

2/12/24 Monday

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Canada's Justice Dept Says Cannot Comment on Russia's Extradition Request for Nazi Veteran

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Canada's Department of Justice cannot comment on extradition requests unless they are made public by the court, a spokesperson told Sputnik after Ottawa rejected Russia's extradition request for Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka.

"Extradition requests are considered confidential state-to-state communications, so we cannot comment on the existence of an extradition request unless made public by the courts," the spokesperson said in a statement. "Extradition in Canada is conducted in conformity with the Extradition Act, international treaties and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It is worth noting that Canada and Russia do not share an extradition treaty."

Canada has rejected Russia's request to extradite the Nazi veteran who received a standing ovation in the Canadian parliament in September, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov confirmed to Sputnik on Tuesday.

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US Senate Majority Leader Says Foreign Aid Bill Could Pass House Vote

(Adds details in paras 3-4)

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said Tuesday that he believed that the foreign aid bill just approved by the Senate would also be passed by the House if brought to the floor by Speaker Mike Johnson.

"With the strong bipartisan vote in the Senate, it's clear that if Speaker Johnson brings this bill to the House floor, it will pass with that same bipartisan support," Schumer said at a press briefing.

Most Democratic senators, along with 22 Republicans, voted Tuesday in favor of the \$95.3 billion emergency aid bill, which would provide \$60.1 billion in aid to Ukraine, \$14.1 billion in aid to Israel, and \$9.2 billion in humanitarian aid for civilians in war zones, among other provisions.

However, it is unclear whether the bill, which does not include provisions for US border security, will pass the Republican-dominated House. Speaker Mike Johnson already indicated on Monday that he would not support it.

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"With the strong bipartisan vote in the Senate, it's clear that if Speaker Johnson brings this bill to the House floor, it will pass with that same bipartisan support," Schumer said at a press briefing.

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UPDATE - US Consumer Prices Up 3.1% in Year to Jan, Staying Above 3% Level Sought by Fed

(Adds comment, details and context in paragraphs 3-11)

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices grew 3.1% in the year to January, above the 3% annual rate that would have facilitated a Federal Reserve rate cut, Labor Department data showed on Tuesday.

The so-called Consumer Price Index, or CPI, has stubbornly remained above 3% in the aftermath of the inflation triggered by the trillions of dollars of pandemic relief spending in the United States. The Fed is counting on annual inflation to go below its long-held target of 2% in order to roll back nearly two years of rate hikes forced by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Wall Street economists polled by US media had expected January CPI to expand by 2.9% annually, versus the 3.4% growth logged during the year to December.

A survey of money market traders after the data showed the Fed unlikely to consider a rate cut before July, as the central bank awaits kinder inflation data.

"Rate-cut pricing for [the] year-end [is] down to 92 bps [basis points] from 111 bps," economist Adam Button said in a commentary on the ForexLive forum.

At its last policy meeting on January 31, the Fed said it will "carefully assess incoming data, the evolving outlook, and the balance of risks" in considering any adjustments to rates, which it left unchanged for a fourth month in a row at between 5.25% and 5.5%.

Prior to that, the central bank had anticipated rate cuts to begin in March.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell also said at his January 31 news conference that any pivot on rates would have to come from benign inflation data.

Prior to the 2020 coronavirus outbreak, CPI rarely crossed 2% a year.

Epic federal spending and loose monetary policy put in place after the pandemic ended that, with annual CPI hitting a four-decade high of above 9% by June 2022.

The Fed, in response, hiked rates by 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023, adding 5.25 percentage points to a prior base rate of just 0.25%.

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Russia Vows to Continue to Pursue Justice in Hunka Case After Canada Rejects Extradition

(Adds details in paras 4-7; background in paras 2, 8-10)

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Moscow will continue to pursue justice in the case of Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka after Canada refused to extradite him, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

Canada has rejected Russia's request to extradite the Ukrainian Nazi veteran who received a standing ovation in the Canadian parliament in September, Stepanov confirmed to Sputnik earlier in the day.

"In any case, this story with Nazi Hunka is far from over. We - Russia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Embassy - will continue to seek justice," Stepanov said.

The incident with Hunka also prompts questions about whether he had declared his SS background when receiving Canadian citizenship, the ambassador said.

"If not, this is the ground for depriving citizenship in accordance with Canadian law," Stepanov stressed.

If yes, the Canadian authorities should provide explanations to the Canadian people, the ambassador said.

"Let me remind you that the SS was recognized as a criminal organization by the Nuremberg Tribunal," he said. "It is an integral part of the modern system of international law."

In September, Hunka was invited to attend Zelensky's address at the parliament of Canada. Hunka was introduced as a hero who fought against the Russians during World War II and received two standing ovations from the entire Canadian legislature.

In October, Hunka was charged in absentia with genocide of civilians during World War II by the Russian Investigative Committee. He is accused of participating in large-scale executions of at least 500 civilians in the Lviv region of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic from 1943-1944.

In December, the Russian Prosecutor General's Office told Sputnik that it had requested that Hunka be extradited to Russia to face criminal charges of genocide against Soviet citizens.

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US House Panel Releases Former Hunter Biden Business Associate's Interview on China Deal

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – The US House Oversight Committee released a transcript on Tuesday of a closed-door interview it held with a former Hunter Biden business associate regarding a deal with Chinese energy firm CEFC.

The transcript of Rob Walker's interview was released without commentary. It is unclear what specific claims of wrongdoing the committee may allege.

According to Walker, he, James Gilliar, and Hunter Biden began pursuing a joint venture deal

with Chinese energy firm CEFC in February 2016. Joe Biden, then vice president, stopped by one meeting with CEFC officials at the Four Seasons hotel in Washington for about 10 minutes to exchange pleasantries. Walker maintained that Joe Biden was not involved in any of his son's business ventures.

On March 1, 2017, Walker received a \$3 million transfer from the CEFC-linked State Energy HK. He sent \$1,065,000 to Gilliar's company and the same amount but in small increments to Hunter Biden and other members of the Biden family, including his uncle James and sister-in-law Hallie.

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Lack of Extradition Treaty No Justification for Canada Refusing to Extradite Hunka - Envoy

(Adds details in paras 4-8; background in paras 8-12)

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The absence of an extradition treaty between Canada and Russia is an untenable excuse for refusing to extradite Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

"The absence of an extradition treaty can hardly serve as a reason for refusal. This is an obvious politically motivated excuse," Stepanov said.

Canada has rejected Russia's request to extradite the Ukrainian Nazi veteran who received a standing ovation in the Canadian parliament in September, Stepanov confirmed to Sputnik earlier in the day

"This Canadian citizen publicly admitted that he voluntarily joined the ranks of the SS Galicia division," Stepanov said. "His participation in mass crimes and extermination of the civilian population - Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Jews - was documented. And the Canadian authorities received these documents from us."

Canada's decision to refuse the extradition raises a number of questions, the ambassador pointed out.

"Let's say you don't want to extradite the SS man to Russia. But at home, here in Canada, is Ottawa going to initiate a case against Hunka for crimes that have no statute of limitations? We haven't heard anything about this from the Trudeau cabinet," he said.

The ambassador recalled that the prime minister apologized on behalf of the parliament only for inviting a Nazi to join the event with Volodymyr Zelenskyy, pretending that that the issue was closed question.

"Here is a litmus test for Canada covering up Nazism. Will the criminal be punished or will he continue to live out his comfortable retirement years in a country that is so proud of its legal standards?" Stepanov wondered.

In September Hunka, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Canadian, was invited to attend Zelenskyy's address at the parliament of Canada. Hunka was introduced as a hero who fought against the Russians during World War II and received two standing ovations from the entire Canadian legislature.

The honoring of a Nazi veteran prompted outcries from Russia, Poland and other countries,

with senior Russian and Polish officials suggesting that Hunka should be extradited to face justice in a court of law. The House of Commons of Canada adopted a motion to condemn Nazism and withdraw its recognition of Hunka.

In October, Hunka was charged in absentia with genocide of civilians during World War II by the Russian Investigative Committee. He is accused of participating in large-scale executions of at least 500 civilians in the Lviv region of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic from 1943-1944.

In December, the Russian Prosecutor General's Office told Sputnik that it had requested that Hunka be extradited to Russia to face criminal charges of genocide against Soviet citizens.

