

2/15/24 Thursday

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Israel Rejects Hamas Ceasefire Offer, Calls Movement's Demands 'Delusional'

Roughly 1,140 Israelis were killed during the October 7 attack by Hamas, who also captured around 250 hostages. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, more than 27,000 Palestinians have been killed as a result of the ground incursion into the enclave launched by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Israel has decided against sending a delegation to Cairo, Egypt to continue discussing a ceasefire deal with Hamas, more than four months into its campaign against the group in Gaza. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Hamas' proposal "delusional" again, echoing comments he made last week. "The day after is the day after Hamas. All of Hamas," he said at a press conference last week. "Continued military pressure is a necessary condition for the release of the hostages."

The Israeli delegation returned from talks in Cairo on Tuesday, Israel now says they have no plans to return. "Netanyahu insists that Israel will not give in to Hamas's delusional demands," the Prime Minister's office said. "A change in Hamas's position will allow the negotiations to advance."

According to a document seen by US media, the Hamas offer would see the return of all remaining hostages over a two-phase plan that includes an 18-week ceasefire.

Phase one would last 45 days and would see the return of all women, children, elderly and sick hostages in exchange for Palestinian women and children being held by Israel. As of November 2023, Israeli authorities hold nearly 7,000 Palestinians according to Israeli human rights organization HaMoked. More than 2,000 of those are held in "administrative detention," which means they have been detained without charges or a trial.

Around 250 Israelis were taken hostage by Hamas during their October 7 attack, roughly 130 remain after a prisoner swap in November.

The second phase, which would only begin once the conditions for the end of military operations by both sides have been set and calm has been restored, would see the return of the remaining male hostages while a peace deal is negotiated.

Last week, fresh off his talks with leaders in Qatar and Egypt, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters that "There are clearly nonstarters in what [Hamas has] put forward," but did not specify what those nonstarters were.

Israel spent an estimated \$7 million for a 30-second ad in the US during the Super Bowl, calling for the return of the hostages. At the same time, it launched its bombing campaign in Rafah, the only enclave left in Gaza where more than half of the Strip's 2.3 million residents have fled to at Israel's urging.

The Israeli hostage families forum, a group dedicated to advocating for the return of Israelis held by Hamas, decried the decision by Netanyahu's government to pull out of the Cairo talks, calling it a "death sentence" for the remaining hostages.

“It appears that some members of the cabinet decided to sacrifice the lives of the hostages [while] admitting it,” the group said in a statement. It promised to hold a barricade outside the Kirtya Defense Ministry headquarters in Tel Aviv.

The Biden administration has been publicly calling on Israel to hold off on its ground operation in Rafah until a “credible” plan to protect civilians in the area is laid out by Israel. However, US officials have made clear in their public statements, and media reports indicate privately as well, that the US has no plans to punish Israel or cut off aid to the country if it proceeds.

Rafah is less than 60 square miles and before the conflict was home to about 280,000 people, already one of the most densely populated cities in one of the world’s most densely populated regions. Its population has since swelled to over 1.5 million as Israeli forces continued to drive the Gazan population further south. The borders of Gaza have been shut, and Rafah sits at the southern border with Egypt, leaving civilians with no place left to go.

Multiple countries, including Turkiye, Egypt, France and Germany have urged Israel to halt its operation on Rafah.

Netanyahu said on US television earlier this week that the civilians can flee back to the North, which has been flattened by the Israeli military. In late December, the World Health Organization announced that there were no functioning hospitals left in northern Gaza.

“I would like to see an Israeli official point to a place in Gaza that is safe for the Palestinians to move to, because there are none,” Journalist and the editor of The Cradle Esteban Carrillo told Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Tuesday.

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41 UK Labour MPs Accepted Money From Pro-Israel Lobbying Groups

At least 41 of the UK Labour Party’s 197 sitting Members of Parliament (MPs) have accepted money from the Israel lobby, according to a report by an alternative UK media outlet.

More than £280,000 have been spent by the groups, paying for more than 50 visits to Israel by Labour MPs since 1999, [the report stated](#). It also noted that an additional £210,000 has been spent by individual pro-Israel lobbyists.

The funders include Labour Friends of Israel and its primary benefactor, Trevor Chinn, a multi-millionaire business tycoon who has long been a supporter of Israel and pro-Israeli groups in the UK.

Labour Friends of Israel (LFI) describes itself as a “Westminster based lobby group working with the British Labour Party to promote the State of Israel,” and currently counts 75 Labour MPs as supporters or officers a number that has increased even as Israel’s campaign in Gaza has intensified and that the International Court of Justice described as a “plausible” genocide in its preliminary hearing.

The organization’s UK branch is headed by former Labour MP Joan Ryan. It focuses on bringing MPs and Journalists to Israel for “fact finding” missions and often pays for the expenses of those trips.

At least one Labour MP, Margaret Hodge, has continued to accept money from the Israel lobby. Over a quarter of Chinn's £195,210 donations to Labour members were given to Keir Starmer, the leader of the Labour Party, during his campaign for that post. He did not reveal the donations until after his election. Eleven MPs inside Starmer's shadow cabinet have also accepted funds from Israeli lobbyists, the same outlet reported in November.

The Labour Party in the UK has not called for a ceasefire in Gaza and the UK has been one of Israel's staunchest supporters, arguably behind only the United States. Chinn has funded LFI and other pro-Israel groups since the 1980s. Other pro-Israel donors to Labour MPs include David Menton, the former director of the British Israel Communications and Research Centre and Red Capital, a private company headed by the former chairman of LFI, Jonathan Mendelsohn.

In the past two days, Starmer has suspended [two parliamentary candidates](#), Azhar Ali and Graham Jones, after they made comments that were critical of Israel and were accused of antisemitism.

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Biden's Dual 'Big Guy', Memory Scandals Will End His Presidency

On Tuesday, Hunter Biden's ex-business associate Tony Bobulinski testified to Congress that US President Joe Biden is "the Big Guy" who was mentioned in an email that discussed "remuneration packages" for six people as part of a business deal with a Chinese energy company. The email included a line that said "10 held by H for the big guy?"

According to US media, citing people familiar with the testimony, Bobulinski also said that he "[personally met](#)" [Joe Biden](#) in 2017 during the Milken Conference, just days before the email was sent.

It has long been suspected that President Biden was "the big guy" referred to in the email, but Bobulinski's testimony adds further evidence to back up that presumption. The elder Biden has repeatedly insisted that he did not discuss business with his son or his associates.

"It's hard to fathom who the big guy could be but Joe Biden. So we've known about this," independent journalist Dr. Jim Kavanaugh [told Sputnik's The Critical Hour](#) on Wednesday.

"[Bobulinski] confirms that the big guy is Biden, which means [...] [Joe] Biden was getting paid from his son's activities with [these Chinese businesses]."

This, combined with the President's cognitive problems that have become "[impossible to deny](#)" will cause him to step aside before this November's Presidential elections.

"He's not going to be the Democratic nominee," Kavanaugh asserted, adding that the only question left is "How much longer is he going to last as president?"

Kavanaugh noted that Bobulinski's testimony validates the IRS whistleblowers Gary Shapley and Joseph Ziegler, who claimed that politics caused the FBI to slowwalk the investigation into Hunter Biden. "It's a mess," he said. "But I don't know where the Democrats think they can go with this, and how they think they can hang on."

The election season with Biden will be a “fun ride” Kavanaugh said “trying to keep Biden out of the public spotlight enough so he won’t make a fool of himself, but in the public spotlight enough to make it seem like he’s still running the show,” adding that all the while Democratic leadership will be “trying to figure out what they’re going to go and with whom they’re going to replace him with.”

Kavanaugh also discussed reports from independent journalists Matt Taibbi and Michael Shellenberger that the CIA allegedly used foreign intelligence agencies to illegally spy on people working for the Donald Trump 2016 Presidential campaign.

“It’s election interference from one side that has been covered up and promoted as some kind of search for justice,” Kavanaugh asserted. “Now you have that side actually trying to prevent the same candidate [...] from running again, and they get away with it.”

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The Truth Shall Set You Free - Cartoon

On Tuesday, former Hunter Biden associate Tony Bobulinski testified under oath in front of Congress that Hunter’s father, President Joe Biden was, as most Americans already suspected, “the big guy” referred to in emails found on his infamous laptop that was abandoned in a Delaware repair shop years ago.

The 2017 email was discussing a business deal with a Chinese energy company and “remuneration packages.” In the email, another Hunter associate James Gillar wrote “10 held by H for the big guy?”

Bobulinski confirmed on Tuesday that [Gillar was referencing President Biden](#) and also asserted that he met with the then-vice president days after that email was sent.

Bobulinski also reiterated his claim that the President is lying to the American people when he says he never discussed overseas business dealings with his son.

“I’ve never spoken to my son about his overseas business dealings,” Joe Biden said in 2019 while campaigning for President.

The testimony adds to an already bad month for the president. Last week, special counsel Robert Hur announced that he would not seek charges against Joe Biden for his handling of classified documents, but cited the 81-year-old’s poor memory as a major factor why. “We have also considered that, at trial, Mr. Biden would likely present himself to a jury, as he did during our interview of him, as a sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory,” [the report read](#), noting that he seemed to forget which years he served as Vice President.

The report was embarrassing for the administration and has led to growing calls for Joe Biden to step aside. It did, however, [help him get out of a legal jam](#) and if the truth worked once, maybe it can help him – and his son – get out of this one.

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“He’s not going to be the Democratic nominee,” Independent journalist Dr. Jim Kavanaugh told Sputnik’s The Critical Hour on Wednesday, referring to President Joe Biden. The only question left, he added, is “How much longer is he going to last as president?”

