby said on Friday.

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US Does Not Know How Many Killed in Mideast Strikes, Assessing Damage - White House

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States does not have any information on casualties resulting from new US strikes on Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) targets in Iraq and Syria, but battle damage assessment is ongoing, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told reporters.

"The Department of Defense is in the early stages of battle damage assessment, but we believe that the strikes are successful," Kirby said on Friday. "We do not know at this time if or how many militants may have been killed or wounded."

The United States informed the Iraqi government about its operation prior to conducting the

strikes, Kirby added.

The US strikes on targets in Iraq represent a violation of the country's sovereignty and undermine the Iraqi government's efforts to stabilize the situation, which can have unforeseen consequences on the country and the region, the Iraqi military said in a statement.

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More Actions to Follow in Coming Days After First US Strikes in Iraq, Syria – Kirby

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) – The United States will continue taking retaliatory actions in the coming days against militant groups responsible for the Jordan attack after US forces hit over 85 targets in Iraq and Syria, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said during a press briefing.

"There will be additional response actions taken in coming days," Kirby said on Friday.

Earlier on Friday, the US Central Command said in a statement that the United States conducted its first retaliatory strikes against 85 targets linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and affiliated militia groups in Iraq and Syria using 125 precision munitions.

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US Strikes on IRGC Targets in Syria, Iraq Avoided Civilian Casualties - White House

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The latest US strikes on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) targets in Syria and Iraq lasted about 30 minutes and avoided civilian casualties, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.

"Numerous aircraft, including B-1 bombers dispatched from the United States, were involved in this operation, firing more than 125 precision guided munitions over the course of about 30 minutes," Kirby said on Friday. "These targets were carefully selected to avoid civilian casualties and based on a clear irrefutable evidence that they were connected to attacks on US personnel in the region."

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Austin Says US Strikes on Iraq, Syria Targets Only Beginning of Response to Jordan Attack

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States' strikes on Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) targets in Iraq and Syria are the beginning of the Biden

administration's response to an attack on US forces in Jordan last month, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a statement.

"This is the start of our response. The President has directed additional actions to hold the IRGC and affiliated militias accountable for their attacks on US and Coalition Forces. These will unfold at times and places of our choosing," the statement said on Friday.

Earlier on Friday, the US struck 85 IRGC-linked targets in Iraq and Syria, after the Biden administration pinned an attack on US forces in Jordan on an Iran-backed group.

The US does not seek conflict in the Middle East, the statement said. However, the Biden administration will not tolerate attacks on US forces and will take all necessary actions to defend its forces and interests, the statement said.

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US Will Not Strike Targets Inside Iran as Part of Response to Jordan Attack - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States will not strike targets inside Iran as part of its military response to the recent deadly attack on US troops in Jordan, CNN reported, citing a senior Biden administration official.

Earlier on Friday, the United States struck 85 targets in Iraq and Syria allegedly linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps after the attack on a US outpost in Jordan killed three service members last month; the Biden administration pinned the attack on Iran-backed groups.

US officials knew of the Friday strikes a few days in advance, the report said.

The timing of the operation was contingent on multiple factors, such as weather, the report added.

US President Joe Biden is receiving updates on the strikes, according to the report.

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Biden Says Ordered Strikes Against Targets in Iraq, Syria in Retaliation for Jordan Attack

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said in a statement that he directed to strike targets in Iraq and Syria linked to militant groups that are supported by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in retaliation for their alleged role in the Jordan attack.

"This afternoon, at my direction, U.S. military forces struck targets at facilities in Iraq and Syria that the IRGC and affiliated militia use to attack U.S. forces. Our response began today. It will continue at times and places of our choosing," the statement said on Friday.

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

US Airstrikes Target 85 IRGC, Affiliated Groups Targets in Iraq and Syria – CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) – The United States conducted its first retaliatory strikes against 85 targets linked to Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and affiliated militia groups in Iraq and Syria, the US Central Command said in a statement.

“At 4:00 p.m. (EST) [21:00 GMT] Feb. 02, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) forces conducted airstrikes in Iraq and Syria against Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and affiliated militia groups. US military forces struck more than 85 targets,” the statement said on Friday.

US forces employed more than 125 precision munitions to strike command and control operations, centers, intelligence centers, rockets and missiles, unmanned aird vehicle storages, and logistics and munition supply chain facilities associated with IRGC and other groups, the statement said.

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Senior US Official to Visit Argentina for Talks on Economic Stabilization - State Dept.

UNITED NATIONS, February 3 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Secretary of State Brian Nichols is set to visit Argentina from February 4-6 for talks on a wide array of issues, including economic stabilization and shared areas of interest, the State Department said.

"Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian A. Nichols will travel to Buenos Aires, Argentina, from February 4 to 6," the State Department said in a statement on Friday.

Nichols will meet with President Javier Milei, Foreign Minister Diana Mondino, Security Minister Patricia Bullrich and Economy Minister Luis Caputo to discuss regional and global challenges, economic stabilization and shared areas of interest, the statement said.

"Assistant Secretary Nichols will also meet with private sector representatives to explore opportunities for new US investments in Argentina that will enhance inclusive prosperity in both countries," the statement added.

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US Defense Official Confirms Strikes Have Started in Mideast in Response to Jordan Attack

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States has started airstrikes in the Middle East in response to the deadly attack on US troops in Jordan, a US defense official confirmed to Sputnik.

"They have now started," the official said on Friday when asked about reports of US strikes in Syria.

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Pierre Trudeau Opposed Stripping Citizenship of USSR-Convicted Nazi - Declassified Report

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - Former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in his capacity of justice minister in 1967 opposed revoking the citizenship of a Latvian Nazi convicted by the Soviet Union of leading a firing squad responsible for the death of over 5,000 Jews, according to a declassified report.

In the mid-1980s, the Canadian government launched the Commission of Inquiry on War Criminals, also known as the Deschenes Commission, to investigate the immigration of individuals with a Nazi-background into the country.

The report for the commission, which was released on Thursday by the Library and Archive, is much less redacted than the version initially released in 1987 under the Access to Information Act. A less censored copy was obtained in July 2023 by the Jewish human rights organization B'nai Brith, but Trudeau's stance on the case was blacked out in that version.

The 617-page document mentions the case of "Subject F," an individual sentenced to death in absentia by a Soviet court in Riga in 1965. The man was said to have been the captain of a firing squad responsible for the execution of 5,128 Jews in Latvia's Rezekne District during the Second World War, and Moscow had sought his extradition.