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US Envoy Says Does Not Expect NATO to Invite Ukraine to Join Alliance at July Summit

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The United States does not expect Ukraine to receive an invitation to join NATO during an upcoming summit in July, US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said on Tuesday.

"As for the summit this summer, I do not expect the alliance to issue an invitation at this juncture," Smith told reporters, as quoted by Reuters.

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"In any case, this story with Nazi Hunka is far from over. We - Russia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Embassy - will continue to seek justice," Stepanov said.

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United States.

Wall Street economists polled by US media had expected the annual CPI rate for January at 2.9%, versus the 3.4% seen year-on-year in December. A survey of money market traders after the release of the data showed the Fed unlikely to consider a rate cut before July, as the central bank awaits kinder inflation data.

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Russia Receives Note From Canada on Refusal to Extradite Nazi Veteran - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Canada has refused to extradite Yaroslav Hunka, the Ukrainian Nazi veteran who received a standing ovation in the Canadian parliament in September, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov confirmed to Sputnik.

"A note has been received from the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the matter," Stepanov said.

In December, the Russian Prosecutor General's Office told Sputnik that it had requested that Hunka be extradited to Russia to face criminal charges of genocide against Soviet citizens.

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US Senate Majority, Minority Leaders Praise Senate Passage of Foreign Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – The US Senate majority and minority leaders both praised the upper chamber's passage of the foreign aid package for Ukraine, Israel and the Indo-Pacific on Tuesday.

"With this national security bill: The Senate declares that American leadership will not waver, not falter, not fail," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer posted on social media.

In a statement, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said: "The Senate understands the responsibilities of America's national security and will not neglect them ... And today, on the value of American leadership and strength, history will record that the Senate did not blink."

Most Democratic senators, along with 22 Republicans, voted in favor of the \$95.3 billion emergency aid bill, which would provide \$60.1 billion in aid to Ukraine, \$14.1 in aid to Israel, and \$9.2 billion in humanitarian aid for civilians in war zones, among other provisions.

However, it is unclear whether the bill will pass the Republican-dominated House. Speaker Mike Johnson already indicated on Monday that he would not support it. He stated that any national security supplemental legislation should secure America's own border before sending additional foreign aid around the world.

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US Senate Attaches Foreign Aid to Legislative Vehicle, Ends Debate on Bill

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The US Senate moved closer to the final passage of a \$95 billion supplemental funding bill with aid for Ukraine and Israel after officially attaching the foreign aid to a legislative vehicle and ending debate on the bill.

Senators on Monday night adopted the foreign aid package as an amendment to an unrelated bill in a vote of 66-33. The legislation includes approximately \$60 billion for Ukraine and \$14 billion for Israel.

The Senate then invoked cloture on the bill, which limits debate, in another vote of 66-33, setting up the legislation for a possible final vote as early as Wednesday.

Earlier on Monday, US Senator J.D. Vance sent a memo to fellow Senate Republicans, contending that the legislation could allow Democrats to attempt to impeach Donald Trump if he is reelected in 2024 and attempts to end the conflict in Ukraine.

In 2019, Democrats attempted to impeach Trump for pausing funds appropriated to Ukraine. Democrats could again impeach Trump if he were to withdraw or pause financial support for Ukraine against the advice of so-called "career experts," the memo said. The memo urges all Republicans to oppose passage of the legislation.

The legislation will also have to clear the Republican-majority US House of Representatives if it passes through the Senate. House Speaker Mike Johnson said in an earlier statement on Monday that he would not take up the foreign aid bill if it reaches the House of Representatives.

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US House Speaker Says Will Not Take Up Senate's \$95Bln Ukraine-Israel Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Monday that he will not bring the Senate's \$95 billion foreign aid bill to the House floor for consideration if it reaches the lower chamber.

The Senate could pass the foreign aid bill as early as Wednesday.

"In the absence of having received any single border policy change from the Senate, the House will have to continue to work its own will on these important matters," Johnson said in a statement.

Johnson said the Senate's foreign aid bill fails to address the United States' most pressing issue: border security. The House Speaker added that the Senate should have pushed to include meaningful border security measures in the \$95 billion foreign aid bill, which includes approximately \$60 billion for Ukraine, \$14 billion for Israel and additional funding to address US national security concerns in the Indo-Pacific region.

Last week, Senate Republicans blocked a \$118 billion national security supplemental package that includes \$60 billion for Ukraine, \$14 billion for Israel and border policy reforms. Republicans claim the reforms in the bill would not do enough to deter illegal immigration on the US southern border. The House Speaker also said that the bill would be "dead on arrival" if it reached the House of Representatives.

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Trump Says After Criticism Over NATO Remarks Alliance 'Has to Equalize and Now'

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said that NATO must "equalize" right away, if properly asked, or otherwise face the prospect of the "America first" policy.

"NATO has to equalize and now. They will do that if properly asked. If not, America first," Trump said on Monday.

Trump noted that he strengthened NATO during his presidency, compelling non-contributing countries to pay up by linking US military protection and increasing the available funds.

However, during the Biden presidency, NATO member states are paying less, Trump said.

Last week, Trump said during a rally in South Carolina that a leader of a NATO member state asked him whether the United States would protect that or other countries in the event of a possible attack by Russia. Trump said no if they did not invest enough in defense, and would actually encourage Russia to do what it wants to such countries.

NATO member states must pay the expected share necessary for defense, Trump added.

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US Air Force Secretary Admits Ukraine Cannot Win Against Russia Without Washington's Aid

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – There is a risk that Ukraine will not win in the conflict against Russia if the United States stops providing security assistance to Kiev, US Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall said during an Air and Space Forces Association (AFA) symposium.

“If we allow Russia to prevail [in Ukraine], and there is a real risk of that if our financial support does not continue, China is almost certain to draw the conclusion that the US lacks the will to preserve the international norm against naked aggression,” Kendall said on Monday.

In Kendall’s view, the risk of future conflict both in Europe and the Indo-Pacific will only increase if Washington abandons Ukraine now.

Earlier on Monday, US Senator J.D. Vance said in an interview with Tucker Carlson that everyone in Congress knows that continued fighting in Ukraine will lead to the destruction of that country.

Later on Monday, the US Senate will consider further measures to advance a \$95 billion supplemental funding bill, which includes approximately \$60 billion in aid for Ukraine and \$14 billion for Israel.

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US Senator Says \$95Bln Supplemental Funding Bill Fails to Address Ukraine Corruption

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - A \$95 billion supplemental funding bill with aid for Ukraine and Israel does nothing to address corruption in the Ukrainian government, US Senator Mike Lee said during a discussion on the social media platform X.

"There is not, to my knowledge, anything in this bill that adequately deals with the issue of corruption," Lee said on Monday.

Ukraine has a history and tradition of corruption, Lee added.

An inquiry into Ukrainian corruption would "completely erode" what public will still exists to support the regime in Kiev, US Senator J.D. Vance said during the discussion.

Earlier on Monday, Vance sent a memorandum to Senate Republicans informing them that Democrats could use the legislation to attempt to impeach Donald Trump if he is reelected in 2024 and tries to end the conflict in Ukraine.

Later on Monday, the Senate is set to consider procedural measures to advance the bill.

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Risk of Conflict With China Exists Already, Will Increase Over Time-US Air Force Secretary

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – The risk of a military clash between the US and China exists now and will only continue to grow over time, US Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall said during an Air and Space Forces Association (AFA) symposium.

"The risk of conflict [with China] is here now, and that risk will increase with time," Kendall said

on Monday.

Kendall underscored that the United States is already "out of time" when it comes to competing with more militarily potent China which spent the last two decades to build a military "that is designed to deter and defeat the United States if we intervene in the western Pacific."

The supplemental funding bill currently before Congress includes \$2.5 billion to bolster US and allied capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region and deter China. 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 Must Transition to Great Power Competition Focused Enterprise 'Now' - Air Force Chief

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The US military needs to immediately transition to being prepared to efficiently compete against great power nations, US Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall said at the AFA Warfare Symposium.

"We need to transition to a great power competition focused enterprise and we need to do it now," Kendall said on Monday.

Last month, US Defense Department Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs Lt. Gen. Richard Moore Jr. said the United States is not ready for great power competition, only for counterinsurgency warfare.