Kavanaugh was discussing Hunter Biden business associate Tony Bobulinski’s testimony in front of congress that confirmed what many suspected all along, that President Biden, then serving as Vice President, was the big guy in the now infamous email found on Hunter Biden’s alleged laptop which included the line “10 held by H for the big guy?” while discussing a business deal with a Chinese energy company.

That, Kavanaugh said, along with cognitive issues that are now “impossible to deny,” will spell the end of the Biden presidency. “It’s a mess,” he said. “But I don’t know where the Democrats think they can go with this, and how they think they can hang on.”

The election season will be a “fun ride” Kavanaugh asserted, while we watch Democratic party leadership “trying to keep Biden out of the public spotlight enough so he won’t make a fool of himself, but in the public spotlight enough to make it seem like he’s still running the show,” while at the same time “trying to figure out [behind the scenes] what they’re going to go and with whom they’re going to replace him with.”

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At least 41 of the UK Labour Party’s 197 sitting MPs have accepted money from pro-Israeli lobbying groups and individuals, a report from Declassified UK has revealed.

Among the biggest names to accept money from the Pro-Israel groups include Keir Starmer, the head of the party who just pulled support from two parliamentary candidates after they criticized Israel and were accused of antisemitism.

The biggest benefactor was Labour Friends of Israel (LFI), which focuses on bringing MPs to the country on “fact finding” missions. Since the 1980s, it has been funded by Multi-millionaire business tycoon Trevor Chinn, who has also funded other pro-Israel groups and made individual donations.

Other major donors include David Menton, the former director of the British Israel Communications and Research Centre and Red Capital, a private company headed by a former chairman of LFI.

Starmer has not called for a ceasefire in Gaza, despite a poll from December showing 71% of the British public support a ceasefire, compared to only 12% who do not.

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Israel has decided against sending a delegation to Cairo, Egypt to continue discussing a ceasefire deal with Hamas, more than four months into its campaign against the group in Gaza.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Hamas' proposal "delusional" again, echoing comments he made last week. "The day after is the day after Hamas. All of Hamas," he said at a press conference last week. "Continued military pressure is a necessary condition for the release of the hostages."

The Israeli delegation returned from Cairo on Tuesday, and there are no plans for them to return to resume talks.

Hamas' offer would have seen the return of all women, children, sick and elderly Israeli hostages in exchange for women and children held by Israel during the first stage of the ceasefire. A second phase would include an exchange of the remaining hostages and a negotiated peace plan.

The Israeli hostage families forum, a group dedicated to advocating for the return of Israelis held by Hamas, decried the decision by Netanyahu's government to pull out of the Cairo talks, calling it a "death sentence" for the remaining hostages.

"It appears that some members of the cabinet decided to sacrifice the lives of the hostages [while] admitting it," the group said in a statement. It promised to hold a barricade outside the Kirtya Defense Ministry headquarters in Tel Aviv.

Read more in the full article.

A recent report on Tuesday shows that Israeli forces shot dead a Palestinian hostage whom they sent into al-Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis to warn others to evacuate. Footage that was shared online shows the man wearing protective clothing with his hands zip tied together.

"Gaza is a pen, this is what it was made for and I think that the fact is that the Israeli military seems pretty cowardly. They seem pretty inept, and I think that this is pretty standard order for them. They just want to line up targets," said Carey. "I think that people can't see how these crimes sort of repeat genocides of the past is really baffling to me, because it's so obvious that there's just no regard for civilian life, in this case."

According to video testimony by a Palestinian journalist, the man was arrested in the hospital before he was sent back with his message from Israeli forces. After delivering his message and following Israeli orders he was shot three times in cold blood, says the journalist.

On Sunday, President Joe Biden cautioned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu against a military operation in the city of Rafah if that operation did not include the evacuation of civilians in the area. Rafah may be one of the last safe zones for Palestinians fleeing the war with well over half of Gaza's population now living there in refuge.

"A military operation in Rafah should not proceed without a credible and executable plan for ensuring the safety of and support for the more than one million people sheltering there," the president reportedly told Netanyahu, signaling a growing impatience the White House feels towards the Israeli leader.

Hamas has warned Israel that an invasion of Rafah would "torpedo" hostage exchange negotiations. Egypt has also threatened to suspend its peace treaty with Israel if Israeli troops are sent into Rafah. The country is afraid that Palestinians may be pushed into the Sinai Peninsula which would then force Gaza's main aid supply route to close.

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'Secret for Six Years' - US Intel Spied on Trump Staff Before 2016 Russian Collusion Claims - Report

According to a joint report by three journalists, the US intelligence community inappropriately used its foreign allies to spy on Trump associates in order to circumvent a law that prohibits the CIA from domestic spying.

Three journalists recently published an [article](#) in which they allege that the United States Intelligence Community (IC), including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), illegally requested its English speaking counterparts—the "Five Eyes" including the US, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand--- to spy on former President Donald Trump advisors and campaign aides before he was elected to the White House in 2016.

Ray McGovern, who served as a CIA analyst for 27 years, returned to Sputnik's The Critical Hour and explained his experience with the "Russiagate" conspiracy, adding that the truth was hidden from Americans for more than six years.

"Not only did the [House Intelligence Committee] (HPSCI) authorize the Five Eyes, those are the cooperative security services of the US, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, all English-speaking folks, a vestige of World War Two. They authorized them to collect dirt on 26 Trump staffers," said McGovern.

"When we heard that there were charges of Russian hacking, of the DNC emails, the two technical directors, former, of the National Security Agency (NSA) were put to work looking at what the evidence might be, and their conclusion was quite clear," the CIA analyst explained. "If there was a hack, the NSA would have the evidence. So our publisher, Bob Perry, at that time, very courageously led this article off. Now, note the date was December 12th, 2016. So even before Trump was inaugurated, we told him and others that as this hysteria about Russia's

alleged interference in the election grows, a key mystery is why US intelligence would rely on 'circumstantial evidence,' when it has the truer capability for hard evidence.”

The CIA analyst then emphasized that there was no hacking involved in the incident.

“What we said here is 'all signs point to leaking, not hacking.' If hacking were involved, the National Security Agency would know it. And there were no sender and recipient, and they would be able to say more than simple 'circumstantial evidence.' The last thing to include here is that that was on December 12th, 2016,” said McGovern.

McGovern went on to explain that HPSCI interviewed the head of the cyber firm that looked at the accused DNC email hacking. Shawn Henry, said McGovern, was an experienced operative from the FBI and runs CrowdStrike, a cybersecurity firm. Adam Schiff, who was head of the House Intelligence from 2019 until 2023, had once asked Henry how the Russians orchestrated these “hacks”, said McGovern.

“Mr. Henry says, 'Actually, Mr. Schiff, [we don't have any evidence](#). We have no technical evidence at all that those emails were hacked by Russia or by anybody else.' Well, what does that mean? That means that on the 5th of December, 2017, that rumor or that concocted story about Russian hacking was convincingly dismissed. Why do Americans not know that? Because that has been kept secret, first of all, by Schiff and then by all the major media for six years, two months and 13 days,” said McGovern.

“So most people think, most people think that Russia hacked the DNC and is responsible for President Trump. Last thing I'll say here is because this is just fresh tonight. Putin is asked by a reporter, 'who do you prefer, Biden or Trump?' And he says, 'Well, Biden's a very predictable guy, he's an old professional. We prefer Biden,’” the analyst said, in reference to [President Vladimir Putin](#) recently stating that Russia prefers to see US President Joe Biden win a second term because he is more experienced and predictable than Trump.

“Why should that be so surprising?” asked McGovern. “You might remember me saying this on your program. I never thought that Putin or anyone else in Moscow had any incentive to help Trump win. Now we have proof that [they didn't help Trump win](#). And they don't want him to win this time either.”

Sputnik's Wilmer Leon then asked McGovern about a recent report in which [Amnesty International](#) once again requested that the US drop their charges against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Julia Hall, an Amnesty International expert on counter-terrorism and criminal justice in Europe, wrote that the “risk to publishers and investigative journalists around the world hangs in the balance. Should Julian Assange be sent to the US and prosecuted there, global media freedoms will be on trial, too.”

“Even if Joe Biden were prompted by what conscience he has left to do the right thing on [Julian Assange](#). He would be afraid to. He's got Homeland Security. He's got the national security state, otherwise known as the deep state, dead set against it,” explained McGovern. “He doesn't have the freedom to do that. And curiously enough, in his interview with Tucker Carlson, Mr. Putin made clear that the president doesn't call the shots in our country. And unfortunately, I have to agree with him on that.”

The three investigative journalists, Michael Shellenberger, Matt Taibbi, and Alex Gutentag, also reported that Putin actually preferred former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to former

President Donald Trump. Their report revealed that the HPSCI had information that showed Russians believing that Trump was unreliable and unsteady.

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'More Disgusting, More Vile': Palestinian Hostage Shot Dead After Delivering Message by IDF - Report

Negotiations over a possible cease-fire in Gaza appear to have come to a standstill, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to continue military attacks in Palestine. The death toll in Gaza has climbed to over 28,000 since October 7, the Gaza Health Ministry has said.

A recent [report](#) from the Middle East Eye on Tuesday shows that Israeli forces shot dead a Palestinian hostage, whom they had sent into al-Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis to warn others to evacuate. Footage that was shared online shows the man wearing protective clothing with his hands zip tied together.

According to video testimony by Palestinian journalist Mohammed Akram al-Helo, the man was detained and arrested in the hospital before he was sent back with his message from Israeli forces. After delivering his message and following Israeli orders he was shot three times in cold blood, says the journalist.