In July 1967, at the request of the Department of External Affairs, Trudeau expressed his legal opinion on the matter, saying that there was no indication that Subject F had concealed circumstances relating to his "good character" even though he was found guilty in absentia of crimes by the USSR.

In November 1967, in a letter addressed to then Secretary of State for External Affairs Paul Martin, Trudeau said he was worried it could set a precedent of stripping an individual of their citizenship.

"It appears to me, on the other hand, that it would be most ill-advised for the government to undertake this venture which would involve publicly accusing a Canadian citizen of having committed crimes in Latvia in respect of which he has been convicted, in absentia, in Russia," Pierre Trudeau said.

Trudeau argued that if Ottawa went forward with revoking the individual's citizenship, Canadian authorities would have to proceed in a similar way with regard to anyone who had obtained a certificate of citizenship if it were found that "he had not disclosed occurrences in his past" which the government now decides "to be of sufficient gravity as to constitute concealment of circumstances material to his grant of citizenship."

"I cannot, therefore, on the basis of my present appreciation of this case, recommend or concur in a course of action designed to strip Subject F of his Canadian citizenship," Trudeau said.

According to the declassified report, Trudeau's main concern was that a successful case involving the revocation of citizenship could ring alarms with several other individuals about their

statuses as Canadians, due to the "consequences of the politics and history" of the country they left.

However, the declassified information also reveals that Trudeau's counsel was ill-received by External Affairs Legal Division, which was unhappy with his opinion and pointed out that the government was free to initiate revocation proceedings, and not doing so was a matter of policy rather than law.

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Judge Delays Trump's March Election Meddling Trial Until Immunity Issue Resolved - Filing

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge postponed former President Donald Trump's March 4 trial start date for his federal election inference case until his immunity appeal is resolved, court documents revealed.

"The March 4, 2024 trial set by the court's 39 Pretrial Order, as amended, is hereby vacated. The court will set a new schedule if and when the mandate is returned," the court filing said on Friday.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) -

MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS

* Yemen's Houthis launched ballistic missiles at the city of Eilat in southern Israel, Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree said on Friday.

* President Joe Biden traveled to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware on Friday to witness the dignified transfer of remains of three US soldiers who were killed in a recent drone attack in Jordan.

US MEASURES AGAINST IRAN

* The Justice Department on Friday unveiled three federal cases, in a series of efforts to combat Iranian oil trafficking funding terrorism, particularly supporting Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

* The United States has sanctioned five individuals and five entities linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Cyber-Electronic Command, the Treasury Department said.

PALESTINE-RELATED DEVELOPMENTS

* The United Nations discussed the topic of funding of the UNRWA in a positive manner with the Qatari Prime Minister, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

* Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib said on Friday she summoned Israeli Ambassador Idit Rosenzweig-Abu after Israel destroyed the Belgian agency for development cooperation (Enabel) building in Gaza.

* EU member states are in the process of drawing up sanctions against Jewish settlers in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, the European Union said.

* At least 17,000 children in the Gaza Strip are unaccompanied or are separated amid Israel's invasion and bombardment of the Palestinian enclave, UNICEF State of Palestine Chief of Communication Jonathan Crickx said.

EU SANCTIONS AGAINST ZIMBABWE

* The Council of Europe said on Friday that it had prolonged for another year the restrictive measures imposed against Zimbabwe in light of the human right situation there.

ETHIOPIA

* The Ethiopian lower house has extended for another four months a state of emergency in the northern region of Amhara, where clashes erupted last year between the regional militia and the country's armed forces, media reported on Friday.

UKRAINE CONFLICT

* The International Court of Justice (ICJ) found that it has jurisdiction to hear Ukraine's 2022 claim against Russia on the basis of Article 9 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Judge Joan E. Donoghue said on Friday.

* The ICJ rejected six objections submitted by Russia regarding Ukraine's claim, Donoghue said.

Opposition Freedom Party of Austria leader Herbert Kickl characterized Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer's agreement to the European Union's new \$54 billion aid package to Ukraine as "betrayal."

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PREVIEW – South Carolina Holds First Official Democratic Presidential Primary of 2024 Race

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The US state of South Carolina will hold the first official Democratic Party primary election of the 2024 presidential race on Saturday, as President Joe Biden seeks to cement his spot as the party's nominee.

Polling sites in South Carolina will operate from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. on Saturday, although early voting for the Democratic primary began on January 22, according to the South Carolina Election Commission. Voters were required to register to vote in the Democratic primary by January 4.

South Carolina voters are required to present an official identification document in order to cast a ballot. However, voters can cast a provisional ballot if they forget to bring identification, which will be counted if they prove their identity to a county election office before certification of the

election.

Last month, Biden won a majority of votes in the New Hampshire state Democratic Party primary election as a write-in candidate, but the national party did not sanction the election. The Democratic National Committee scheduled the South Carolina primary election as its first official primary of the 2024 race, citing the state's diverse electorate compared to New Hampshire and Iowa.

Although Biden is the Democratic party's presumptive nominee as an incumbent president, he nevertheless faces primary challenges from US Congressman Dean Phillips and writer Marianne Williamson.

A majority of Democratic voters, 69%, intend to vote for Biden, according to an Emerson College poll released last month. Five percent (5%) of Democratic voters plan to vote for Phillips and 3% for Williamson, while 22% were undecided, the poll report said.

The Republican Party will hold its primary election in South Carolina on February 24.

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US Charges 3 Men With Scheme to Transfer \$65Mln to Middle East Countries – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) – US prosecutors unsealed an indictment charging three men for a conspiracy to move more than \$65 million to several countries in the Middle East, the US Justice Department said on Friday.

“[US prosecutors] announced today the unsealing of an Indictment charging MOHANAD AL-ZUBAIDI, SHAKER SALEH MOHAMMED HAUTER, and ABDULKADER NOORI HAMZA with conspiring to operate an unlicensed money transmitting business that was responsible for illicitly moving more than \$65 million between the United States and countries in the Middle East, including Yemen, Turkey, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan,” the department said in a press release.

While Al-Zubaidi and Hauter have been arrested in the United States, Hamza remains at large, the release added.

It is alleged that between about 2018 and 2022 the defendants operated an illicit scheme to facilitate hundreds of money transfers of up to hundreds of thousands of dollars to move more than \$65 million to Middle East countries and earn between one to six percent of the total sum transferred in commission, the release said.