Kendall further said the United States needs fully capable units with all the assets they need to possibly fight China or Russia on short or no notice.

The United States needs organizations that are focused on the readiness of the current US military and to ensure that the United States has "enduring competitive advantages" in the future, Kendall said.

Kendall added that the United States also needs an efficient and effective pipeline of technologies flowing continuously into the US military.

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One Person Killed, Multiple Injured in New York Subway Station Shooting - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - One person has been killed and at least five others injured in a shooting at a subway station in the New York City borough of Bronx, the New York Post reported.

The shooting occurred on Mount Eden Avenue station amid an increased number of commuters waiting on the subway platform for a train, the report said on Monday.

The victims appeared to be teenagers and one girl died despite being rushed to St. Barnabas Hospital, the report said.

Witnesses reported hearing more than ten shots fired, the report added.

A suspect has not yet been identified and the New York City Police Department has asked residents to avoid that area due to the ongoing investigation, according to the report.

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Jordanian King Says Israeli Attack on Rafah to Create Another Humanitarian Catastrophe

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Jordanian King Abdullah II said on Monday that an Israeli attack on Rafah would create another humanitarian catastrophe in the region and the situation is already "unbearable" for over a million people.

"We cannot afford an Israeli attack on Rafah. It is certain to produce another humanitarian catastrophe and the situation is already unbearable for over a million people who have been pushed into Rafah since the war started," King Abdullah II told reporters at the White House.

The international community cannot let this situation continue and needs to do everything it can to obtain a lasting ceasefire immediately, he added.

Earlier on Monday, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said they carried out strikes in the Shaboura area of Rafah. Some 100 Palestinians were killed and more than 230 injured as a result of the shelling, Al Mayadeen broadcaster reported.

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US Senator Says 'Everyone Knows' Continuing Conflict Will Destroy Ukraine

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - US Senator J.D. Vance said in an interview with Tucker Carlson that everyone in Congress knows that continued fighting in Ukraine will lead to the destruction of that country.

"Everyone knows that this war will lead to the destruction of Ukraine," Vance said on Monday.

"I've had conversations with Democratic colleagues where they get this sort of dark look in their eyes, and they say, effectively, that they want to fight Russia to the last Ukrainian drop of blood."

Later on Monday, the US Senate will consider further measures to advance a \$95 billion supplemental funding bill, which includes approximately \$60 billion in aid for Ukraine and \$14 billion for Israel.

Now is the best opportunity for senators to block the bill, Vance said. The US House of Representatives will also have an opportunity to improve or block the legislation, Vance said.

Earlier on Monday, Vance sent a memo to Senate Republicans, contending that the legislation could allow Democrats to attempt to impeach Donald Trump if he is reelected in 2024 and tries to end the conflict in Ukraine.

Vance will also join Senator Mike Lee, entrepreneur Elon Musk and others later on Monday to discuss the legislation.

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US Partners in Latin America Not Prioritizing China's Growing Role in Region - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - US partners in Latin America at present are not prioritizing addressing China's growing influence in the region, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Western Hemisphere Daniel Erikson said during a panel discussion.

"What we find in the region is that there are many countries, particularly our core partners, that are concerned about China and are concerned about the PRC's growing role, it's just not at the top of their list of concerns," Erikson said on Monday during a panel discussion hosted by the Council of Foreign Relations.

Latin American countries are focused on dealing with transnational criminal organizations, climate threats, and ongoing border disputes in a number of countries, Erikson said.

The alleged risk posed by China is something that is going to come perhaps in the future, but not anytime soon, the Pentagon official added.

US Congressman Joaquin Castro during the discussion said the United States should do more to build relations with countries in Latin America.

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Trump Asks Supreme Court To Block Ruling Rejecting His Claims to Immunity Over Prosecution

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald J. Trump has filed a motion with the US Supreme Court (SCOTUS) asking for a stay in his immunity case until SCOTUS can hear his appeal, court documents released on Monday showed.

"...At the Special Counsel's urging, a panel of the DC Circuit has, in an extraordinarily fast manner, issued a decision on President Trump's claim of immunity and ordered the mandate returned to the district court to proceed with President Trump's criminal trial within four business days unless this Court intervenes (as it should). This Court should stay the DC Circuit's mandate to forestall . . . an unprecedented and unacceptable departure from ordinary appellate procedures and allow President Trump's claim of immunity to be decided in the ordinary course of justice," wrote Trump's attorneys in the filing.

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Jordan's King Abdullah Says Separation of Gaza and West Bank Cannot Be Accepted

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – Jordan's King Abdullah II said that the separation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank cannot be accepted.

"The separation of the West Bank and Gaza can not be accepted," the King told reporters at the White House on Monday.

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Biden Says US Working on Israel-Hamas Hostage Deal That Includes Six Weeks of Calm

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden told reporters that the United States is working on an Israel-Hamas hostage deal that would include up to six weeks of calm in Gaza.

"As the King [Abdullah II of Jordan] and I discussed today, the United States is working on a hostage deal between Israel and Hamas, which would bring an immediate and sustained period of calm to Gaza for at least six weeks, which we could then take the time to build something more enduring," Biden said on Monday during a joint press conference with the monarch.

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Former Iranian-Owned Boeing Aircraft Seized By US Arrives in Florida - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - A former Iranian-owned Boeing aircraft seized by the US government has arrived in Florida, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"The Department of Justice today completed enforcement of a final order for forfeiture of a US-manufactured Boeing 747 cargo plane, previously owned by Mahan Air, a sanctioned Iranian airline affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)," the release said on Monday.

According to the release, the aircraft was transferred from Argentina to Florida on Sunday. The plane was previously detained by Argentine law enforcement after the United States issued a warrant.

A federal court issued a seizure warrant for the aircraft in July 2022, the release said. Federal prosecutors claim that the aircraft was involved in a scheme that allegedly violated US export control laws and directly benefited the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, the release added.

The investigation on this matter is ongoing, the release noted.

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Augmented Technology Boosts Training Tech for US Fighter Pilots - Lockheed Martin

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin and Red 6 have announced a new system to integrate augmented reality (AR) training technology with a TF-50 fighter pilot trainer simulator, the US aerospace giant defense contractor announced in a press release on Monday.

"Lockheed Martin and Red 6 today announced a recently-completed groundbreaking effort to integrate the latest Red 6 augmented reality (AR) training technology with a TF-50 simulator," the release said.

The new system facilitates broader evaluation of AR applications and accelerates their integration into the TF-50 aircraft design to make possible increased pilot readiness with less flight hours, Lockheed Martin said.

"Technology integration such as this ensures that with the TF-50, pilots have the right tools to enable faster, more efficient training for fourth and fifth generation fighter missions and beyond." Lockheed Martin Integrated Fighter Group Vice President OJ Sanchez said in the release.

Lockheed Martin is offering the TF-50 for upcoming, advanced fighter training programs of the US Air Force, US Navy and several international customers as a light attack fighter and advanced trainer, the release said.

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Trump's Remarks About NATO Put US Credibility at Stake – US Top General

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump's remarks about NATO put US credibility with each of its alliances is at stake, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Brown said in an interview.

On Saturday, at a rally of his supporters in South Carolina, Trump said that during his presidency, the leader of an unspecified NATO nation had asked him whether the United States would support the alliance in the event of Russia's possible attack. Trump replied in the negative, saying that NATO countries did not invest enough in defense. The former US president also vowed to encourage Russia "to do whatever the hell they want," adding that NATO member states "got to pay."

"This year is the 75th anniversary of NATO," NBC reported on Monday citing Brown as saying in the interview. "And I think we have a responsibility to uphold those alliances. US credibility is at stake with each of our alliances and US leadership is still needed, wanted, and watched."

During the interview, Brown underscored that his job is to make sure that the United States is doing everything it can with its NATO allies on the military aspect of the alliance and he intends to continue doing so.

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Houston Police Say Found Anti-Semitic Writings During Church Shooting Investigation

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Houston Police Department Homicide Division Commander Chris Hassig said on Monday that investigators found anti-Semitic writings in connection with a church shooting over the weekend.