James Carey, the host of the Left is Dead podcast, said that this recent report shows that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) fear any form of Israeli opposition.

"These stories continue to get more disgusting and just more vile, and I think that the atrocity of the IDF, its inability, and its fear of Israel opposition is really on display here as they're using the same tactics they decry Hamas for, whether it's human shields or, you know, the arrests of thousands of Palestinian children that we've discussed in the past," said Carey, most likely referencing a [report](#) from two months ago that revealed Israel had inflated the death tolls of Israelis killed by Hamas, including the ages of those killed.

"As you know, they inflate these stories of children killed on October 7th or anything like that. And we find out later they're false. And they killed their own hostages trying to go into Gaza to supposedly save them. I think that the real, the projection coming off the IDF is just so strong at this point that if you can't see that this is exactly what they're about, you have to be intentionally missing it," he added.

During the interview, Sputnik's Garland Nixon noted that the Palestinian civilian was viewed by the IDF as "just another Palestinian". This thought echoes [statements](#) made by Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, he suggested. It was reported by the Middle East Eye that during a cabinet meeting, Ben-Gvir demanded the military shoot women and children in Gaza if they come near the Israeli border.

"Yeah, I think that's what makes this so disgusting. Because after the man is told to warn everyone in the hospital to evacuate, what do they do but start shooting people in the entryway of the hospital, at the gates of the hospital," said Carey.

Sputnik's Wilmer Leon also suggested that the Palestinians who were told to evacuate the hospital appeared to have been told to move into a particular direction or space so that they could be more easily killed, in a way that could be compared to herd culling.

"They just told them to essentially line up targets for them. And I think that you see this sort of it's a disgusting analog, but you see this sort of disgusting analog to say some of the horrible crimes of World War II, this sort of corralling and penning of people. And I think that you see this a lot in Palestine and obviously all of Gaza," Carey continued.

"Gaza is a pen, this is what it was made for and I think that the fact is that the Israeli military seems pretty cowardly. They seem pretty inept, in my opinion, and I think that this is pretty standard order for them. They just want to line up targets. And as you said, any Palestinian is a Palestinian. Therefore their life is not as valuable as an Israeli. I think that people can't see how these crimes sort of repeat genocides of the past is really baffling to me, because it's so obvious that there's just no regard for civilian life, in this case."

Per one [report](#), the al-Nasser hospital has been a lifeline for displaced Palestinians and an estimated 10,000 people are believed to be sheltering there. The young man, Abu Al-Ola, who had passed on the evacuation order was reportedly begged to not return to Israeli soldiers afterward by his own mother.

Al-Ola reportedly protested and explained that he had to return to Israeli soldiers after having been beaten, abused and threatened by them. He had also been told that if he did not leave the hospital doing so would "put all the civilians in danger". Al-Ola was then shot three times in the chest and abdomen while still inside the gates of the hospital. And despite the IDF telling displaced Palestinians where to exit the hospital in a "secure way" they still shot three of those evacuating under their orders.

The Israeli military has claimed that Hamas is using the hospital for military operations, but medical staff have repeatedly denied the allegations.

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Hypocrisy in Action: Israel Allowed to Participate in Eurovision While Russia Banned

Israel will be allowed to compete in this year's Eurovision, organizers say. The decision contradicts the song contest's decision to bar Russia following the launch of its military operation in Ukraine in February, 2022. The country ended up missing the contest in 2022 and 2023.

On Thursday, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU)---which owns and operates Eurovision---announced that they had conducted a review and made the decision to allow Israel to participate.

"The Eurovision song contest is a non-political music event and a competition between public service broadcasters who are members of the EBU. It is not a contest between governments," the EBU director general, Noel Curran, said in a statement.

“Our governing bodies ... did review the participants list for the 2024 contest and agreed that the Israeli public broadcaster Kan met all the competition rules for this year and can participate, as it has for the past 50 years,” Curran claimed.

In 2022, Eurovision banned Russia from participating in the contest. In response, Russia’s national broadcasters suspended their [memberships](#) from the EBU. At the time, the contest’s executive supervisor, [Martin Österdahl](#), said the contest’s values stood for “basic and ultimate values of democracy” as well as “solidarity, reaching out, and uniting through music”.

Noel Curran, the director general of the EBU, said that it was not the EBU’s place to make comparisons between the two governments.

“The Eurovision song contest is a non-political music event and a competition between public service broadcasters who are members of the EBU. It is not a contest between governments,” he said in a [statement](#).

“In the case of Russia, the Russian broadcasters themselves were suspended from the EBU due to their persistent breaches of membership obligations and the violation of public service values,” said Curran.

Eden Golan, a 20-year-old who grew up in Russia, will represent Israel in this year’s Eurovision after winning a domestic contest. The event will be held in Malmö, Sweden, in May.

In December, 2023, the Association of Composers and Lyricists of Iceland (FTT) called on the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service (RUV) not to participate in the 2024 Eurovision contest “unless Israel is denied participation in the competition on the same grounds as Russia in the last competition”.

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin announced that Moscow would stage its own singing contest with its “partner countries” as a replacement for Eurovision.

Israel’s attack on Hamas, first triggered by their attack on October 7, has resulted in the killings of more than 28,000 people in Gaza which has included mostly women and children, according to the Health Ministry in [Gaza](#).

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‘Here to Stay’: Higher Prices for Some Goods Permanent Reality of Biden Economy

The US President’s “Bidenomics” narrative was undermined by new economic data released yesterday.

President Joe Biden’s plans to tout his stewardship of the US economy during his reelection campaign [hit a snag yesterday](#) when it was revealed that year-on-year core inflation stood at 3.9% through January. Now one economist warns that the prices of many basic goods will likely remain high even if inflation slows.

“I believe that some prices are here to stay,” said Larrea Wealth Management CEO Aquiles Larrea during [an appearance on Sputnik’s Fault Lines program](#) Wednesday. “When you talk about your basic food staples... some of them have not risen in so long that sometimes they [companies] use these events as a catalyst to raise the pricing. If you look at the companies, you know, Wal-Mart, all the supermarkets, they had record quarters once inflation started.”

“So yeah, prices went up quite substantially,” Larrea noted.

Observers have increasingly [noted](#) that corporate greed plays a role in high inflation, with private businesses often using global events as an excuse to raise prices even beyond what's necessary to maintain profits during periods of economic disruption. [Countries](#) where the state plays a more active role in the economy, such as China and [Bolivia](#), maintained low inflation rates in the wake of the global pandemic.

But the United States has pursued a more hands-off, neoliberal economic policy since the late 1970s. That's when US Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker defiantly [declared](#) that “the standard of living of the average American has to decline.”

Since then US Presidents have attempted to manage inflation through the raising of interest rates. The practice has been observed to eventually tamp down inflation, but it also causes significant hardship for Americans seeking to [buy a home](#), take out a loan, or do any other kind of borrowing.

Larrea noted that higher interest rates have the potential to “snap us into a recession,” observing “that has happened before.”

Some observers predicted the Federal Reserve would seek to lower interest rates soon, but that's now seen as unlikely given the [recent data on inflation](#). Larrea claimed the adjustment could finally take place in August or September.

By then, the United States could inhabit an entirely different political reality as the proxy war in Ukraine fails and questions mount over [President Biden's age](#). If the Federal Reserve is finally able to lower interest rates, the occasion could represent a modest political victory for Biden. But Americans still must adjust to a permanently higher cost of living in any case.

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Ohio Congressman Part of Shadowy 'Cabal' Aiming to Destroy Russia, Says Scott Ritter

Former United Nations weapon inspector Scott Ritter says the timing of congressman Mike Turner's headline-grabbing announcement is not a coincidence.

Ohio Representative Mike Turner (R-OH) made waves this week when he warned of an alleged “[serious national security threat](#)” to the United States. The supposed risk was soon revealed to be Russian in nature, with a media cycle quickly emerging over the danger of alleged “space nukes” the country could detonate to disable US satellite communications.

The timing of the revelation raised eyebrows as Turner had visited Ukraine just days ago as part of a Congressional delegation in solidarity with the country's embattled President Volodymyr Zelensky. Turner's claims also come as the Biden administration struggles to continue funding the US-backed Ukrainian proxy war, with [key Republicans blocking](#) a compromise bill with aid for Kiev and Tel Aviv.

Former UN weapons inspector and whistleblower Scott Ritter joined [Sputnik's Fault Lines program on Thursday](#) to discuss the latest Russophobic hysteria, speculating Turner is part of a secret group of lawmakers and intelligence officials hellbent on undermining Russia at any cost.

“There's a cabal,” claimed Ritter, who was shunned in Washington after defying intelligence claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction during the George W. Bush administration. “Turner is... part of the cabal of people that view this Ukrainian conflict [as] not about defense of democracy – knock off this nonsense – it's about [defeating Russia](#), the strategic objective of the United States by using Ukraine as a proxy in a conflict against Russia.”

“You've heard everybody say this, 'we're killing them without losing a single American, we're weakening Russia, we're creating the conditions to destroy Russia, to collapse Russian society, to bring down [Russian President] Vladimir Putin,’” noted Ritter. “He believes that this is a good thing. He believes that's the direction the United States should be going. And he understands that [Ukraine right now is in freefall](#). Their military is being slaughtered on the battlefield. The Americans have no clue what's happening on the battlefield right now.”

Ukraine has faced declining fortunes in the Donbass conflict since the spectacular failure of the country's vaunted “counteroffensive” last year. In recent days Russian forces have achieved an advantage in the city of Avdeyevka, where for months they've endured a stalemate with Ukrainian troops. Shortages in ammunition have undermined Ukrainian reinforcements in the past weeks, allowing Russia to break down Kiev's fortifications.