Al-Zubaidi allegedly operated four companies in the US states of Texas and New Jersey and falsely claimed that the companies were dealing with an international trading and investment business or selling cars, according to the report.

Al-Zubaidi's father, Hamza, was responsible for picking up and delivering cash as required to facilitate money transfers, the release said.

The United States charged all three defendants with one count of conspiracy to operate an unlicensed money-transmitting business and one count of operating an unlicensed money-transmitting business. Each of the charges carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison, according to the release.

Al-Zubaid has also been charged with bank fraud and faces 30 years in prison, the release added.

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Ex-Egyptian Foreign Minister Says Middle East Has Crossed the Brink of Regional Conflict

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The unrest in the Middle East ignited by the war in Gaza has already crossed the brink of a regional conflict, former Egyptian Foreign Affairs Minister Nabil Fahmy told Sputnik.

The United States has conducted multiple strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen and on other militant groups in Iraq and Syria but continues to state that it does not want the war in Gaza to broaden into a regional conflict.

"The Middle East today has already crossed the brink of regional conflict, which given the asymmetrical balance of power is expressed through a proliferation of conflict rather than traditionally through conflicting alliances," Fahmy said.

According to Fahmy, the coming weeks will be concerning as tensions are expected to flare up. While the Kataib Hezbollah militant group announced plans to suspend its military operations against US forces in the region, other groups including Yemen's Houthis and Syria's Al-Nujaba have pledged to keep up their attacks on Israel and US forces in the region until Israel halts its war on Gaza.

The United States is reportedly preparing to launch a weeks-long campaign soon against pro-Iranian militants across the Middle East in retaliation for the drone attacks that killed three US troops in Jordan last week.

Iran has repeatedly denied any involvement in the attacks on US troops.

Fahmy said Israel appears amenable to a wider conflict because it intends to continue its military operation in Gaza until it has completed its objectives, but its campaign in the territory depends on continued US support.

"The United States in particular has a singular role to play because of its geopolitical influence," Fahmy said. "It also bears a unique responsibility as the main supplier of weapons to Israel, in fact the whole region, which is in stark contradiction to its responsibility as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which is supposed to ensure global peace and security."

Although US policy has urged Israel to scale down its bombardment of Gaza, the Biden administration has opposed a ceasefire and has supported Israel's operation against Hamas, so it bears a great responsibility for the "carnage we are witnessing," Fahmy said.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Israel, and the West Bank Sunday through Thursday to discuss matters related to the Gaza conflict, including to "continue work to prevent the spread of the conflict, while reaffirming that the US will take appropriate steps to defend its personnel," according to the State Department.

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

US Starts Military Strikes in Syria in Retaliation for Jordan Attack - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US military strikes have begun in Syria in retaliation for a deadly attack on an American military outpost in Jordan, ABC news reported on Friday, citing a US official.

While the Pentagon was still assessing what happened, President Joe Biden said Tuesday he has decided how to respond to the attack, but reiterated that the US is not seeking a wider war in the region.

Biden said he holds Iran partly responsible due to its alleged supply of weapons to a militia that perpetrated the attack. Iran has denied playing any role in it.

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US Deterrence in Mideast 'Ineffective,' Coming Weeks Concerning - Ex-Egyptian Diplomat

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has been ineffective at deterring attacks on US forces across the Middle East, but the coming weeks will be concerning as the Biden administration prepares to retaliate for the drone attack that killed three US troops in Jordan, former Egyptian Foreign Affairs Minister Nabil Fahmy told Sputnik.

"The United States has approached the rising tensions in the region through traditional deterrence approaches, which is ineffective in an asymmetrical theatre, especially with non-state parties involved as well as nation states," Fahmy said.

The United States is reportedly preparing to launch a weeks-long campaign on Iranian assets across the Middle East in retaliation for the drone attack that killed three US troops and injured dozens of others in Jordan. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin warned that a "multi-tiered" response is coming, adding that it's "time to take away even more capability than we've taken in the past" against these so-called Iran proxy militant groups.

Iran has denied playing any role in the attack. Tehran says that resistance groups in the Middle East do not receive any instructions from Iran.

"In coming weeks, one must be truly concerned with a cycle of violence which all sides will try to calculate and calibrate on a risk benefit analysis," Fahmy said. "An all out confrontation ultimately is highly risky even for the adversaries, including the United States and Iran because of maritime security concerns and United States military superiority."

The leader of the Al-Nujaba militant group, Akram Al-Kaabi, said it won't follow a decision this week by the Kataib Hezbollah militant group to suspend operations against US forces in the region. Since the start of the war in Gaza in October, US forces have been attacked approximately 166 times in Iraq and Syria.

Fahmy also expects the United States to be cautious about escalating tensions in the Middle East due to the upcoming presidential election in November.

President Joe Biden has been doing poorly in the polls, especially amid US support for Israel in

Gaza. In addition, a recent poll conducted by Bloomberg News found that former President Donald Trump is leading Biden in seven swing states.

Comprehensive diplomacy that deals with core issues in the region is needed, Fahmy said, but US policies in this respect are highly questionable.

"The different parties are trying to exercise force in a managed fashion, which is extremely risky because of miscalculation or inadvertent mistakes," Fahmy said.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Israel, and the West Bank Sunday through Thursday to discuss matters related to the Gaza conflict, including to "continue work to prevent the spread of the conflict, while reaffirming that the US will take appropriate steps to defend its personnel," according to the State Department.

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US, Qatar, Egypt Collaborate on Proposal for Gaza Hostage Release - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States, Qatar, Egypt, and additional regional partners are actively engaged in creating a proposal to address the issue of reuniting Gaza hostages with their families, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Friday.

"We've been working tirelessly with Qatar, Egypt and other regional partners on a strong, compelling proposal. Our engagement is the best opportunity to reunite all hostages with their families," Linda Thomas-Greenfield said during media stakeout.

Thomas-Greenfield said that the proposal would allow for an extended humanitarian pause, thereby facilitating the delivery of critical life-saving provisions such as food, water, fuel, and medicines.

"This proposal would move all parties one step closer to creating the conditions for sustainable cessation of hostilities," Thomas-Greenfield said.

However, Thomas-Greenfield added that the draft resolution presented by Algeria is deemed ineffective, potentially jeopardizing sensitive negotiations and delaying the ongoing diplomatic efforts to secure the release of hostages and provide a crucial extended pause for Palestinian civilians and aid workers.