On Sunday, a woman entered Lakewood Church in Houston with a young boy and opened fire. Two off-duty law enforcement officers returned fire and killed the shooter, identified as 36-year-old Genesse Ivonne Moreno. The child was critically injured and one man was hit in the leg during the shooting.

"We have uncovered some items. We do have some anti-Semitic writings that we have uncovered during this process," Hassig said during a press conference.

Moreno's rifle had a sticker on the gun that said "Palestine," Hassig said. The anti-Semitic writings may be linked to a familial dispute involving her ex-husband and his family, some of whom are Jewish, Hassig said.

Investigators believe that Moreno has a history of mental health issues, Hassig said. Although Moreno has previously used the male alias "Jeffery," investigators identified Moreno as a Hispanic female.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) -

GAZA DEVELOPMENTS

* A total of 67 Palestinians were killed as a result of Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip southern city of Rafah overnight, the Gaza Health Ministry said on Monday.

* EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell expressed concern over the recent deadly wave of attacks in Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah.

* Two hostages released in Gaza overnight into Monday were Argentinians, The Office of Argentine President Javier Milei said.

* The United States does not assess that Israel's recent air strikes in Rafah represent the launch of a full scale offensive there, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

WESTERN RESTRICTIONS ON RUSSIA

* Vienna is looking into the possibility of terminating gas supply agreements between Austrian oil, gas and petrochemical company OMV and Russia's energy giant Gazprom and will study all available withdrawal options, Austrian Energy Minister Leonore Gewessler said.

* Russian gas is not subject to EU sanctions and Austria will need to create a legal base to refuse using it, Austrian oil and gas company OMV told RIA Novosti.

* The Council of Europe on Monday decided that the profits from frozen Russian assets will be stored for their further use in the interests of Ukraine.

ELECTIONS IN FINLAND

* Finland will not have any relations with Russia until the special military operation is over, Finnish President-elect Alexander Stubb said on Monday.

* Russia still hopes that Stubb will have a more balanced approach to the bilateral relations, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Ukraine has lost up to 290 soldiers in the Krasnyi Lyman direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Monday.

* The UN Security Council failed to prevent the conflict in Ukraine, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin's interview with US journalist Tucker Carlson could influence US public opinion and the country's politicians who make decisions on allocating aid to Ukraine, the adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's chief of staff, Serhiy Leshchenko, said.

US DEFENSE SECRETARY HOSPITALIZED AGAIN

* US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has canceled his trip to Brussels, Belgium, after he was hospitalized over the weekend for the second time since January, a Defense Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

* Austin underwent a non-surgical procedure under general anesthesia to address a bladder issue and is still expected to fully recover, Walter Reed Military Medical Center officials said in a statement published by the Pentagon.

IMF MISSION IN UKRAINE

* The International Monetary Fund (IMF) team in Kiev began discussions with government officials on the challenges facing Ukraine's economy, the IMF said on Monday.

* An IMF team in Kiev will start talks with the Ukrainian authorities on February 17 regarding the third review of the Extended Fund Facility loan, the IMF said.

* The first meeting of the Steering Committee of the IMF's Ukraine Capacity Development Fund will take place in Ukraine on February 13, the IMF said.

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Russian-Canadian National Pleads Guilty Violating US Sanctions - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - Russian-Canadian national Kristina Puzyreva has pleaded guilty to a multimillion-dollar money laundering conspiracy to send drone and guided-missile parts to sanctioned entities in Russia, the US Justice Department said on Monday.

"Earlier today in federal court in Brooklyn, Kristina Puzyreva pleaded guilty to money laundering

conspiracy for her role in a multimillion-dollar scheme to send components used in unnamed aerial vehicles (UAVs) and guided missile systems and other weapons to sanctioned entities in Russia," the Justice Department said in a statement.

Puzyreva faces a sentence of up to 20 years in prison, the statement said.

Prosecution against Nikolay Goltsev, the co-defendant in the case, remains pending, the statement also said.

The Justice Department charged Puzyreva and Goltsev last year for participating in a money laundering scheme, where the defendants illegally sourced, purchased and shipped dual-use electronics to Russia, the statement added.

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US Senators Filibuster in Opposition to \$95Bln Ukraine, Israel Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - A group of Republican US Senators began filibustering on the Senate floor on Monday, amid disagreements over a \$95 billion supplemental funding bill with aid for Ukraine and Israel.

"Talking filibuster begins in earnest this afternoon," Paul said in a statement via social media platform X.

Later on Monday, the US Senate will consider further procedural motions to advance the legislation, which includes approximately \$60 billion for Ukraine and \$14 billion for Israel.

Senators were able to speak for one hour each on the floor, delaying consideration of the bill. Senators Paul, Mike Lee, and J.D. Vance have delivered remarks in opposition to the legislation. Senator Thom Tillis also delivered a speech blaming his Republican colleagues for holding up an agreement to unlock amendment votes.

Earlier on Monday, Vance sent a memo to Senate Republicans, contending that the bill could allow Democrats to attempt to impeach Donald Trump in 2024, if he is reelected and attempts to end the conflict in Ukraine.

Vance and Lee will join entrepreneur Elon Musk in a discussion later on Monday to discuss the legislation.

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First Meeting Of Committee Of IMF Ukraine Capacity Development Fund To Be Held On Tuesday

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) – The first meeting of the Steering Committee of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Ukraine Capacity Development Fund will take place in Ukraine on February 13, the IMF said on Monday.

"The team will also participate in the inaugural meeting of the Steering Committee of the IMF's

Ukraine Capacity Development Fund (UCDF) on February 13. This meeting will convene Ukrainian authorities, development partners, and IMF staff to discuss the Ukraine's capacity development priorities and IMF support in this important area," IMF Resident Representative to Ukraine Vahram Stepanyan said in a statement.

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IMF Says to Start Talks With Ukraine on Friday About 3rd Review of Loan Program

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) – An International Monetary Fund (IMF) team in Kiev will start talks with the Ukrainian authorities on February 17 regarding the third review of the Extended Fund Facility loan, the IMF said on Monday.

"On February 17, an IMF mission, led by Gavin Gray, will start policy discussions with the Ukrainian authorities in Warsaw on the third review of the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) Arrangement," IMF Resident Representative to Ukraine Vahram Stepanyan said in a statement.

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Record-Keeping, Rules Disregarded in Development of Canada Covid Travel App - Watchdog

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government failed to ensure proper financial record-keeping and demonstrated "glaring disregard" for basic principles during the development of the country's COVID-era app for travelers, a watchdog said on Monday.

The Canadian government said it spent C\$55 million on the application's development from April 1, 2020, through March 31, 2023. The app's purpose was to collect travelers' health-related data and assist with quarantines.

"I will discuss our findings, but first, I have to say that I am deeply concerned by what this audit didn't find. We didn't find records to accurately show how much was spent on what, who did the work, or how and why contracting decisions were made, and that paper trail should have existed," Auditor General Karen Hogan said, following the release of her report.

Hogan said the audit showed what she characterized as "glaring disregard" for basic management and contracting practices throughout the ArriveCAN app development and implementation processes.

Although the COVID-19 situation demanded that Canadian government institutions act quickly, it was still required to keep records and prudently manage public funds, Hogan added. However, that was not the case, she said, adding that several failures were detected throughout the audit.

Hogan said that she was most concerned by the Canada Border Service Agency (CBSA), which did not have complete and accurate financial records of the app's development.

"Because of this, we were unable to calculate the exact cost of the ArriveCAN application. By piecing together available information we estimated that ArriveCAN costed approximately \$59.5

million," Hogan continued.

The auditor general expressed further concern that CBSA did not have any record of how and why it chose not to follow a competitive process, rather choosing to directly allocate the contract to GC Strategies.

CBSA's contract management abilities are "very poor" as essential information on deliverables and workers qualification requirements were missing from the contracts, Hogan said. It greatly contributed to the audit's decision to determine "best value for money" was not achieved.

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White House Says No Timeline for Biden's Physical Examination Yet

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said in a press briefing on Monday that there is no timeline for President Joe Biden's physical examination at present.

"He will have a physical. When we have information on that, obviously we will certainly share that with all of you," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

Jean-Pierre said the White House will make available a comprehensive report as it has done in the last two years, but does not have a timeline at present.