“The Russians aren't losing anywhere,” said Ritter. “Maybe in the Black Sea they lost a ship, big deal, but on the ground, they're routing Ukraine. There's no ammunition left. There's nothing left. Ukraine has got nothing.”

“And he [Turner] knows he's looking at it, saying ‘it's over, game set match – Russia, they win,’” he added. “Therefore, we need to make people understand the consequences of a Russian victory.”

Ritter speculated that lawmakers like Turner are worried a victorious Russian army could proceed to “dominate Europe,” even though President Putin has noted the country has no strategic or ideological interest in invading NATO countries. Despite decades of Cold War paranoia, Russia-aligned Warsaw Pact nations never militarily threatened the West. On the contrary, it was the West that invaded Russia when the United States sent troops to undermine the Russian Revolution in 1918.

NATO also funded fascist groups throughout Europe in the decades to come as part of the secretive Operation Gladio program intended to counter the Soviet Union. More recently, NATO has played a part in Western military aggression in Libya, Afghanistan, and the former Yugoslavia.

More recently, the so-called “Russiagate” narrative [alleging Russian interference in US elections](#) has reactivated dormant [Russophobia](#) in American society, with lawmakers like Turner representing the legislative wing of US anti-Russia diehards.

“Turner just fantasizes about a dominant Russian army,” said Ritter. “Now, you layer over that this emerging capability of taking out America's communications network, and suddenly you have this ‘Russia that's out of control. We can't contain it.’”

“The best way to contain this Russia is to continue funding Ukraine, to keep Russia trapped in Ukraine, to keep the Ukrainians killing Russians,” the whistleblower added, describing the motivations of lawmakers like Turner. “That's what's behind this.”

While officials in Washington and Langley stoke fear of an alleged Russian threat, Ritter noted that the United States already dominates the world, with the country's vast satellite network demonstrating its projection of power around the globe.

“There's only one nation that projects power globally, that's America,” said Ritter.

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Bombshell: Obama CIA Colluded with Foreign Powers in Massive Spy Op Against Trump

New reporting suggests the lengths the US deep state went to to undermine former US President Donald Trump.

Since 2016, Democratic Party officials have accused former US President Donald Trump of illegally colluding with the Russian government as part of the discredited “Russiagate” narrative. Now, it appears such claims may represent a case of projection on the part of Trump’s critics. That’s the takeaway from a bombshell report by “Twitter Files” journalists Matt Taibbi and Michael Shellenberger this week that suggests that CIA officials under former US President Barack Obama worked through English-speaking intelligence partners to [spy on Trump’s presidential campaign](#).

The report alleges that the CIA under intelligence chief John Brennan worked with Five Eyes intelligence partners to circumvent legal restrictions against domestic spying by the agency. Five Eyes is an alliance of intelligence agencies in the United States, the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

Brennan’s CIA allegedly colluded with these foreign intelligence agencies to conduct surveillance on the Trump campaign. The spy agency also reportedly targeted prominent people associated with the campaign, operating from a list of 26 figures that intelligence assets could attempt to extract information from.

Attorney Steve Gill and analyst Daniel McAdams joined [Sputnik’s Fault Lines program](#) on Thursday to discuss the shocking revelations.

“It’s now becoming clear that despite all the claims that Trump didn’t know what he was talking about when he said that his campaign operatives were being spied on by the federal government – they were,” noted Gill.

“It is deplorable that we have a federal government that is spying on our citizens, not because of a legitimate national security interest, but because the deep state is trying to protect their interests rather than the interests of fair and free elections,” he added. “You know, they’re targeting their political opponent. This is the stuff that you see in third-world countries and allegedly in Russia, and it is despicable that it’s not getting the backlash from the public and the media that it deserves.”

Host Jamarl Thomas then cut to a clip of a 2020 appearance by Trump on the 60 Minutes television program.

“The biggest scandal was when they spied on my campaign,” said Trump to reporter Leslie Stahl. “They spied on my campaign.” An argument then ensued between Trump and Stahl over whether the alleged spying actually took place.

“He was right,” Thomas observed after playing the clip.

“Leslie Stahl should be fired by 60 Minutes today,” said Gill. “All these people that have collected their Emmys and their awards for their journalistic integrity and their successes, including those

that denied that the Russia hoax was being pushed by Hillary Clinton... at the very least they should be turning in their awards as they exit their positions of power in the media.”

Daniel McAdams, the executive director of the Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity, also commented on the bombshell report during the final hour of the program Thursday.

“The revelations about the spying on the [Trump campaign](#) now that have come out thanks to Matt Taibbi and Michael Shellenberger... [are] astonishing because it tells you that the US was not able to spy on Trump legally [through] the intelligence community,” McAdams said. “So they asked their allies, 'Hey, spy on someone and tell us what's going on.'”

Host Jamarl Thomas expressed skepticism towards certain elements of Taibbi and Shellenberger’s reporting, including the justification the FBI allegedly used to search Trump’s Mar-a-Lago estate. But McAdams said the spying against Trump is [typical of the abuses of the CIA](#) during its long and sordid history.

“The one thing about [CIA director] John Brennan is that I wouldn't put anything past him,” he said. “He has such a history of mendacity... I mean, the guy, he's an absolute thug.”

The US Central Intelligence Agency is responsible for a long list of crimes and abuses, including torture, assassinations, human experimentation, sexual abuse, infiltration of the US media, plane hijacking, drug trafficking, terrorism, domestic spying, foreign spying, spying on members of Congress, lying to Congress, human rights violations, recruitment of Nazis, illegal funding of death squads, and political interference and coups in Ukraine, Haiti, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Iraq, Bulgaria, Panama, Nicaragua, Libya, Morocco, Grenada, Angola, Australia, Guatemala, Bolivia, Greece, Chile, Uruguay, Ghana, Indonesia, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Brazil, the Congo, Ecuador, France, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Italy, Syria, Costa Rica, Iran, Albania, Korea, the Philippines, and China, among other countries, according to author William Blum who extensively documented such efforts in his acclaimed and eye-opening book Killing Hope.

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Donald Trump ‘Resonates With Average People’ With Criticism of NATO, Ukraine Funding

Trump’s outlandish statements make him a pariah in Washington but a hero for some blue collar voters.

Mainstream media Russophobia reached new heights this week as stories of alleged Russian “space nukes” dominated headlines.

The claims, fueled by [revelations](#) from Ohio Representative Mike Turner (R-OH), center around an alleged Russian capability to detonate a nuclear device in space, generating an electromagnetic pulse that could disable US satellite communications.

Turner’s warning rekindled anti-Russian sentiment on Capitol Hill just as Republicans seemed poised to sideline the latest aid package for Ukraine. Geopolitical consultant David Oualaalou claimed that’s not a coincidence during a Thursday appearance on [Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program](#).

“The timing of the release of this story seems interesting and I would say is – no pun intended – targeted like a laser to damaging Donald Trump,” said the international security analyst and founder of Global Perspective Consulting.

Trump critics have lambasted the former president in recent days after comments he made urging European countries to contribute more funding towards NATO. Trump has angered establishment figures by questioning the modern-day relevance of the Cold War military alliance.

“One of the things that I think would be humorous if it weren't so pathetic, over the last couple of days in response to Donald Trump's comments about the funding of NATO and all of that kind of thing is all of this outrage that we've been hearing from analysts and government officials – 'how dare Donald Trump encourage Russia to attack NATO' – which is not at all what he was doing,” said host Wilmer Leon.

“But they don't talk about the fact that the United States attacked a NATO member when it [blew up the Nord Stream pipeline](#),” he noted. “That was an act of war against Germany, and Article Five [of the NATO charter] would then require the other NATO countries to come to Germany's assistance in any manner that they saw fit.”

“So the United States, just like violating the peace treaty about war in space by creating the Space Force, they have already violated Article Five, but none of the analysts want to point that out.”

Oualaalou expressed pessimism over the prospect of accountability for the massive act of terrorism and environmental destruction, noting that [Sweden has officially closed their investigation into the matter](#).

Host Garland Nixon speculated that Trump's criticism of the US foreign policy establishment actually endears him to average voters, who care little about Washington officials' sacred cows. “Donald Trump says things that upset the machine, the foreign policy blob,” noted Nixon. “They put it on all of the front pages... something about NATO thinking that it's going to hurt him. And most American people look at it and they're like, 'NATO is kind of a pain in the neck, and we're sending them a lot of money. Why should we do this anyway?’”

“They don't understand that in a way, they're helping Donald Trump because the American people, the average working-class people, don't see NATO as something that we got to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on. They're like, 'man, I'm trying to handle my own business and I can't afford it.’”

“They don't hear the applause that he receives at his rallies when he makes these outrageous statements, they don't hear that,” added Leon.

“You're absolutely correct,” agreed Oualaalou. “It's spot on. It's because the establishment does not want the American people to sort of absorb what is Donald Trump.”

“When it comes down to the issue of NATO, why are we carrying the burden at the expense of an average American person?” Oualaalou asked.

“[Trump] resonates with the average people because he speaks the language that the average Joe, average Jane will understand,” he added, claiming Americans are more likely to be concerned about recent [inflation statistics](#) than Washington military priorities. “And frankly, yeah, many of us are asking, what is NATO for? What the heck is going to over 31 members? What for? And yes, we are funding the bill for that.”

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov [weighed in on Turner's claims](#) of a "serious threat to national security" Thursday, calling the accusation an attempt "to encourage the Congress to vote for a bill allocating money to Ukraine."