In December, the United States vetoed a UAE-drafted Security Council resolution to facilitate aid deliveries to the Gaza Strip and create a UN mechanism to monitor humanitarian assistance to the territory.

Earlier in November, the US vetoed Brazil's draft resolution, which called on Israel to withdraw the order for Gazans to move to the south of the strip. The United States explained its decision by saying that the draft resolution did not mention Israel's right to self-defense.

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Oil Tumbles 7% on Week Amid Dollar Rally, Wiping Out 2-Week Gain

NEW YORK, February 2 (Sputnik) - Oil prices fell 7% on the week, wiping out gains from the two prior weeks, as a surging dollar on Friday made it costlier to own commodities denominated in the US currency.

The dollar sprinted higher on data showing runaway jobs growth for January that made it harder for the Federal Reserve to cut interest rates right away. The dollar benefits from higher interest rates.

At the close of Friday's trade, the West Texas Intermediate (WTI) benchmark for US crude settled at \$72.28 per barrel on the New York Mercantile Exchange, down \$1.54, or 2.1%, on the day. For the week, it fell 7.3%. That negated all of the 7.3% WTI had gained over two prior weeks.

Brent, the global benchmark for crude, settled at \$77.33 per barrel, down \$1.37, or 1.7%, on the day. For the week, Brent lost 7.4%, wiping out the 6.6% gain from two prior weeks.

While Friday's blowout US non-farm payrolls report for January was a catalyst for the dollar rally that brought the oil market down, crude prices had already been weakened as of Thursday by reports of a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war. Geopolitical events, including wars and conflicts, often lead to disruptions in crude supply, sending prices higher.

"Crude oil had extended its weekly losses to 7%, more than wiping out previous week's sharp gains," Fawad Razaqzada, market analyst at London's City Index, said in a commentary.

Scott Shelton, an energy futures broker for ICAP in Durham, North Carolina, said it "seems like there [are] more downside risks than upside risks at least in the near term" for oil. Shelton added "I also can't help but notice that oil versus other commodities has outperformed significantly and is due for a retracement."

Volatility in oil markets since the start of 2024 has left crude prices just slightly higher on the year, despite sharp gains in recent weeks. Year-to-date, WTI is up 1%, with Brent being 0.4% higher.

Earlier on Friday, Fitch Ratings said that Saudi Arabia's decision to halt maximum capacity increases for oil stockpiles at state-owned Saudi Aramco will reduce the global supply buffer for crude although no major market disruptions or price increases are expected this year.

Aramco stated earlier this week that it will refresh its capital expenditure, or capex, guidance in March, prompting speculation that investments in crude production will be reduced and some of that money will be channeled to the Saudi government to be reinvested in non-oil sectors.

Saudi Aramco is majority-owned by Riyadh. The government of Saudi Arabia controls 90.18% of the company's share capital directly, with a further 8% owned by the nation's sovereign wealth fund and its subsidiary, and the rest held by outside investors.

The scale of the potential changes in Aramco's capex and dividends will not materially affect the credit profiles and financial positions of Saudi Arabia or Saudi Aramco, and will have no rating implications, Fitch said.

Aramco had previously indicated that it would spend \$48 billion-\$52 billion in capex in 2023 and

potentially more in 2024 and beyond, including on oil production growth projects that would increase its maximum sustained capacity of crude to 13 million barrels per day by 2027 from a current 12 million. In reality, Saudi Arabia produces significantly below its stated maximum sustained capacity, with production averaging just 9 million barrels per day in the second half of 2023.

Notwithstanding the potential longer-term change to oil flows from OPEC and OPEC+, Fitch said any immediate capex amendment at Saudi Aramco - especially in the absence of major market disruptions - will not be material to supply and demand, Fitch said.

OPEC stands for the Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, which has 13 member nations in all. OPEC+ constitutes a larger alliance of this grouping, where the original OPEC 13 are joined by another 10 oil producing countries steered by Russia.

The oil market is expected to be "well-supplied in 2024" and global demand growth to moderate to 1.2 million barrels daily this year from the 2.3 million in 2023, Fitch said, citing data from the Paris-based International Energy Agency.

OPEC-related supply reductions are also expected to be broadly mitigated by increases from non-OPEC oil producing countries, including the United States, Canada, Brazil and Guyana, Fitch added.

Oil prices fell in early trading on Monday, as concerns over global economic growth and crude pricing, Fitch said it did not expect a strong upside either to its \$80 per barrel forecast for global benchmark Brent. Tumbles 7% on Week Amid Dollar Rally, Wiping Out 2-Week Gain

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Ukraine Informs White House About Decision to Sack Gen. Zaluzhnyi - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) – Ukraine has formally notified the White House of Volodymyr Zelenskyy's decision to sack Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi, despite Kiev denying mounting reports of his imminent ouster, The Washington Post reported on Friday, citing two people familiar with the matter.

Zelenskyy has not yet issued a formal decree cementing his decision. The White House officials neither welcomed nor objected to the move, but noted that it is up to the Ukrainian president to make this choice, the report said.

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US Approves Possible \$150M In Sale of Hellfire Missiles to Norway - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US State Department approved the possible \$150 million sale of Hellfire missiles and related equipment to Norway, the US Defense Security

Cooperation Agency said in a press release on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of the Netherlands of Hellfire Missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$150 million," the release said. "The Government of the Netherlands has requested to buy up to three hundred eighty-six (386) Hellfire Air-to-Ground Missiles, AGM-114R2."

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Biden Attends Transfer of Remains of Three US Troops Killed By Drone Attack in Jordan

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden traveled to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware on Friday to witness the dignified transfer of remains of three US soldiers who were killed in a recent drone attack in Jordan.

The US president was joined by First Lady Jill Biden and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who stood on the tarmac with assistance of a cane as he continues to recover from treatment for his prostate cancer.

The three soldiers were killed on Sunday in a drone attack on a US military outpost in the northeast of Jordan, near the border with Syria. At least 40 other soldiers were injured in the attack.

The slain soldiers were identified as Sergeant William Jerome Rivers, 46; Specialist Kennedy Ladon Sanders, 24; and Specialist Breonna Alexsondria Moffett, 23.

Biden blamed unspecified Iran-backed militant groups for the attack, and the United States is reportedly preparing to launch a weeks-long campaign on Iranian assets across the Middle East in response.