When asked whether the White House believes that taking a cognitive test as part of the physical examination is a legitimate idea, Jean-Pierre said, she would relay what the president's doctor told her about a year ago when the report came out, saying the president proves every day how he operates and how he thinks.

"I spent sometimes countless hours with him whether it's in the Oval Office, whether it's on the road and I believe... he is sharp, he is on top of things," Jean-Pierre added.

On Thursday, US Special Counsel Robert Hur released a report on his investigation into Biden's mishandling of classified documents, in which he cited several instances of Biden forgetting key dates in his life and career.

Following the release of the report, Biden delivered a speech arguing that his memory is "fine," but subsequently mixed up Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi for being president of Mexico.

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US Must Start Talks to End Ukraine Conflict, Not Fund It - Senate Candidate's Campaign

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The United States must start negotiations to end the conflict in Ukraine instead of continuing to provide security assistance to Kiev, US Senate candidate Michael Hoover's spokesperson told Sputnik.

"The war in Ukraine could and should have been prevented, we need to start the negotiations to end this conflict," campaign spokesperson Hannah Ellithorpe said. "Instead, we are funding a

war that has no end."

The campaign pointed out that the US is not engaged in any diplomatic activity to broker peace in Ukraine, nor is it effectively monitoring US funds to Ukraine, and all the while the country has a crisis on the US southern border.

Last week, Senate Republicans blocked a \$118 billion national security supplemental package that includes \$60 billion for Ukraine, \$14 billion for Israel and border policy reforms, saying it would not do enough to deter illegal immigration.

The Senate is currently working on passing a \$95 billion foreign aid bill that would provide security assistance to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, but excludes any border security measures. A vote on this bill is expected as early as Wednesday.

The US has provided more than \$75 billion in assistance to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022. Aid shipments began in 2022 with artillery munitions and training and have escalated to include tanks, advanced air-defense systems, missiles and cluster munitions. The Kremlin has consistently warned against the West's continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

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IMF Says Starts Discussions With Ukraine on Challenges Facing Country's Economy

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) team in Kiev began discussions with Ukrainian officials on the challenges facing the nation's economy, the IMF said on Monday.

"An IMF team, led by Uma Ramakrishnan, Deputy Director of the Fund's European Department, starts meetings today in Kiev with the Ukrainian authorities and other stakeholders. The discussions will focus on the authorities' economic objectives and the challenges facing the Ukrainian economy," IMF Resident Representative to Ukraine Vahram Stepanyan said in a statement.

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Austin's Participation in Ukraine Contact Group Depends on His Health Status – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's participation in the upcoming Ukraine Defense Contact Group (UDCG) meeting will depend on his health status following his second hospitalization this year, Pentagon spokesperson Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said on Monday.

"While Secretary Austin currently intends to participate in the virtual UDCG, he will remain flexible depending on his health care status," Ryder said during a press briefing.

An in-person iteration of the UDCG is scheduled to take place later this week in Brussels,

Belgium.

Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Dr. Celeste Wallander is ready to substitute Austin and represent the United States at the meeting since she will be in Brussels this week, Ryder said.

US Permanent Representative to NATO Ambassador Julianne Smith will be representing the United States at the NATO defense ministerial meeting scheduled for Thursday, Ryder added.

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US Senate Candidate's Campaign Says Biden Unfit for Office, National Security at Risk

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is not mentally fit to serve as US president and his reelection may put US national security at risk through the weaponization of the justice system and engagement of the United States in multiple wars, US Senate candidate Michael Hoover's spokesperson told Sputnik.

"American sovereignty, independence and national security is at stake," Hoover campaign spokesperson Hannah Ellithorpe said about the upcoming presidential election. "We have an invasion occurring across our borders, the weaponization of our justice system, and Biden has us engaged in multiple wars."

Ellithorpe added that Biden is "mentally not fit" to serve as US president.

Last week, US Special Counsel Robert Hur released a report on his investigation into Biden's mishandling of classified documents, in which he cited several instances of Biden forgetting key dates in his life and career, including his time serving as US vice president and the date of the death of his son Beau Biden.

Following the release of the report, Biden delivered a speech defending his memory, but subsequently mixed up Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi as the leader of Mexico and became upset after reporters questioned whether his memory had gotten worse with age.

Moreover, former President Donald Trump has accused the Biden administration of weaponizing the US justice system to go after him to stop him from running for office. He faces federal court cases related to his alleged role in the riot at the US Capitol in 2021 and for allegedly mishandling classified documents.

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White House Says Special Counsel Report on Biden's Handling of Classified Docs 'Wrong'

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - US Special Counsel Robert Hur's report on an investigation into President Joe Biden's mishandling of classified documents is inappropriate and wrong, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Monday.

"The stuff in this report, that has captured all of your attention right now, is just wrong. It's flatly

wrong. It is inappropriate. It is gratuitous," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

The report noted several instances in which Biden forgot details about his life and career, including the dates of his service as vice president and the death of his son Beau. The report did not recommend charges in connection with the case, noting that a jury would likely perceive Biden as a well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory.

Hur is a Republican prosecutor, not a medical doctor, Jean-Pierre said.

Following the release of the report, Biden held a press conference in an attempt to defend his cognitive capabilities. However, Biden mistakenly referred to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as the president of Mexico during the event.

The press conference and Hur report confirm that Biden is "not fit" to serve as president, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said.

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Austin Undergoes Non-Surgical Bladder-Related Procedure Under General Anesthesia
-Hospital

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin underwent a non-surgical procedure under general anesthesia to address a bladder issue and is still expected to fully recover, Walter Reed Military Medical Center officials said in a statement published by the Pentagon on Monday.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III underwent non-surgical procedures under general anesthesia to address his bladder issue. We anticipate a successful recovery and will closely monitor him overnight," the statement said.

The medical officials added in the statement that they do not anticipate Austin's prolonged hospital stay and expect him to return to his duties on Tuesday.

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Ex-US Official Says 'Skeptical' Projected Demand for Haleu Nuclear Fuel Will Materialize

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - Frank von Hippel, former US Assistant Director for National Security in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, told Sputnik that he is skeptical the projected demand for high-assay low-enriched uranium (Haleu) will materialize and that most projects to build reactors that use this fuel will not be completed.

Boris Schucht, chief executive of European enriched uranium supplier Urenco, which has been struggling to compete with Russia's Rosatom, told the Financial Times that the company is in discussions with the US and UK governments about potential investments in new plants to produce Haleu. The fuel is used in advanced reactors and is currently only sold by Rosatom. Schucht also said there has been a development of new generation small modular reactors

(SMRs), which are powered by Haleu.

"With regard to Haleu, I am very skeptical that the projected demand will materialize," Von Hippel said. "I think most of the small modular reactor projects will not be completed."

According to the report, the US nuclear industry expects the Biden administration to ban imports of enriched uranium from Russia sometime this year after stockpiling for two years and getting signals that it has bipartisan support from Congress. The head of Urenco believes it has enough capacity to replace Russian supply.

Schucht also told the Financial Times that a cutoff from Russian supplies would benefit the likes of Urenco, France's Orano and US-based Centrus.

Russia currently controls nearly 50% of the global uranium enrichment capacity. Official US figures show that the United States imported \$1.2 billion worth of enriched uranium from Russia in 2023, an all-time record.

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White House Admits Possibility Some Gaza Hostages No Longer Alive

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - A sad possibility is that some of the hostages taken during the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel may no longer be alive, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Monday.

"Sadly, we have to accept the possibility that some of them are no longer alive," said Kirby during a press briefing.

The comments come after two hostages were located and rescued from Hamas during an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) deadly raid in the southern Gaza Strip city of Rafah on Monday morning. The individuals were reported by the IDF to be in stable condition.

On October 7, the Gaza Strip-controlling Hamas movement launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel and breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 28,300 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, 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. More than 100 hostages are still believed to be held by Hamas in Gaza.

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Urenco May Take Years to Expand Uranium Enrichment Capacity - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The European enriched uranium supplier Urenco may take years to expand its uranium enrichment capacity, Frank von Hippel, former US Assistant Director for National Security in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, told Sputnik.

On Sunday, the Financial Times reported that the US nuclear industry expects the Biden administration to ban imports of enriched uranium from Russia sometime this year after stockpiling for two years and getting signals that it has bipartisan support from Congress. According to the report, the head of URENCO believes it has enough capacity to replace the Russian supply.