"I cannot comment on that at all," said Peskov. "Let's wait for the briefing to see if there will be any information. But it is obvious that the White House is trying... to get Congress to vote on a bill to give money [to Ukraine]."

"What kind of tricks the White House will resort to, so to speak, well, we will see," the spokesman said.

A Russian Soyuz 2.1a rocket carrying the Progress MS-26 cargo spacecraft, which will deliver more than 2.5 tonnes worth of cargo to the International Space Station (ISS), launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, according to a live broadcast by Russian state space corporation Roscosmos.

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Nine minutes after the liftoff, the rocket will put the spacecraft into Earth orbit, and the Progress spacecraft will separate from the rocket's third stage and begin its independent flight to the ISS.

Russia's new space freighter will fly the traditional two-day route and is scheduled to dock the station on February 17 at 9:12 a.m. Moscow time (06:12 GMT). The spacecraft will spend a total of 180 days in space.

The spacecraft will deliver to the station more than 2.5 tonnes of cargo, including nearly 1.5 tonnes worth of hardware and equipment for the station's systems and scientific experiments, clothing, food, medical and sanitary supplies for the ISS crew, 580 kilograms of fuel, 420 kilograms of drinking water and 40 kilograms of nitrogen.

The space freighter also carries consumables for the new scientific experiment dubbed "Fullerene" to grow fullerite crystals in the Nauka module — the third crystalline form of carbon, which is a new class of semiconductors. Progress MS-26 will also carry equipment for the new scientific experiment Orbita-MG to create a monitoring system that will find cracks and other leaks in the station's hull.

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"The best way to contain this Russia is to continue funding Ukraine, to keep Russia trapped in Ukraine, to keep the Ukrainians killing Russians. That's what's behind this," former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter told Sputnik's Fault Lines program.

The analyst alleged that US Representative Mike Turner is part of a deep state “cabal” of lawmakers and intelligence officials who want to destroy Russia at any cost.

“Turner is... part of the cabal of people that view this Ukrainian conflict [as] not about defense of democracy – knock off this nonsense – it's about defeating Russia, the strategic objective of the United States by using Ukraine as a proxy in a conflict against Russia,” Ritter emphasized.

The discussion comes amidst claims by Turner that Russia possesses the capability to knock out US satellite communications, with observers saying the revelation is likely timed to convince GOP legislators to back further military funding for the Ukrainian proxy war. Russia has dominated Kiev’s forces on the battlefield in recent months, with a lack of ammunition contributing to the decimation of Ukraine’s Nazi army.

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Bombshell: Obama CIA colluded with foreign powers in a massive spy op against Trump

“The US was not able to spy on Trump legally [through] the intelligence community. So, they asked their allies, 'Hey, spy on someone and tell us what's going on,’” analyst Daniel McAdams told Sputnik’s Fault Lines program, commenting on the recent report that suggests CIA officials worked through foreign intelligence partners to spy on Trump’s presidential campaign.

Since 2016, Democratic Party officials have accused former President Trump of collusion with Russia as part of the discredited “Russiagate” narrative, but now it appears such claims may be a case of projection.

“It is deplorable that we have a federal government that is spying on our citizens, not because of a legitimate national security interest, but because the deep state is trying to protect their interests rather than the interests of fair and free elections,” attorney Steve Gill said in response to the report.

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As establishment figures in Washington stoke Russophobia with hysterical claims of Russian space nukes, security analyst David Oualaalou noted the timing of the “revelations” is likely intended to damage Donald Trump after the former president made statements questioning the relevance of NATO.

"The timing of the release of this story seems interesting and I would say is – no pun intended – targeted like a laser to damaging Donald Trump," Oualaalou told Sputnik's The Critical Hour program.

Trump has angered establishment figures by challenging Ukraine funding and other Washington foreign policy shibboleths. However, host Garland Nixon said establishment outrage against Trump likely helps instead of harms him.

"They don't understand that in a way, they're helping Donald Trump because the American people, the average working-class people, don't see NATO as something that we got to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on," Nixon emphasized.

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Kenyan President to Visit US in May to Discuss Trade, Security Cooperation - White House

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - Kenyan President William Ruto will pay a state visit to the United States in May to discuss cooperation on trade, technology, climate and security, the White House said on Friday.

"President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden will host President William Ruto and First Lady Rachel Ruto of the Republic of Kenya for a State Visit to the United States on May 23, 2024," Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement.

The two leaders will discuss ways to enhance cooperation in various areas including trade, technological innovation, climate, health, and security.

The visit will strengthen the two countries' shared commitment to "advance peace and security, expand our economic ties, and stand together in defense of democratic values," the statement said.

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US Global Leadership Based on American Strategic Interest, Not Charity Virtues - Harris

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – The US's "global leadership" stems not from the virtue of charity, but rather from the country's strategic interests, US Vice President Kamala Harris said at the Munich Security Conference in Friday.

"Please, do understand our approach is not based on the virtues of charity. We pursue our approach because it is in our strategic interest," Harris said. "I strongly believe America's role of global leadership is to the direct benefit of the American people".

She also reaffirmed the US's commitment to pursue global engagement in upholding the so-called international rules and norms, as well as domestic and worldwide democratic values.

The vice president stated that the US leadership "keeps our homeland safe."
She also expressed belief that the commitment to build and sustain alliances has helped America to "become the most powerful and prosperous country in the world."

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Mayorkas to Meet Chinese Counterpart in Vienna for Talks on Counternarcotics - DHS

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas will meet his Chinese counterpart in Vienna on Sunday for talks on counternarcotics cooperation and efforts to counter child sexual exploitation, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Friday.

"On Sunday, February 18, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas will travel to Vienna, Austria to meet with People's Republic of China (PRC) State Councilor and Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong," DHS said in a press release.

The ministers will follow up on the inaugural meeting of the US-PRC Counternarcotics Working Group and will also discuss "efforts to counter child sexual exploitation and abuse, and other law enforcement priorities," it added.

The meeting comes after the US House of Representatives on Tuesday impeached Mayorkas over the Biden administration's handling of the migrant crisis at the US southern border.

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Blinken to Meet With Lula, Milei During Tour of Region Next Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet with Brazilian President Luiz Lula da Silva and Argentine President Javier Milei during a trip to the region from February 20-23, the State Department said on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Brasilia and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Buenos Aires, Argentina, February 20-23," spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a statement.

While in Brasilia, Blinken is scheduled to meet with Lula to address bilateral and global affairs, the statement said. The secretary will reaffirm Washington's support for Brazil's G20 presidency, the US-Brazil Partnership for Workers Rights, clean energy transition collaboration, and commemorations for the bicentennial of bilateral diplomatic relations.

In Rio de Janeiro, Blinken will participate in the G20 Foreign Ministers Meeting. The secretary also intends to discuss international efforts in support of Haiti.

In Argentina, Blinken will meet with Milei to discuss bilateral and global issues such as sustainable economic growth, shared commitments to human rights and democratic governance, as well as critical minerals, trade and investment enhancement, according to the

statement.

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Harris Claims Russia Responsible for Navalny's Death, US Will Have to Say More Later

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris claimed on Friday that Russia is responsible for the death of opposition politician Alexei Navalny, and Washington will have to say more on the matter later.

"This is of course terrible news which we are working to confirm," Harris said at the Munich Security Conference, offering condolences to Navalny's family and noting that his wife Yulia is at the conference today.

"if confirmed, this would be a further sign of Putin's brutality, whatever story they tell, let us be clear, Russia is responsible. And we will have more to say on this later," Harris claimed.

Navalny died earlier on Friday at an Arctic prison colony where he was serving a 19-year-term on fraud and extremism charges.

He felt unwell after a walk and almost immediately lost consciousness, the prison authorities said. All necessary resuscitation measures were carried out, but to no avail, with medics pronouncing him dead, the authorities said. The causes of the death are being established.

The Russian Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) is inspecting everything related to the death of Navalny and there is no need for additional instructions, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. The causes of the death should be established by doctors, he said.

FSIN has dispatched a commission to the prison in connection with Navalny's sudden death. The Russian Investigative Committee's office in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Area has launched a procedural investigation.

The immediate reaction of Western leaders to Navalny's death is "self-exposing," as they have made their conclusions before a forensic examination is completed, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

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Guterres Stresses Desperate Need for 'Just Peace' for Ukraine, Russia, World

UNITED NATIONS, February 16 (Sputnik) - A just and sustained peace is desperately needed for Ukraine, Russia, and the world, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Thursday.

"We desperately need a just and sustained peace for Ukraine, for Russia and for the world, but the peace in line with the UN charter and international law, which establishes the obligation to respect the territorial integrity of sovereign states," Guterres said at the Munich Security Conference.

Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Russian and

Ukrainian delegations engaged in several rounds of peace talks in the early days of the conflict. In October 2022, Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a decree stating that Kiev could not hold peace talks as long as President Vladimir Putin is in power in Russia.

In November 2022, Zelenskyy unveiled his 10-point peace initiative dubbed a "peace formula." It included an all-for-all prisoner swap with Russia, security guarantees for Ukraine and a return to the pre-2014 borders. Moscow has said it is open to peace negotiations as long as Kiev recognizes the territorial gains Russian forces have made since the launch of the special military operation.

President Putin said earlier this week that the only thing to regret is that Russia did not start active actions in Ukraine earlier. Putin has pointed out that Ukraine started the war in 2014, and Russia's objective is now to bring it to an end.

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US to Consult With Allies After Death of Navalny in Prison - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Friday blamed Russia for the death of Alexei Navalny in prison and said the United States would consult with its allies about a possible response.

"Russia is responsible for this. We'll be talking to many other countries concerned about Alexei Navalny, especially if these reports bear out to be true," Blinken said in remarks at the Munich Security Conference in Germany.