Iran has denied playing any role in the attack. Tehran says that resistance groups in the Middle East do not receive any instructions from Iran.

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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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Georgia Prosecutor in Trump Case Admits to Relationship With Special Prosecutor - Document

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Georgia District Attorney Fani Willis on Friday has admitted to having a relationship with Special Prosecutor Norman Wade, who was managing the election interference case against former President Donald Trump, according to a court document.

"In 2022, District Attorney Willis and I developed a personal relationship in addition to our professional association and friendship," Willis said in a court filing on Friday.

However, Willis defended herself from allegations that the affair impacted the court proceedings and called such allegations "meritless."

"Any personal relationship among members of the prosecution team does not amount to a disqualifying conflict of interest or otherwise harm a criminal defendant," Willis said.

In January, Trump filed a motion alleging an improper relationship between Wade and Willis and claiming financial impropriety and lavish vacations funded by taxpayer money.

A Fulton County grand jury indicted Trump on 13 felony counts related to his alleged attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

Trump has pleaded not guilty to charges lodged by Willis in Georgia over the 2020 presidential election.

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US Agency Proposes Modifying Regulations to Classify Some 'Forever Chemicals' as Hazardous

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced in a release on Friday that it is proposing to modify current regulations in order to classify some of the so-called forever chemicals, also known by the acronym PFAs, as hazardous.

"EPA is proposing two rules that would add to the agency's comprehensive approach to tackling PFAs pollution across the country. These proposals will also help deliver on President Biden's agenda to better protect public health and advance environmental justice," the release said.

PFAs are colloquially called "forever chemicals" because of the long periods of time it takes for

them to break down in the human body. PFAs are often found in consumer and industrial products, including in fertilizer compounds and water treatment systems.

EPA is proposing to change the definition of "hazardous waste" to include some of the most common PFAs, making it easier for governments and hazardous facilities to address the compounds as part of their existing cleanup programs, the release said.

"Thanks to strong partnerships with our co-regulators in the states, we will strengthen our ability to clean up contamination from PFAs, hold polluters accountable and advance public health protections," the release added.

Although there are thousands of different types of PFAs, the EPA is proposing to regulate nine of them, according to the release.

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Blinken to Visit Middle East Next Week for Hostage Deal, Gaza Aid Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit several Middle Eastern countries next week to discuss the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and a deal to secure the release of hostages in the Palestinian enclave, US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Friday.

Blinken will visit Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Israel and the West Bank from February 4-8, marking his fifth trip to the region since the October 7 attack on Israel, Miller said in a statement.

"The Secretary will continue diplomatic efforts to reach an agreement that secures the release of all remaining hostages and includes a humanitarian pause that will allow for sustained, increased delivery of humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza," the statement said.

Blinken will also work to prevent the spread of the conflict and discuss ways to establish a more peaceful, integrated region, the statement said.

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Transparency a Must to Fight Interference, But Any Disclosure Has Limits - Canada Minister

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) – Canadian Minister of Public Safety Dominic LeBlanc said on Friday that there "absolutely" is a need for transparency in order to fight foreign interference, but hurdles related to the inappropriate disclosure of information remain.

On Monday, the Foreign Interference Commission, which seeks to examine allegations of electoral meddling by China, Russia and other states in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections, began its first week of public hearings. Both Beijing and Moscow dismiss Ottawa's claim.

The hearings are intended to address the challenges related to the public disclosure of classified information and intelligence. The commission will hold a second set of hearings in March, and a third one is likely to take place in the fall. The first report on the findings is

scheduled for May 3, whereas the final one is due December 31.

"Absolutely," LeBlanc said, when asked whether he agreed on the need for transparency to combat foreign interference as he testified before the Commission.

The Canadian government is ready to collaborate with the commission in ensuring that all information it deems necessary to make public is done in an appropriate way, the minister said. He added that there are governmental mechanisms, such as the redaction of summaries, which make it possible to disclose as much information as possible to the public.

"I think it's important that Canadians understand that as the Commission releases its reports. The Commission will have access to, obviously, unredacted documents and access to all the witnesses," LeBlanc stressed.

However, the minister also noted limitations when it comes to the disclosure of information on foreign interference, particularly since Ottawa is a "net importer" of intelligence, mainly provided by the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, who along Canada make up the so-called Five Eyes partnership.

Canada needs to have a trusted relationship with its partners and that often comes with restrictions on the disclosure of information, LeBlanc said. If Ottawa disrespects or inappropriately discloses data it is given, it could have broader consequences on its future ability to protect its citizens, the minister stated.

Missteps could also have life-threatening consequences on operatives working for Canadian or foreign intelligence agencies, the minister added.

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UN Discussions With Qatar on UNRWA Carried Out in 'Positive Atmosphere' -Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United Nations discussed the topic of funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East in a positive manner with the Qatari Prime Minister, the UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"The issue of funding of UNRWA was discussed in a very positive atmosphere," Dujarric said in a briefing.

The Secretary-General Antonio Guterres met earlier today with the Prime Minister of Qatar Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani.

Last week, UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini said Israel had shared with the agency data on the alleged involvement of some of its staff members in the October 7 Hamas attack and vowed to hold accountable anyone involved in "acts of terror."

The United States, Finland, the United Kingdom, Italy, Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, and some other countries have since suspended funding for UNRWA.

On October 7, 2023, 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. Over 26,000 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, local authorities said.

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Justice Dept. Announces 3 Cases Targeting Iranian Oil Trafficking Funding Terrorism

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The Justice Department on Friday unveiled three federal cases, in a series of efforts to combat Iranian oil trafficking funding terrorism, particularly supporting Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

"The Justice Department today announced the unsealing of three federal cases, across two US Attorneys' Offices, as the most recent in a series of efforts to combat the illicit trafficking of Iranian oil that funds Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), and its Qods Force (IRGC-QF), Iran's primary mechanism for cultivating and providing lethal support to terrorist organizations abroad," the Justice Department said in a statement on Friday.

According to the report, the United States seized \$108 million as part of the defendants' scheme to fund the IRGC-QF.

Furthermore, in the District of Columbia, a forfeiture complaint alleges that over 500,000 barrels of Iranian fuel are forfeitable under terrorism laws, serving as a funding source for the IRGC and IRGC-QF.

Earlier today, the US Treasury Department sanctioned six individuals and five entities linked to Iran.