"Urenco has committed to expand its enrichment capacity but that will take some years," Von Hippel said. "In the interim, Urenco and Orano can overfeed their existing capacity by buying additional uranium to allow them to produce the same amount of enriched uranium with less enrichment work."

Urenco chief executive Boris Schucht told the Financial Times that a cutoff from Russian supplies would benefit their company as well as France's Orano and the US-based Centrus.

Russia currently controls nearly 50% of the global uranium enrichment capacity. Official US figures show that the United States imported \$1.2 billion worth of enriched uranium from Russia in 2023, an all-time record.

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US Sees No Indications of Possible Hostilities on Venezuela-Guyana Border - Kirby

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The United States sees no indications of possible hostilities on the Venezuela-Guyana border, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Monday.

When asked about the reports that satellite imagery shows Venezuela moving military assets to the border with Guyana, Kirby said the White House has "been monitoring this closely."

"Our assessment is that whatever military movements there have been by Venezuela have been of a very small nature in the size, scale and scope," Kirby said. "We see no indication that there is about to be hostilities or that the Venezuelan military would be capable of conducting any significant military activities there."

The oil-and mineral-rich Essequibo region has long been a subject of dispute between Venezuela and Guyana. Venezuela gained independence from Spain in 1845, with Essequibo recognized as part of its sovereign territory. However, in 1899, the United Kingdom filed and won an arbitration claim to recognize Essequibo as part of its then-Caribbean colony of British Guiana. Independent Guyana cited the 1899 Arbitral Award in its 2018 International Court of Justice suit against Venezuela to reassert its claim of sovereignty over the disputed territory.

In December 2023, Venezuela held a referendum in which almost 96% of the population voted for incorporating the Essequibo region into the country. Guyanese President Mohamed Irfaan Ali

said that Georgetown was considering Caracas' actions to incorporate Essequibo, which makes up two-thirds of Guyana's territory, as a threat to the country's national security.

Following talks in Kingstown on December 14, Venezuela and Guyana agreed to renounce any use of force in resolving the territorial conflict, reaffirmed commitments to keep Latin America a zone of peace and avoid aggravating the situation in the disputed region.

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IMF Deputy Director Says Will Not Judge Russia Sanctions, Admits Economy Outperformed

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is not in a position to judge the effectiveness of Western sanctions against Russia, but the country had outperformed previous IMF forecasts on its economy, First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath said on Monday.

"I think this is an area that we don't comment directly on, in terms of effectiveness of sanctions or kinds of sanctions to implement," Gopinath said in a live-streamed interview with the Washington-based think tank Foreign Policy.

However, Gopinath also said the Russian economy had surpassed IMF's expectations of its performance.

"What is true is that Russia has been able to export large quantities of oil, even despite the price gap (with the selling price cap set under Western sanctions). So, they have earned a large amount in terms of export earnings."

Gopinath acknowledged the IMF had been criticized by some for its positive outlook on Russia's economy and "I think everybody has now come around to recognizing that these are the actual numbers".

"Russia's growth has come in stronger than we expected. We revised it up by a percentage and a half this year so you know we are squarely in positive growth territory. It has done better than we expected," she added.

But Russia's status as a "war economy" also meant there were many uncertainties ahead, Gopinath said.

"From the growth numbers as a whole, if you want to tell the story, it is a fact that this is a war economy and ... physical expenditures are quite high. Admin, military expenditures are extremely high. Social transfers are extremely high. So you see that with the growing deficits." Inflation was another risk in any economy that might be overheating, she said.

"The question is what happens over the medium term and there is considerable uncertainty," Gopinath said. "Given the loss of human capital and given the restricted ability for Russia to import high-tech products, all that has the potential to reduce (growth) into the medium term. I say it's highly uncertain and it depends upon how things develop over the next months."

The IMF has forecast Russia's economic growth in 2024 to be anywhere between 1.1% and 2.6%.

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Private Sector Moon Mission With Artemis Projects to Blast Off on Wednesday - NASA

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The Nova C Lunar Lander built by Innovative Projects (IM) is scheduled to blast off from Launch Pad 39A at Kennedy Space Center, Cape Canaveral, Florida in two days, NASA officials announced on Monday.

"As part of NASA's CLPS (Commercial Lunar Payload Services) initiative and Artemis campaign, SpaceX is targeting no earlier than 12:57 am EST [Eastern Standard Time] Wednesday, February 14, for a Falcon 9 launch of Intuitive Machines' first lunar lander to the Moon's surface," the US space agency said in a press release. "Liftoff will be from Launch Complex 39A at the agency's Kennedy Space Center in Florida."

The lander is expected to land on the Moon about ten degrees away from the lunar south pole on Thursday, February 22 after a six day journey, NASA said.

"Among the items on its lander, the IM-1 mission will carry NASA science and technology instruments focusing on plume-surface interactions, space weather/lunar surface interactions, radio astronomy, precision landing technologies, and a communication and navigation node for future autonomous navigation technologies," the space agency said.

Four cameras on the spacecraft will observe the patterns of dust it disturbs and activates as it lands in preparation for the eventual Artemis project landing of four US astronauts later this decade, NASA investigator Michelle Munk told a space agency teleconference on Monday.

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Kirby Says Not Aware of Talks Between Biden, Austin Since Hospitalization

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Monday that he is unaware of any talks between US President Joe Biden and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin following the weekend hospitalization of the Pentagon chief.

"I'm not aware of any conversation between the two of them since, since it's just happened yesterday," Kirby said in a press briefing.

When asked whether Biden has any concerns that Austin can no longer serve due to his health issues, Kirby stated: "Not at all."

Doctors at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center said on Sunday that Austin had been admitted to the critical care unit for supportive care and close monitoring in connection with a bladder issue. It is unclear when the Pentagon chief will return to his duties.

Austin transferred his powers to Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks.

Austin was initially hospitalized on January 1 over complications following a December surgical procedure to treat prostate cancer. The US Defense Department failed to communicate Austin's

hospitalization to the White House for several days, prompting a Pentagon Inspector General probe and bipartisan calls for him to leave his leadership position.

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

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UPDATE - IMF to Re-Evaluate Potential to Unfreeze Russian Assets - Deputy Managing Director

(Updates with more details, background in paragraphs 5-12)

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) will make its own evaluation in due time regarding potentially the unfreezing of Russian assets for further deployment, IMF First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath said on Monday.

"The decision on what to do with Russia's frozen assets, you know, are solely with the countries who are holding these assets and the negotiations among them," Gopinath said in an interview with the Washington-based think tank Foreign Policy.

Gopinath made the comment in response to a question on the possibility of taking the frozen Russian assets and deploying them toward the reconstruction of Ukraine.

While saying that the IMF would not be involved in the countries' discussions and decisions on the frozen Russian assets, "we will evaluate the impact of any decisions that are taken by our member countries or on the global economy," Gopinath added.

Even in the event that some Russian assets are unfrozen for redeployment, Gopinath urged that international laws and norms be followed.

"I think the broad (consensus) of course, always is that you want to make sure that whatever you are doing has sufficient legal support ... so that you don't end up with the risks down the line," Gopinath said. "I think that's important to keep in mind. But that said, we will wait and see the direction in which these discussions go."

Using frozen Russian assets to pay for the reconstruction of war-torn Ukraine is edging closer to reality, in what might become a landmark precedent in international law, Foreign Policy said in a commentary last month.

Financial institutions in the United States and Europe froze about \$300 billion worth of Russian at the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. The World Bank last year estimated the cost to cover the damage in Ukraine would be more than \$400 billion and that number has only grown since.

In January, the US Senate advanced legislation that would authorize the seizure of frozen Russian state funds, following a similar measure earlier in the House of Representatives. The Biden administration has backed the bill.

Canada already has such a law in the works. The European Union has agreed in principle to the idea of seizing at least the interest earned from the frozen Russian assets for Ukraine's reconstruction. The Group of Seven (G7) will further discuss using Russian money to rebuild

Ukraine at a meeting next month.

Foreign Policy noted that in the early days of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen dismissed the idea of seizing Russian assets as not "legally permissible."

But the notion has seen growing momentum in part due to the prolonged state of the conflict and also because of uncertainty over the future of US and other Western aid for Ukraine.