Navalny died earlier on Friday at an Arctic prison colony where he was serving a 19-year-term on fraud and extremism charges.

He felt unwell after a walk and almost immediately lost consciousness, the prison authorities said. All necessary resuscitation measures were carried out, but to no avail, with medics pronouncing him dead, the authorities said. The causes of the death are being established.

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Houthis Launch Missile Into Gulf of Aden Toward UK-Owned Bulk Carrier - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The Houthis have launched an anti-ship ballistic missile toward UK-owned bulk carrier MV Lycavitos, leading to "very minor damage," the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Friday.

"On Feb. 15, at approximately 4:30 p.m., an anti-ship ballistic missile was launched from Houthi controlled areas of Yemen into the Gulf of Aden," CENTCOM said. "The missile was headed toward MV Lycavitos, a Barbados-flagged, UK-owned and operated bulk carrier. The ship reported no injuries but very minor damage in the attack and continued its voyage."

On the same day, US forces successfully carried out two strikes against three mobile anti-ship cruise missiles in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, the command said.

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Russia to Organize UNSC Meeting on Impact of Measures on Counterterrorism Efforts - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 16 (Sputnik) - Russia to organize a less formal meeting of the UN Security Council on February 20 on the impact unilateral measures have on counterterrorism efforts, the Russian Deputy to the UN Maria Zabolotskaya said.

"In this regard, Russia is convening an Arria formula meeting of Council members to discuss the important issue of the impact of unilateral coercive measures on counterterrorism efforts," Zabolotskaya told the UN Security Council members during a meeting on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) (terrorist group banned in Russia) to international peace and security. "This event will be held on February 20."

Arria formula is a less formal style of a meeting of the UN Security Council members. It allows for a less tense atmosphere and all members are sitting in a normal conference room instead of a UN Security Council Chamber.

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Terrorism Can Not Be Eradicated if West Continues Using It to Cause Tensions - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, February 16 (Sputnik) - Eradicating terrorism may be impossible as long as terrorists are utilized by the Western countries to topple governments or wage proxy wars, Russian Deputy Envoy to the United Nations Maria Zabolotskaya said.

"We are convinced that it will not be possible to eradicate this global problem as long as terrorists and extremists are used by a number of Western states to overthrow regimes that have fallen out of favor in proxy wars, or in other ways to achieve their general political goals," Zabolotskaya said during a UN Security Council meeting on Thursday.

The Russian diplomat said the presence of terrorist groups clearly indicates the persistence

and growth of tensions in the Middle East as well as in certain parts of Africa and Afghanistan. States experiencing significant interference in their internal affairs, under any pretext, is usually followed by a destruction of their statehood, Zabolotskaya said.

The collective West playing games such as the alleged War on Terror and attempts to overthrow leaders and governments who have fallen out of favor have left an indelible bloody mark on these regions, which is clearly visible in the UN Secretary General's reports, she said. Moscow has said that the regime in Ukraine utilizes methods practiced by the Islamic State terror group (outlawed in Russia).

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US Charges Ex-FBI Informant for Allegedly Lying About Biden, Burisma Deal - DOJ

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - Federal prosecutors have charged a former FBI informant for allegedly lying about President Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden's ties to the Ukrainian energy company Burisma, the US Justice Department said.

"Today, a federal court unsealed a two-count indictment returned by a federal grand jury in the Central District of California charging Alexander Smirnov, 43, with making a false statement...and creating a false and fictitious record...for statements he made that were recorded in an official record of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) known as a Form 1023," the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

Smirnov provided false derogatory information to the FBI about "Public Official 1, and Businessperson 1, the son of Public Official 1, in 2020, after Public Official 1 became a presidential candidate," the release said.

"Businessperson 1" was a member of Burisma's executive board, which was a fact that was already publicly known, the release said.

Smirnov allegedly lied to federal investigators that between 2015 and 2016, Burisma was lobbying Hunter Biden to have his father, then-vice president, Joe Biden protect them from "all kinds of problems," and that they each received \$5 million from the Ukrainian energy firm, the release said.

The issues Burisma faced, according to Smirnov, pertained to a criminal investigation being conducted by the then-Ukrainian Prosecutor General into Burisma. Smirnov allegedly falsely claimed Burisma wanted Joe Biden to use his influence as vice president to help them deal with the then-Ukrainian Prosecutor General, the release added.

Smirnov was arrested on Wednesday at the Harry Reid International Airport in Las Vegas after his arrival to the United States from overseas and faces up to 25 years in prison if convicted, according to the release.

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Soaring US National Debt to Reach Double Annual GDP by 2050 - Official Report

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US national debt will double annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in a quarter century and will grow faster than the domestic economy, driven by huge and growing Medicare and Social Security deficits, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) warned in a new report.

"The federal government faces an unsustainable long-term fiscal path that poses serious economic, security, and social challenges if not addressed," the report said on Thursday.

The government's accumulated debt is projected to grow faster than the entire economy, reaching 200% of GDP by 2050 if revenue and spending policies are unchanged, the report states.

"Large budget deficits drive the growing debt, as Medicare and Social Security spending outpace revenue," the GAO said.

Government interest spending as a share of GDP will reach an all-time high by 2030, in part due to rising interest rates, the report added.

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US Navy Awards \$11Mln Engineering Contract on Weapon Testing at China Lake - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - New Directions Technologies has won a more than \$111 million US Navy contract to supply engineering support services for missiles and sensor systems for weapons research and engineering at China Lake testing grounds, the Defense Department announced.

"New Directions Technologies [of] Ridgecrest, California is awarded an \$111,409,699 ...contract[that] provides engineering support services for system, test, and transition engineering and management analysis," the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

The company will provide engineering and expertise for weapons systems such as missiles and sensor systems for the Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division (NAWCWD) Research and Engineering Department, the release said.

"Work will be performed in China Lake, California (70%); and Point Mugu, California (30%)," the release added.

The contract is scheduled to operate for five years and is expected to be completed in February 2029, according to the release.

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Ukraine National Pleads Guilty to Malware Online Theft - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - A Ukrainian national has pleaded guilty in a US federal court to theft in the amount of multiple millions of dollars by infecting computers with malicious software, the US Justice Department announced.

"Vyacheslav Igorevich Penchukov was a leader of two prolific malware groups that infected thousands of computers with malicious software," the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

The two criminal groups stole millions of dollars from their victims and attacked a major hospital with ransomware, leaving it unable to provide critical care to patients for over two weeks, the release said.

"Before his arrest and extradition to the United States, the defendant was a fugitive on the FBI's most wanted list for nearly a decade," the release added.

Penchukov, also known as Vyacheslav Igoravich Andreev and Tank, 37, of Donetsk, helped lead a wide-ranging racketeering enterprise and conspiracy that infected thousands of business computers with malicious software known as "Zeus" beginning in May 2009, according to the release.

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US to Buy 2.95Mln Barrels for Oil Reserve From 4 Companies at \$229.5Mln - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has finalized with four companies the purchase of 2.95 million barrels of crude oil at \$229.5 million to help refill the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR), the US Energy Department announced.

"As of February 15, 2024, the following contracts for the purchase of 2.95MMB, totaling \$229,540,350.00, have been finalized," the Energy Department said on Thursday.

The four companies contracted to provide crude oil for the deal were Atlantic Trading & Marketing, Inc, which would make available 1.5 million barrels, Macquarie Commodities Trading US (800 million), ExxonMobil Oil Corporation (350 million) and BP Products North America (300 million).

The Biden administration has announced various installments of crude purchases in recent months aimed at refilling the SPR, which saw outflows totaling more than 200 million barrels over the past two years.

Concerns of oversupply have brought US crude prices sharply lower in recent months from the highs of 2023. The Department of Energy said this has been beneficial to the Biden administration's plans to refill the reserve.

The Energy Department said that since it began filling out purchase orders for the SPR last year, a total of 20.13 million barrels of oil was purchased at an average price of \$76.12 per barrel.

Thursday's deal puts a barrel acquired by the Energy Department at the price level of \$78.

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ANALYSIS - Political Grandstanding Will Lead Nowhere Despite Biden's Incapacity to Do Job - Experts

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The call by a US official for Vice President Kamala Harris to invoke the 25th Amendment and take over from President Joe Biden was just a piece of political grandstanding that will lead nowhere despite Biden's evident incapacity to do the job, prominent US legal and constitutional scholars told Sputnik.

West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey on Tuesday called on Harris to invoke the 25th Amendment, claiming that the president is not physically able to perform his duties of the job.

Morrisey's call would not even dent Democratic support for Biden to stay in office, both in the administration and in Congress, University of Illinois Professor of International Law Francis Boyle said on Wednesday.

"[Morrisey's proposal] won't go anywhere," Boyle said.

The Democrats would be able to invoke precedent in ignoring Morrisey, a Republican, and other political critics of Biden because the Republicans themselves ignored and defied far more numerous calls for former President Donald Trump to stand down during his tumultuous presidency, Boyle said.

"[The proposal] is what the Democrats suggested in 2017," Boyle said in reference to the proposal to remove Trump.

Former State Department official James Carden said that Morrisey was just indulging in empty rhetoric and that he had no legal standing for his comments to be taken seriously.

"It seems like political grandstanding. In the relevant text of the 25th Amendment, there is no place for states' attorney generals," he said.

Carden agreed with Boyle that Biden and his cabinet officers would just treat Morrisey's remarks as irrelevant.

"I think the Biden administration can and will ignore it," Carden said.

The Biden administration remained obsessed above all with sending scores of billions of dollars of aid to prop up the Zelenskyy regime in Ukraine and the Israeli government as it waged war against the Palestinians and had no interest at all in any other issues, Carden said.