The sanctioned individuals are Iranian nationals and alleged to be linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Cyber-Electronic Command.

Four of the sanctioned entities are linked to a procurement network for Iran's ballistic missile and drone programs. The other entity is linked to the sale of millions of dollars of commodities for the IRGC Quds Force.

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UN Has No Comment on Biden's Order to Sanction Jewish Settlers in West Bank - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has no comment on US President Joe Biden's recent decision to sanction Israeli settlers in the West Bank, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"We have no comment on these bilateral sanctions," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

The United Nations has previously made clear its position on the Israeli settlements, Dujarric added.

On Thursday, the White House said that Biden signed an executive order to impose sanctions

on Jewish settlers in the West Bank.

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UPDATE - Canada Considers Sanctioning Extremist Israeli Settlers in West Bank - Trudeau

(Adds Russia's reaction in paras 6-7)

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) – Canada is considering using sanctions as means to hold accountable individuals responsible for extremist settler violence in the West Bank, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the European Union's lead spokesperson for foreign affairs Peter Stano said that EU member states were in the process of drawing up sanctions against violent Jewish settlers in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Trudeau's remarks also come a day after US President Joe Biden issued an executive order imposing financial sanctions and travel bans on four Israeli citizens accused of violence in the West Bank. The measures went beyond a December directive which stated that the US would deny visas to Israeli settlers who are believed to be involved in "undermining peace, security, or stability in the West Bank."

"As the Minister of Foreign Affairs said yesterday, we are looking into how to make sure that those responsible for extremist violence or extremist settler violence in the West Bank are held to account for it," Trudeau told reporters. "We are looking at sanctions on extremist settlers."

Trudeau stated that settler violence in the West Bank is unacceptable and further endangers prospects for peace and stability as well as the path toward an "absolutely essential" two-state solution to the conflict.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on Friday criticized the inconsistent US policies on Israeli settlement activities as "hypocrisy."

The US has supported and encouraged land grabs of Palestinian territory, only to later impose sanctions on settlers, she said.

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Upgraded Javelin Anti-Tank Missile Launch Unit Keeps Failing - US Army Report

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The new launch unit for the upgraded US Army Javelin anti-tank missile has failed to meet its reliability standards during its follow-on test and evaluation (FOT&E) assessment trials, the Office of the Director said in a report on Friday.

"The LW CLU (light weight command launch unit) did not meet its reliability requirement during FOT&E due to a new failure that resulted in multiple system aborts," the report said.

The Javelin system is undergoing two independent, but complimentary upgrades, referred to as the G-model missile and the light weight command launch unit, the report said.

The Javelin system is a man-portable, shoulder-launched system used to defeat armored vehicles out to 2,500 meters, the report added

The Javelin system consists of a missile in a disposable launch tube assembly and a reusable command launch unit, according to the report.

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Trump Says He Would Have Two Candidates for Fed Chair Instead of 'Political' Powell

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) – Former US President and GOP hopeful in the 2024 election Donald Trump said on Friday that he would not keep current Fed Chairman Jerome Powell and already has two potential candidates in mind for the key position.

In an interview for Fox News, Trump said that he would not appoint Powell as the Fed Chair in his administration because he is “political” and does what is good for incumbent President Joe Biden.

Trump believes that Powell can go as far as help the Democrats look good before November by lowering interest rates which have been raised multiple times since Biden took office in 2021 to cope with record inflation.

The former US president also warned that the ongoing crisis in the Red Sea with Houthi attacks on commercial and naval ships can easily lead to big inflation in the United States after oil prices skyrocket again.

In August, Trump also said that he would not reappoint Powell as Chair of the US Federal Reserve, which handles monetary policy if he wins the 2024 election.

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Final Report on Foreign Interference Agreed for Year End, Before Next Elections – Minister

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) -The release of the final report of Canada’s Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions was agreed for the end of 2024 before the next elections, Minister of Public Safety Dominic LeBlanc said on Friday.

The Minister also acknowledged the tight timelines by which the Commission must abide to accomplish what he described as an “enormous” task.

“All political parties agreed that it would be beneficial for Canadians to have by the end of 2024 the final report of the Commission,” LeBlanc said as he testified before the Inquiry.

LeBlanc noted that the final report's release was agreed by year-end as it would allow for the government to consider and apply the recommendations made under the Commission ahead of the next federal elections which by law must take place by October 20, 2025.

“It allows the government to consider and to put into place recommendations that will make

institutions more resilient before a 2025 elections," LeBlanc said. The Minister further noted that he hopes for citizens to benefit from the Commission's work and the final report.

On Monday, the Foreign Interference Commission which seeks to examine allegations of electoral meddling by China, Russia and other states in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections, began its first week of public hearings where it sought to address the challenges related to the public disclosure of classified information and intelligence.

The Commission will hold a second set of hearings in March, and a third one is likely taking place in Fall. The first report on the findings is scheduled for May 3, whereas the final one is due December 31, 2024.

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New York Police Arrest Migrant After Incident Involving Assault on Officers - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The New York Police Department has arrested a migrant following an incident shown in a video on social media platforms depicting migrants attacking two police officers, Fox News reported on Friday.

Nineteen-year-old Yoiber Martinez was arrested after a verbal exchange with officers while playing a video depicting the recent attack on their two colleagues over the weekend, the report said.

The police announced that they charged Martinez with disorderly conduct, disrupting traffic and possession of a controlled substance, the report said.

Officers observed that Martinez disrupted pedestrian traffic and failed to provide identification after which they intervened and took him to the 18th precinct building, where an undisclosed substance was found in his pocket, the report added.

On Thursday, seven migrants were arrested in connection with their alleged role in assaulting two police officers near a migrant shelter over the weekend. All seven face assault and other charges.

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New Defense Intelligence Chief Brings 'Steady Hand' to Job - Deputy Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US Air Force Lieutenant General Jeffrey Kruse will bring a "steady hand" to the direction of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks told Kruse's inauguration ceremony on Friday.

"He has a steady hand in times of crisis," Hicks said,

Hicks presides over the podcast ceremony during which Kruse succeeded US Army Lieutenant General Scott Berrier, who is retiring, as DIA chief.

Since August 2020, Kruse has served as advisor for military affairs to the Director of National

Intelligence (DNI).

Kruse has said he sees a prime national security concern at the flow of information from US industry, and advanced technologies going from the United States to China and other potential adversaries.