IMF To Re-Evaluate Potential Unfreezing of Russian Assets - Deputy Managing Director

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UPDATE - Musk Welcomes Ukraine Aid Supporters to Join Discussion on US Senate Funding Bill

(Adds details in para 6)

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - Entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Monday that he would welcome any lawmaker who supports a US Senate supplemental funding bill with more than \$60 billion in aid for Ukraine to join an upcoming discussion about the legislation on social media platform X.

On Monday evening, Musk will join US Senators J.D. Vance and Mike Lee, entrepreneur David Sacks and former Republican presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy to discuss the legislation, which also includes \$14 billion for Israel.

Ramaswamy said in a statement via X that any lawmaker who intends to vote in favor of the legislation should join the discussion as well to make a case for the bill.

"That would be great," Musk said in reply to Ramaswamy.

Vance sent a memo to fellow Senate Republicans, contending that the legislation could allow Democrats to attempt to impeach Donald Trump if he is reelected in 2024 and attempts to end the conflict in Ukraine.

The measure allowing Democrats to potentially impeach Trump is "insane," Musk said in response to Vance's memo. Musk also tagged US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell in a post, asking him "what is going on" in the upper chamber of Congress.

The US Senate is set to vote on further procedural measures related to the legislation later on Monday.

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State Dept. Says Israeli Air Strikes on Rafah Do Not Represent Full Scale Offensive

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The United States does not assess that Israel's recent air strikes in Gaza's Rafah represent the launch of a full scale offensive there, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"It is our assessment this is not part of the full scale military operation there," Miller said during a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said it had rescued two hostages from Palestinian movement Hamas in an overnight operation in Rafah, located right on the border with Egypt. Al Mayadeen broadcaster reported, citing medical sources, that the operation, accompanied by a wave of airstrikes, had resulted in at least 100 deaths and over 230 people injured.

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Elon Musk Welcomes Ukraine Aid Supporters to Join Discussion on US Senate Funding Bill

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Tucker Carlson Says President Biden's Incapacitation 'Unassailable Fact'

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - Journalist Tucker Carlson said on Monday during an interview at the World Governments Summit in Dubai that he cannot overstate the fact of Joe Biden's incapacitation, emphasizing it as not an attack but a reality.

"I can't overstate how incapacitated Joe Biden is. It's not an attack, that is a fact and anyone who tells you otherwise is lying," Carlson said.

The remarks were in response to Egyptian journalist Emad Eldin Adeeb's question regarding whether Biden understands the law of action and reaction that influences a country like Russia.

"I think that the current administration is very obviously incompetent...Everyone knows it, it has now been confirmed...In the report that you're all familiar with," Carlson added.

Last week on Thursday, US Special Counsel Robert Hur released a report on his investigation into Biden's mishandling of classified documents, in which he cited several instances of Biden forgetting key dates in his life and career.

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Tucker Carlson Says Putin Wants Resolution in Ukraine Conflict

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin seeks a resolution in the Ukraine conflict but remains skeptical about increased openness to negotiation as the duration of the conflict persists, Journalist Tucker Carlson said on Monday.

"Putin wants to get out of this war, he's not going to become more open to negotiation the longer this goes on," Carlson said during an interview at the World Governments Summit in Dubai.

The remarks were in response to Egyptian journalist Emad Eldin Adeeb's question about Putin's reluctance to compromise amid Western efforts to escalate tension, exert pressure, and weaken Russia economically and its alliance with China.

"One of the things we've learned in the course of the last few years is that Russia's industrial capacity is a lot more profound than we thought it was...This country [Russia], we're assured was a gas station with nuclear weapons has a pretty easy time making missiles, rockets, and artillery shells," Carlson added.

Last week, the Russian president sat down for an interview with Carlson, discussing the Ukraine conflict, the Nord Stream sabotage, Russia-NATO relations, artificial intelligence, and

other topics.

The interview has attracted huge interest around the world. As of Monday, the video had been viewed 196 million times on the X. On YouTube, the video has been viewed nearly 14.8 million times.

Western countries have been providing military and financial aid to Kiev since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it would lead to further escalation of the conflict.

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US Spends \$7Mln Per Year to Maintain Russian Businessman's Seized Yacht - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The US government spends about \$7 million per year to maintain the \$300 million Amadea yacht it had seized from Russian businessman Suleiman Kerimov, court documents revealed on Monday.

The US government seized the yacht after Kerimov was sanctioned in connection to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. Kerimov was sanctioned by the US Treasury Department in 2014 and 2018 in response to Russia's activities in Syria and Ukraine, respectively.

"The government respectfully requests that the court order interlocutory sale of the defendant asset, a 106-meter superyacht known as the M/Y Amadea, whose upkeep is costing the government roughly \$600,000 per month," prosecutors stated in the court document. "Such a monthly expenditure easily qualifies as an 'excessive' cost that justifies interlocutory sale under [US law]."

The US Justice Department previously said the yacht is under US government control in San Diego, California, after it was seized in March 2022 pursuant to a court order issued by the Republic of Fiji in response to a US request.

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Internal Politics Stall US Aid for Ukraine, But Passage Likely Eventually - Ex-US Envoy

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - Former US Ambassador to the OSCE Jim Gilmore told Sputnik that he expects Congress to eventually approve a new \$95 billion aid package that includes funding for Ukraine, though internal politics have delayed passage of assistance for Kiev.

Lawmakers are working to pass the new aid bill after Republican senators blocked a \$118 billion package that included border policy measures, saying it did not do enough to deter illegal border crossings. The Senate is currently on track to hold a final vote on the new \$95 billion aid package for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan as early as Wednesday, but the fate of the legislation in

the US House remains uncertain.

"I think it will ultimately pass the Congress," Gilmore said. "This [delay] is simply ... a product of the internal politics of the United States, trying to address the border issue, and trying to get leverage over the border issue by the necessity of supplying both Israel and Ukraine. I think that sooner or later it's going to pass."

The Biden administration is eager to get more funding approved for Ukraine after it ran out of funds for Kiev in December. White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said last week that Ukrainian forces were beginning to worry about ammunition shortages amid a lack of new US assistance.

Gilmore said he thinks negotiations are possible to end the conflict in Ukraine, but not unless Russia leaves Ukraine. He expects the conflict may "go on for a while."

The US has provided more than \$75 billion in assistance to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022. Aid shipments began in 2022 with artillery munitions and training and have escalated to include tanks, advanced air-defense systems, missiles and cluster munitions. The Kremlin has consistently warned against the West's continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

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Special Counsel Report on Biden 'Damaging,' Shows Not Fit for Second Term - Ex-RNC Chair

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The Special Counsel report on President Joe Biden's mishandling of classified documents during his time as vice president is damaging and reinforces the notion that he is not able to do a second term as US president, former Republican National Convention Chairman Jim Gilmore told Sputnik.

On Thursday, US Special Counsel Robert Hur said in his final report on Biden's mishandling of classified documents that Biden suffered from lapses in memory during the course of the investigation, forgetting key dates in his life and career.

"I thought that the revelation of the special counsel's investigation was terribly damaging to Biden, and I think that's because there was already a sense for months and months from almost everybody that President Biden is not able to do the second term because of his age and infirmity. The Special Counsel report ... just supported that sense that President Biden is not going to be able to do this," Gilmore said.

According to the Hur report, Biden forgot when he started and ended his term as US vice president, and also could not recall "within several years" when his son Beau died. Biden likely would have presented himself as a well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory if the matter were brought to a jury trial, the report added.

Moreover, Gilmore said Biden's press conference after the release of the Special Counsel report backfired on him.

"He tried to basically defend himself on that, I don't think succeeded," Gilmore said. "I think he looked like a grumpy old man or an angry old man."

Biden gave a press conference on Thursday afternoon after the Special Counsel report

highlighted that he has a poor memory, arguing that his memory is "fine" and he knows what he's doing, but subsequently mixed up Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi with the leader of Mexico.

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Pentagon Tells Sputnik Austin Cancels Trip to Brussels After Second Hospitalization

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has canceled his trip to Brussels, Belgium, after he was hospitalized over the weekend for the second time since January, a Defense Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

"I can confirm that [trip cancellation]," the spokesperson said in a statement. "The Ukraine Defense Contact Group will take place virtually."