Biden and his lieutenants "ignore most everything else except calls for more money from Tel Aviv and Kiev; then and only then does the administration and its leader awaken from slumber," Carden added.

BIDEN TO IGNORE POTENTIAL CHALLENGE UNDER 25TH AMENDMENT

Biden would be able to get away with this policy because the wording of the 25th Amendment itself was so vague, fearful and confusing, US constitutional historian and political commentator Dan Lazare said.

"The first thing to know about the 25th Amendment is that it's a God-awful mess. It's a lawyer's document in the worst sense in that it's filled with loopholes, qualifications and special requirements that render it virtually useless," Lazzare said.

According to the wording of the amendment, Harris could take over if she was able to persuade

a majority of the cabinet to go along, Lazzare said.

However, if Biden objects, "all he has to do is 'transmit [to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives his written declaration that no inability exists, whereupon he shall resume the powers and duties of his office,'" Lazzare said.

Even if Harris and her supporters maintained the position that the president really was unfit to hold office, Congress still would have 20 or 22 days - the language is unclear - to decide the issue, he said.

"But they must do so via a two-thirds vote in both houses. This, as we all know, is impossible. So if Biden continues fighting such a verdict - and I have no doubt he will since he's very stubborn - the amendment is a dead letter," Lazzare said.

In that case, Biden would be back in office, and the situation would be even worse than it was before, Lazzare said.

"Knowing the pitfalls, I'm certain that Harris will not go down this road unless Biden is absolutely catatonic. Whether it will because she's savvy, timid, unimaginative, or what is unknown. But the bottom line is she won't do it," he said.

NO SIGNIFICASNT LEGAL PRECEDENT

There was no danger of a precedent being set to remove a sitting president because none would be established, Lazzare said

"America is therefore stuck with a president who is legally incompetent in the view of Robert K. Hur. The only solution is to vote him out of office in November," he said.

Whoever may be Biden potential successor would likely be even more incompetent and irresponsible than he had been Lazzare said.

In that case, "'We the People will go from the frying pan to the fire. Nice, eh?" Lazzare added.

Morrisey's comments would set no significant legal precedent to remove a sitting president from office, California State University Emeritus Professor of Political Science Beau Grosscup said.

"Does this set a legal precedent? No. It is a political stunt intended to keep Biden's mental acuity in the public eye," Grosscup said.

However, Trump's supporters across the United States were guaranteed to agree with Morrisey and would step up the rhetoric to further delegitimize Biden, thus intensifying and prolonging the ongoing US political crisis, Grosscup added.

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US House Breaks Until February 28 Without Advancing Ukraine, Israel Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will break from legislative business until February 28, without having advanced any legislation to provide assistance to Ukraine and Israel.

House lawmakers adjourned on Thursday for a President's Day break, before beginning consideration of legislation to provide aid to Ukraine and Israel, such as a \$95 billion supplemental funding bill passed by the US Senate earlier this week.

US Congressman Don Bacon reportedly said that he intends to introduce a new bipartisan bill

with foreign aid and border security measures, which cut some economic and humanitarian assistance included in the US Senate bill.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson has said that he has no plans to bring the Senate bill to the House floor for a vote.

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Tucker Carlson's Interview With Putin Was 'Tremendous Breakthrough' -Head of US Delegation

UNITED NATIONS, February 16 (Sputnik) - The interview of American journalist Tucker Carlson with Russian President Vladimir Putin was a breakthrough and Americans can see something else other than the standard narrative, Chair of the US Delegation to the World Youth Festival Caleb Maupin said.

"If you look at how important that interview that Tucker Carlson was able to do with the Russian president was it was a tremendous breakthrough," Maupin said in a briefing at the UN on Thursday. "Because that will be the only time that American young people will ever hear anything other than the standard American media line about the war in Ukraine."

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. The video has been viewed 201 million times on X. On YouTube, the video has been viewed over 16.8 million times.

Prior to the interview release, Carlson faced criticism from his Western colleagues for the very fact of sitting down with the Russian leader.

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Two Dead, One Critically Hurt in Quebec Apartment Stabbing - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - Two women were fatally stabbed, and a third severely injured in an apartment west of Montreal, CBC reported on Thursday.

According to the report, the Surete du Quebec (SQ) announced two women were declared dead at an armed assault scene in Vaudreuil-Dorion, with a third, a 70-year-old woman, critically wounded and hospitalized in Montreal.

A 44-year-old man was apprehended by police at the scene as the suspect, the report said.

The report added that the suspect, suffering from minor injuries, was hospitalized and is scheduled to be interrogated by investigators later in the day.

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

Chair of US Delegation to World Youth Festival Says Expects to Send 15 Members to Sochi

UNITED NATIONS, February 16 (Sputnik) – Members of the US delegation expect to have 15 representatives for the World Youth Festival in Sochi, Russia, Chair of the US Delegation to the World Youth Festival .

"We have 15 Americans total at the festival," Maupin told reporters during a press briefing at the United Nations on Thursday.

He also did not rule out that there would be several older, not young, Americans who would be participating in the forum as invited speakers.

World Youth Festival will take place in Sochi from March 1– 7, 2024. Organizers are expecting, that over 20,000 Russian and foreign experts in sports, media, social projects, science, and other areas will participate in the meeting.

Maupin stressed that there would be several delegations from European states, but he did not provide details.

The head of the US team warned that three of its members – Omali Yeshitela, Penny Joanne Hess, and Jesse Nevel were already indicted for allegedly spreading so-called "Russian propaganda".

"We, are prepared for US government harassment. We expect such arrests," he said.

The indictment, imposed by the US Department of Justice almost a year ago, is a clear violation of the fundamental freedoms, Maupin added.

"This indictment should be a deep concern to any values of freedom of speech, freedom of the assembly, and democratic traditions our country is known for," he said.

The festival represents a chance to start a dialogue and search for mutual understanding regardless of nationality, political views, or cultural peculiarities, according to its website.

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US Committed to Avoid ISIS Return, Working with Iraq, Kurdish Militias – Deputy UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 16 (Sputnik) – The United States is committed to preventing the return of the Islamic State (ISIS, banned in Russia) and will continue its joint work with the Iraqi military and Kurdish militias, US Deputy Ambassador to the UN Robert Wood said on Thursday.

"The United States will continue to work with the Iraqi security forces, including Kurdish Peshmerga forces, to build up their capabilities and prevent an ISIS resurgence," Wood said during a UN Security Council meeting on international threats to peace linked to terrorism.

The Deputy Ambassador, however, noted that while the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS works with regional partners in addressing threats posed by the organization, Iran-allied militias have carried out over a170 attacks on them, "undermining" efforts to prevent the terrorist groups from reconstituting.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani told the Wall Street Journal in mid-January that the

US-led coalition present in Iraq to fight the Islamic State wasn't needed anymore, and that he was no longer worried that the departure of the coalition forces would undermine Iraq's military capabilities.

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin later informed that Washington and Baghdad would begin working group meetings related to the future of US-led Coalition and military presence in the country.

The Department of Defense however said that launching the commission did not mean the start of negotiations between the two countries about the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.

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US Conducted Cyber Attack on Suspected Iranian Spy Ship - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The United States conducted a covert operation against an Iranian military ship named MV Behshad that had been collecting intelligence on cargo vessels in the Red Sea, NBC reported on Thursday, citing three US officials.

Intended to prevent the ship from sharing intelligence with Houthi rebels, whose recent attacks have been rising in the Red Sea, the operation took place last week as part of the Biden Administration's response to last month's attack on a Jordanian airbase that claimed the life of three US soldiers, the report said.

The covert cyberattack was intended to stop the ship from sharing information it was collecting with Houthi rebels in Yemen responsible for firing missiles and drones at cargo ships attempting to navigate the Red Sea. According to the report, US officials had reason to believe that the ship's intelligence was used by Houthi rebels to better triangulate the locations of their targets.

The Houthi movement, which controls large parts of northern and western Yemen, vowed in November 2023 to attack any ships associated with Israel until it halts military actions in the Gaza Strip. This led US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to announce the creation of a multinational operation to secure navigation in the Red Sea. US and UK forces later launched major strikes against Houthi positions in a bid to degrade the rebels' ability to target commercial vessels.

Iran denies sending weapons to the Houthis. It has also rejected the West's allegations of Iran's involvement in Houthi attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea, saying that the group is acting on its own.

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US Fabricated Claim That Putin Preferred Trump Over Clinton in 2016 Election - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The US intelligence community fabricated claims that Russian President Vladimir Putin preferred Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US

presidential election, journalists Michael Shellenberger, Matt Taibbi and Alex Gutentag reported on Thursday.

An Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) published by the US Director of National Intelligence in January 2017 purported that Putin wanted Trump to win the election.

However, the assessment's authors fabricated the intelligence on the claim, the report said, citing sources close to a House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI) investigation into the origins of the Trump-Russia scandal.

The findings of the HPSCI investigation are being blocked from release, according to the report. Evidence indicates that Putin actually preferred Clinton, the report said. The House investigators found that US intelligence analysts had information about Russians calling Trump unreliable and unsteady, the report said.

In contrast, intelligence indicates that Russians viewed Clinton as manageable and likely to continue existing US policies, the report said.

Former CIA Director John Brennan led the attempt to frame Trump as Putin's preferred candidate in the ICA, the report said. The HPSCI investigation determined that the intelligence community conducted the assessment for political purposes, the report said.

On Wednesday, Putin said in an interview with Russian media that it would be better for Russia for current US President Joe Biden to remain in office because he is more predictable. Trump called Putin's remarks a "great compliment" and said that Biden would give up everything to Russia.