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US Peace Corps to Resume Program in Island Country of Palau in 2025 - Director

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US Peace Corps (USPC) will revive its program in the Western Pacific island country of Palau next year on the invitation of President Surangel Whipps, USPC Director Carol Spahn announced on Friday.

"I am thrilled to announce that the Peace Corps will re-open its country program in the Republic of Palau in 2025," Spahn said in a statement.

Spahn expressed gratitude to Whipps for the invitation and noted that USPC has a long history of partnering with Palau and its people that will continue in the future.

"Volunteers will live and work side-by-side with community partners to improve childhood literacy and math and science skills, along with teaching English as a foreign language," Spahn said.

Palau, a country of some 22,000 people, is one of the 12 nations in the world that recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state and do not have diplomatic relations with China.

Taiwan has been governed independently of mainland China since 1949 but Beijing views the island as its province. Taiwan maintains that it is an autonomous country but stops short of declaring independence. Beijing opposes any official contacts of foreign states with Taipei given that it considers Chinese sovereignty over the island as indisputable.

Palau recently signed an agreement with the United States that will allow the US Coast Guard to enforce regulations at sea in Palau's exclusive economic zone or territorial waters on its behalf without a Palauan officers being present.

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US Air Force Plans to Restructure Organization for Great Power Competition - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force is planning to restructure its organization in an effort to optimize for so-called great power competition, Politico reported on Friday.

The Air Force will announce the consolidation of some of its commands in the coming weeks, the report said, citing six people familiar with the plans.

The restructuring will integrate fighter jets and bombers into singular units and bolster budgeting and planning elements, the report said.

The Air Force has been developing the plan, dubbed Reoptimizing for Great Power Competition, since September, the report said. The plan is the first major change to the Air Force's command structure since 2019, the report said.

The plan is set to be announced at the Air and Space Forces Association Warfare Symposium on February 12, the report said. The plan could take months, or even years, to receive support from Congress and implement, according to the report.

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Saudi Aramco Capex Change Not Seen Impacting Oil Supply, Prices in Near Term - Fitch

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Riyadh's decision to halt maximum capacity increases for oil stockpiles at its state-owned Saudi Aramco will reduce the global supply buffer for crude although no major market disruptions or price increases are expected this year, Fitch Ratings said on Friday.

Aramco stated earlier this week that it will refresh its capital expenditure, or capex, guidance in March, prompting speculation that investments in crude production will be reduced and some of that money will be channeled to the Saudi government to be reinvested in non-oil sectors.

Saudi Aramco is majority-owned by Riyadh. The government of Saudi Arabia controls 90.18% of the company's share capital directly, with a further 8% owned by the nation's sovereign wealth fund and its subsidiary, and the rest held by outside investors.

The scale of the potential changes in Aramco's capex and dividends will not materially affect the credit profiles and financial positions of Saudi Arabia or Saudi Aramco, and will have no rating implications, Fitch noted in an outlook.

"The change in the oil investment strategy, however, sends a signal to the market that it should not overly rely on Saudi Arabia to absorb any future increases in consumption or supply disruptions," the ratings agency said. "The decision could contribute to the tightening of the oil market if global oil consumption grows strongly by end-2030 and the energy transition proceeds slowly."

Aramco had previously indicated that it would spend \$48 billion-\$52 billion in capex in 2023 and potentially more in 2024 and beyond, including on oil production growth projects that would increase its maximum sustained capacity of crude to 13 million barrels per day by 2027 from a current 12 million.

But Fitch noted that Saudi Arabia produces significantly below its stated maximum sustained capacity of 12 million, with production averaging just 9 million barrels per day in 2023.

"Saudi Arabia is the main balancing supplier, accounting for most OPEC+ spare capacity, which is available to absorb potential supply shocks," Fitch said. "However, this supply buffer could gradually diminish should global non-OPEC supply increase more slowly than demand in the next few years."

OPEC stands for the Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, which has 13 member nations in all. OPEC+ constitutes a larger alliance of this grouping, where the original OPEC 13 are joined by another 10 oil producing countries steered by Russia.

Notwithstanding the potential longer-term change to oil flows from OPEC and OPEC+, Fitch said any immediate capex amendment at Saudi Aramco — especially in the absence of major market disruptions — will not be material to supply and demand.

The oil market is expected to be "well-supplied in 2024" and global demand growth to moderate to 1.2 million barrels daily this year from the 2.3 million in 2023, Fitch said, citing data from the Paris-based International Energy Agency.

OPEC-related supply reductions are also expected to be broadly mitigated by increases from non-OPEC oil producing countries, including the United States, Canada, Brazil and Guyana, Fitch said.

In terms of crude pricing, Fitch said it did not expect a strong upside either to its \$80 per barrel forecast for global benchmark Brent.

In Friday's New York futures trade, a barrel of Brent was hovering at \$77.

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US Podcaster Joe Rogan Nearing Multi-Year Renewal of Spotify Deal - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Podcaster Joe Rogan is nearing an agreement with the media streaming service Spotify to renew a multi-million dollar deal to host his show on the platform, Bloomberg reported on Friday.

Spotify intends to reveal the multi-year renewal in the coming days, the report said, citing people familiar with discussions on the matter.

However, the deal could still fall through, the report added.

In 2020, Rogan reached a deal with Spotify, granting exclusive rights to the platform to host The Joe Rogan Experience podcast. The deal was reportedly valued at \$200 million.

Rogan's podcast was the most popular one in the United States in the third quarter of 2023, the report said, citing Edison Research data. The podcast frequently features guests from the scientific, sports, political and comedy communities.

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Canada Considers Sanctioning Extremist Israeli Settlers in West-Bank – Trudeau

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) – Canada is considering to use sanctions as means to hold accountable individuals responsible for extremist settler violence in the West Bank, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

Earlier on Friday the European Union's lead spokesperson for foreign affairs Peter Stano said that EU member states were in the process of drawing up sanctions against violent Jewish settlers in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Trudeau's remarks come a day after US President Joe Biden issued an executive order

imposing financial and travel bans on four Israeli citizens accused of violence in the West Bank. The measures went beyond a December directive which stated that the US would deny visas to Israeli settlers who are believed to be involved in "undermining peace, security, or stability in the West Bank."

"As the Minister of Foreign Affairs said yesterday, we are looking into how to make sure that those responsible for extremist violence or extremist settler violence in the West Bank are held to account for it," Trudeau told reporters. "We are looking at sanctions on extremist settlers."