The spokesperson could not confirm whether the US defense secretary will be taking part in the meeting on Ukraine.

Austin was supposed to be in Brussels this week to participate in the Ukraine Defense Contact Group and the NATO Defense Ministerial meeting at the NATO headquarters.

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Texas Church Shooter Wrote 'Free Palestine' on Rifle, Motive Under Investigation - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - A woman who attempted a shooting at an evangelical church in Texas wrote the phrase "Free Palestine" on the AR-15 rifle she carried, CNN reported on Monday.

On Sunday, a woman entered Lakewood Church in Houston with a young boy and opened fire. Two off-duty law enforcement officers returned fire and killed the shooter, Houston Police Chief Troy Finner said during a press conference.

The child was critically injured and one man hit in the leg during the shooting, Finner said.

The shooter also mentioned a bomb before dying, although police found no evidence of explosives at the scene, Finner said.

The shooter wrote the phrase "Free Palestine" on her AR-15, the report said, citing a federal law enforcement source. However, investigators are still working to determine whether the shooting was politically motivated, the report added.

Lakewood Church is a non-denominational, evangelical church led by pastor Joel Osteen.

The shooter, Genesse Ivonne Moreno, entered the church wearing a trench coat and backpack, the local news outlet KHOU reported earlier on Monday, citing multiple independent sources.

Moreno had a criminal history dating back to 2005, with charges including assault, evading arrest and unlawful carrying of a weapon, the report said.

Moreno has previously identified as Jeffery Escalante Moreno, the report also said, citing Texas

police records.

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UN Security Council Failed to Prevent Ukraine Conflict - Nebenzia

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council failed to prevent the conflict in Ukraine, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday.

"The implementation of the Minsk package of measures was the best possible scenario for resolving the intra-Ukrainian conflict," Nebenzia said during a meeting of the UN Security Council. "We must also recognize the failure of prevention in the work of the Security Council."

The UN Security Council members knew what was happening and what it was leading to but they stood idly by, hoping they could use "the neo-Nazi Russophobic monster" raised on Russia's borders to significantly weaken Russia.

Earlier on Monday, Russian Deputy Envoy to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said that Russia requested a UN Security Council meeting in connection with the anniversary of the adoption of the Minsk agreements.

The Minsk Agreements were a complex series of measures negotiated in 2014-2015 by Russia, France, Germany and Ukraine - a quartet known as Normandy format - in an attempt to put an end to the armed conflict between the Kiev authorities and the breakaway region of Donbas.

Russia repeatedly complained that Ukraine was not fulfilling its end of the deal, including not granting autonomy to the Donbas.

In February, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy admitted that he never intended to implement the Minsk agreements as did former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former French President Francois Hollande.

Merkel and Hollande said that negotiating the Minsk agreements with Russia was a stalling tactic to buy time to arm and train the Ukrainian military and they had no intention of complying with the agreements they had signed.

In addition, former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the Normandy format had been nothing else but a "diplomatic imitation."

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US Senator Says Trump May Be Impeached Again Under Ukraine Supplemental Bill

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - US Senator J.D. Vance said on Monday that the Ukraine supplemental bill, authored by Democrats, contains a hidden clause that could become the basis for a new impeachment of Donald Trump should he become president of the United States again.

"If President Trump were to withdraw from or pause financial support for the war in Ukraine in order to bring the conflict to a peaceful conclusion, 'over the objections of career experts,' it would amount to the same fake violation of budget law from the first impeachment, under markedly similar facts and circumstances. Partisan Democrats would seize on the opportunity to impeach him once again," Vance said in a memorandum to fellow Republicans in Congress.

Vance explained that the new supplemental bill includes \$1.6 billion for foreign military financing in Ukraine and \$13.7 billion for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, with an expiration date on September 30, 2025 or a about a year into Trump's possible second term.

If Trump decides to go against the lawmakers and block the funding for Ukraine, this can become a basis for an impeachment procedure similar to the one initiated by Democrats in December 2019.

On February 5, 2020, the US Senate acquitted then-President Donald Trump of charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress after he paused the transfer of about \$400 million to Ukraine to allegedly pressure Kiev on the issue of an investigation into President Joe Biden's and his son Hunter's dealings in Ukraine.

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Kurt Campbell Sworn in as US Deputy Secretary of State – State Department

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) – Kurt Campbell was sworn in as the US deputy secretary of state on Monday morning, according to a senior State Department official.

"Our new Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell was just sworn in a few minutes ago," Robert Koepcke, deputy assistant secretary for Japan, Korea, and Mongolia at the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said at a CSIS event.

The senate voted 92-5 last Tuesday to confirm Campbell as the no. 2 official at the State Department.

Prior to his appointment, Campbell served as the coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs at the White House's National Security Council.

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US Accuses Russian Intel of Seeking to Undermine Western Health Projects in Africa

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The State Department accused Russian intelligence of pushing disinformation to target US and Western health initiatives in Africa, according to a new portion of allegations released on Monday.

In a fact sheet, the State Department claimed that Russian intelligence services are providing material support and guidance to African Initiative, a new news outlet focused on Africa-Russia relations. It accused the latter of spreading disinformation about the United States and

European countries.

"One of African Initiative's first major campaigns is to target US and Western health initiatives in Africa with dangerous health-related disinformation. The campaign seeks to undermine US-funded public health projects across Africa beginning with disinformation regarding an outbreak of a mosquito-borne viral disease," the fact sheet said.

The alleged campaign will spread "conspiracies" about Western pharmaceutical corporations, health-focused philanthropic efforts, and the spread of disease in West and East Africa, according to the State Department.

The African Initiative news outlet has local offices in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso and Bamako, Mali and is also hosting events on the ground, the State Department pointed out.

Some of its employees were recruited from the disintegrating enterprises of late Yevgeniy Prigozhin, the fact sheet said.

The State Department claimed that Russia's "disinformation campaign" is harming the countries it targets and the African continent as a whole and must "come to an immediate end." Western countries on multiple occasions have expressed their concerns over Russia's expanding diplomatic and military ties with Africa.

In response to such claims, Russian officials have said that the history of colonialism prevents the West from seeing Africa as an independent geopolitical player. Moscow, in contrast, views African nations as sovereign countries that decide on their own with whom they want to develop ties, the officials said.

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Biden Sees Netanyahu as Primary Obstacle to Reining in Israeli Tactics in Gaza - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden sees Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the primary obstacle to reining in Israel's military tactics in the war on Gaza, NBC News reported on Monday, citing five unnamed sources who are directly familiar with the president's remarks.

In recent private conversations, Biden has expressed frustrations with Netanyahu, whom he sees as "giving him hell" and impossible to deal with. On at least three instances, Biden has referred to him as an "asshole," three sources said.

At the same time, Biden has continually reiterated his support for Israel and publicly refrained from harsh remarks about Netanyahu and Israel's war on Gaza. In private conversations, he said he believes it would be otherwise counterproductive, the report said. He has also not made any meaningful policy shifts toward Israel or sought to rein in the US military aid fueling Israel's military operations.

Biden recently said that he believes Netanyahu is deliberately drawing out the war on Gaza so that he can remain in power, three sources said.

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Trump to Deport Millions of Undocumented Migrants If Reelected - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump will deport millions of illegal migrants if reelected, Axios reported, citing a source familiar with the plan.

Trump intends to mobilize Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration, federal prosecutors, the National Guard, as well as state and local law enforcement officers to crack down on immigration, the report said on Sunday.

Fast-track deportations would be expanded to apply to anyone who illegally crossed the border and could not prove they had been living in the US for more than two years, the report stated.

As of now they are reserved for recent crossers encountered near the border.

To avoid the multistep deportation process, Trump will purportedly use what the report says is an obscure section of the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts to immediately arrest and deport some migrants with criminal histories.

In addition, Trump plans to target sponsors of unaccompanied minors who came into the United States without their parents, the source said.

US Customs and Border Protection documented more than 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded. The Biden administration has also experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal crossings of the US southern border.

According to an ABC News-Ipsos poll out Sunday, more Americans believe that Trump would do a better job of tackling immigration and the situation at the border than incumbent President Joe Biden, 44% vs 26%.