Trudeau noted that settler violence in the West Bank is unacceptable and further endangers prospects for peace and stability as well as the path toward an "absolutely essential" two-state solution to the conflict.

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Airplane Crash in Florida Mobile Home Park Results in 3 Fatalities - FAA

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - An airplane crashed into a mobile home park in the Clearwater-St. Petersburg area in Florida, resulting in three fatalities, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said on Friday.

"Aircraft crashed under unknown circumstances into a mobile home park," the FAA said in a notice.

The FAA explained in the notice that one individual on board the airplane and two on the ground died in the accident.

According to reports, the pilot had communicated that the airplane's engine failed prior to the aircraft crashing.

The fire from the crash damaged at least three other homes in the Bayside Estates, formerly known as Japanese Gardens, but the occupants in the other houses were able to evacuate safely, the reports said.

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US Announces New Iran-Related Sanctions Against 6 Individuals, 5 Entities - Treasury Dept.
(Updates with more information in paras 3-8; modifies headline)

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is sanctioning six individuals and five entities linked to Iran, the US Treasury Department said on Friday.

The sanctioned individuals are Iranian nationals and alleged to be linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Cyber-Electronic Command, the Treasury Department said in an update to its Specially Designated Nationals list.

"The United States is taking action against these individuals in response to IRGC-affiliated cyber actors' recent cyber operations in which they hacked and posted images on the screens of programmable logic controllers manufactured by Unitronics, an Israeli company," the Treasury

Department said in a statement.

Four of the sanctioned entities are linked to a procurement network for Iran's ballistic missile and drone programs, the Treasury Department said in a separate statement.

The other entity is linked to the sale of millions of dollars of commodities for the IRGC Quds Force, the statement said.

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

Iran's proliferation of weapons, including drones and missiles that target US soldiers, remains a critical threat to the stability of the region, the statement added.

The United States will not hesitate to leverage all available tools to disrupt illicit procurement networks that supply weapons systems components, according to the statement.

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At Least 17,000 Children in Gaza Unaccompanied or Separated - UNICEF

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - At least 17,000 children in the Gaza Strip are unaccompanied or separated amid the ongoing Hamas-Israel war, UNICEF State of Palestine Chief of Communication Jonathan Crickx said on Friday.

"UNICEF estimates that at least 17,000 children in the Gaza Strip are unaccompanied or separated. Each one, a heartbreaking story of loss and grief," Crickx said during a briefing.

This corresponds to 1% of the overall displaced population of 1.7 million people.

The figure is just an estimate as it is impossible to verify it due to the ongoing conflict, Crickx stressed.

Crickx, who returned from the region this week, said that more than half of 12 children he met had lost a family member in this war.

"Three had lost a parent, of which, two had lost both their mother and their father," he shared. "Behind each of these statistics is a child who is coming to terms with this horrible new reality."

UNICEF fears that the situation with children who have lost their parents is much worse in the north and the center of the Gaza Strip.

Children's mental health is also severely impacted, with UNICEF estimating that almost all children - or more than 1 million - are now in need of mental health and psychosocial support. Before the war, an estimated 500,000 children were in need of such assistance.

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 House Judiciary Committee Subpoenas Georgia Prosecutor Who Charged Trump - Letter

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan has issued a subpoena for Georgia District Attorney Fani Willis requesting documents from her office over the alleged firing of a whistleblower for his attempt to stop the misuse of federal funds, according to a letter published on Friday.

"To date, you have failed to comply voluntarily with any of our requests," Jordan wrote in a letter to Willis published by the committee. "Accordingly, please find attached a subpoena for the requested documents and information."

The subpoena is part of the probe by Jordan and other Republican congressmen into whether Willis misused federal funds when investigating former President Donald Trump. Trump has pleaded not guilty to charges lodged by Willis in Georgia over the 2020 election.

Jordan cited reports indicating that Willis's office unlawfully used part of a \$488,000 federal grant that was earmarked to create a Center of Youth Empowerment and Gang Prevention. Media reports have indicated that the funds were instead used to pay for "frivolous, unrelated expenses," Jordan noted.

In January, Trump filed a motion alleging an improper relationship between Special Prosecutor Nathan Wade and Willis and claiming financial impropriety and lavish vacations funded by taxpayer money.

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US Adds 353,000 Jobs in January in Another Shocker to Federal Reserve - Labor Dept.

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-15; modifies headline, lede)

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States added 353,000 jobs in the month of January, the US Labor Department announced on Friday.

The number is nearly double than the forecast and is likely to shock Federal Reserve officials keen to cool the runaway employment market in order to cut interest rates. Wall Street economists polled by US media, on the average, had expected the January non-farm payrolls report to show 185,000 new jobs.

The Labor Department also boosted jobs growth in the December non-farm payrolls report to 333,000, from a previously published 216,000. That meant an expansion of just 20,000 jobs, or 6%, month-on-month.

Even so, the sheer strength of the labor market did not miss the attention of analysts who noted that the inflationary pressure brought on by such robust employment meant that the Fed would

have an extra difficult task of cutting interest rates in the near future.

US money market data published right after the job numbers suggested that traders taking bets on interest rates had ruled out any possibility of a Fed easing by March.

Just two days ago, the Fed left rates unchanged at between 5.25%-5.5% for a fourth month in a row, citing stickier-than-thought inflation.

"What worries me here - and will worry the Fed - is the wage growth," economist Adam Button said in a reaction posted on the ForexLive forum.

Labor Department data showed average hourly earnings for January increased by 0.6%, double the monthly estimate. Year-over-year, wages jumped 4.5%, well above the 4.1% forecast. The wage gains also came amid a decline in average hours worked, down to 34.1, or 0.2 hour lower.

Button noted that the latest non-farm payrolls report was reminiscent of that from a year ago where there was also a "huge beat."

"There are big seasonal adjustments in January and I think the BLS (Bureau of Labor Statistics) is struggling with that," Button added.

On Wednesday, Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said the central bank was prepared to maintain interest rates at where they stood for a much longer period to get inflation to desired levels.

"If the economy evolves as expected, we will dial back the policy rate this year," Powell said.

The Fed signaled in December that it could reduce interest 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.

Inflation, as measured by the Fed's favorite price gauge - the so-called Personal Consumption Expenditures Index (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 below the four-decade high of 6.5% hit by the PCE in 2022, it is still far from the Fed's desired long-term target of 2%.