Russia will work with any president elected by US citizens, Putin added.

In the wake of the 2016 election campaign, former President Trump was investigated by federal agencies for possible ties between his aides and Russia. Both Trump and Russia denied allegations of collusion.

A four-year investigation by US Special Counsel Robert Mueller into the allegations found no evidence of a criminal conspiracy.

A subsequent investigation by US Special Counsel John Durham concluded that the FBI should have never launched the probe into the collusion allegations.

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UPDATE- US Justice Dept Says Disrupted Hacking Network Affiliated With Russian Intelligence

(updates para 6)

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The United States Justice Department said in a statement on Thursday it disrupted a hacking network with ties to Russian intelligence.

"The Justice Department is accelerating our efforts to disrupt the Russian government's cyber campaigns against the United States and our allies, including Ukraine. In this case, Russian intelligence services turned to criminal groups to help them target home and office routers, but the Justice Department disabled their scheme," wrote US Attorney General Merrick Garland in the statement.

According to the statement, this is the second time in 2 months that the Justice Department has

disrupted state-sponsored hackers from using compromised US routers to launch cyber attacks. Through a court-ordered operation, US authorities neutralized the network, which utilized hundreds of small office and home office (SOHO) routers allegedly controlled by Russian intelligence as a screen for a 'variety of crimes,' the statement said.

The FBI is currently working to notify the owners of infected SOHO routers covered by the court's authorization.

Earlier, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said that accusing Russia of hacking is one of the world's most favorite hobbies. Russian authorities have repeatedly denied involvement in cyber attacks and hacking activities and expressed their readiness to cooperate in the fight against hackers and conduct a dialogue on cybersecurity.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE TERRORIST ATTACKS ON BELGOROD

* At least seven people have died and another 18 have been injured as a result of an attack of the Ukraine military on the Russian city of Belgorod, the Russian Health Ministry said on Thursday.

* Attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure must end, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday in comments on Ukraine's deadly attack on Belgorod.

* The Russian Foreign Ministry said that it strongly condemns Ukrainian strikes on civilians and civilian infrastructure in Belgorod and vows to severely punish those responsible for the act of terrorism.

* Russian air defense systems destroyed 14 shells of the RM-70 Vampire multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) over the Belgorod Region fired by Ukraine, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

* Israel has banned 51% of the planned humanitarian supplies to the population of Northern Gaza since January 1, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said.

* The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said that its recent airstrike on Lebanese territory has killed a senior commander of Hezbollah's special unit and his deputy.

* The evacuation of refugees from Rafah to the supposed safe zone is an illusion as there is no safe place in the Gaza Strip, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths has said.

WESTERN MILITARY AID FOR UKRAINE

* Some of the weapons the United States had pre-positioned in Europe to send to the Ukrainian military were non-functional due to poor maintenance and conditions, a Pentagon Special Inspector General said in a report to Congress out Thursday.

* US auditors initiated 57 investigations into fraud, corruption, theft and abuse related to US aid provided to Ukraine since 2022 and 43 of them remain open, the Defense Department's Office of Inspector General said.

* NATO plans to supply a million drones and a mine clearance coalition to Ukraine, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said.

* NATO has decided to create a new training center for Ukraine in the Polish city of Bydgoszcz, Stoltenberg said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Russian armed forces on Thursday launched missile attacks targeting facilities of the Ukrainian defense industry, the Defense Ministry said.

* Ukraine has lost up to 360 soldiers in the Donetsk direction in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Some 25,000 Ukrainian refugees are expected to seek asylum in Switzerland in 2024 if the intensity of the Ukraine conflict does not change, the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration told RIA Novosti.

IEA GLOBAL OIL FORECAST

* The International Energy Agency (IEA) on Thursday issued a report saying that it expects the global oil demand level to remain at the level of 102.98 million barrels per day.

* The IEA believes that Russia's exports of oil and petroleum products in January remained at the level of December, around 7.7 million barrels per day, while its revenue increased by 1.4%, the report said.

* The reserves of the commercial oil and oil products of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have decreased by 24.1 million barrels in December, the report said.

RUSSIAN POLITICIAN NADEZHDIRIN COURT CASE

* The Russian Supreme Court on Thursday rejected politician Boris Nadezhdin's lawsuit against the Central Election Commission's (CEC) decision to ban him from running in the March 15-17 presidential election.

* Nadezhdin intends to appeal to the Constitutional Court after his lawsuit related to the CEC was rejected by the Supreme Court.

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White House Says Putin Should 'Stay Out' of US Elections

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - US National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said Thursday that Russia should "stay out" of US elections.

"Mr. Putin should just stay out of our elections," Kirby told briefing, when asked about the White House's reaction to President Vladimir Putin favoring incumbent US President Joe Biden over

his predecessor Donald Trump.

During in an interview with Rossiya 1 on Wednesday, President Putin was asked which US presidential candidate is better for Russia.

Putin said that he prefers Biden as he is "more experienced" and "more predictable." Russia, however, will work with any US president whom the American people elect in November, he stressed.

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DoD Leaders Briefed on Alleged Russian Anti-Satellite Capability in Space - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – Top leaders at the US Department of Defense, including Secretary Lloyd Austin, received a briefing on an alleged Russian anti-satellite capability in space, Pentagon spokesperson Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

“We are tracking what this [new Russian capability] is, we have been briefed on it. The secretary [Austin], of course, is a part of the national security team that has been briefing the President [Joe Biden],” Ryder said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Thursday, ABC News reported that US lawmakers had allegedly been secretly informed about a purported national security threat to the United States that involves an alleged desire by Russia to put an anti-satellite nuclear weapon into space.

White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby confirmed that the national security threat stems from Russia's ongoing development of anti-satellite capabilities.

On Wednesday, US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner announced that he made information about the alleged security threat available to all lawmakers. Turner also called on US President Joe Biden to declassify all information related to the threat.

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US Should Strengthen Dollar by Supporting Innovation of Digital Assets - Tech Firm Circle

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States should strengthen the dollar by supporting innovation that would make the dollar the base currency of digital assets, Caroline Hill, an executive at financial tech firm Circle, said on Thursday.

"The US government should also strengthen the role of the US dollar in the future by supporting innovation that would make the dollar the base currency of digital assets," Hill said.

Hill, who serves as the senior director of global policy and regulatory strategy at Circle, added that it is important to ensure that all US dollar back stable coins have compliant Bank Secrecy Act programs and adhere to US sanctions.

Circle manages USD coin, which is a stablecoin that is fully backed by US dollars and

dollar-denominated assets.

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UPDATE - Greenpeace Canada Activists Stormed Freeland Office Demanding Climate Action – Statement

(Updates with details in para 7)

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – Greenpeace Canada said on Thursday that several activists stormed the Toronto office of Canadian Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland to demand climate action and banking regulations.

“Earlier this morning, Greenpeace Canada activists entered Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland’s downtown Toronto office calling on the Liberal government to stop backsliding on existing climate commitments and commit to regulating Canadian fossil banks in the 2024 federal budget,” the environmental organization said in a statement.

Greenpeace said Thursday’s action was motivated by delays and attenuations of the federal government’s long-promised climate policies, and Ottawa’s refusal to tackle the “irresponsible” funding of fossil fuels by banking institutions.

Freeland was not present at the time the activists stormed her office. However, the protesters said they would remain on site until the minister understood the “urgency” of climate action.

The organization noted that since Canada signed the Paris Agreements in 2015, the country’s major banking institutions have increased their investments in fossil fuels by over C\$1 trillion (US\$742.15 billion) and fallen short on their voluntary climate pledges.

“With the release of a new Federal Budget just around the corner, Greenpeace activists are calling on Minister Freeland to ramp up rather than backslide on climate action, including climate-aligned finance legislation,” the statement added.

Two of the activists were fined for trespassing and were subsequently removed from Freeland’s office, Greenpeace said in an update.

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US Says Takes Outer Space Treaty Obligations Seriously, Does Not Intend to Violate Accord

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States takes its obligations under the Outer Space Treaty very seriously and has no intention to violate the accord, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We take our obligations under that treaty very seriously, and we have no intention of violating it," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby's comment on the United States' obligations under the Outer Space Treaty was made in light of Washington's concerns that Russia has allegedly developed a space-based

anti-satellite weapon.

The United States is going to engage with US allies and Russia on this matter, Kirby added.

In 1967, the Outer Space Treaty between the United States, United Kingdom and the Soviet Union laid down the basis for international space law, making it clear that the universe beyond Earth's atmosphere was not to be a domain for military contest as signatories pledged never to place weapons in space. The treaty is non-binding, but signals an important statement of peaceful intent.

Earlier on Thursday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the White House is trying to encourage the Congress to vote for a bill to allocate money to Ukraine through a closed briefing on this "serious threat to national security."

US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan is meeting with House leaders on Thursday in a closed briefing about the "serious threat to national security" related to Russia's alleged development of an anti-satellite weapon.

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US OKs Potential Sale of Air-to-Air Missiles, Bombs to Italy - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has approved a possible sale of \$150 million worth of Small-Diameter Bomb II and a \$69.3 million sale of medium-range air-to-air missiles to Italy, the Pentagon said Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Italy of AIM-120C-8 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$69.3 million," the Defense Security Cooperation Agency said in a release.

Italy is seeking to purchase 12 AIM-120C-8 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles, according to the release.

The State Department has also approved a possible sale of Small Diameter Bomb II and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$150 million, the DSCA said in a separate release.

Italy has requested to buy 125 Guided Bomb Unit (GBU)-53/B Small Diameter Bombs-Increment II (SDB-II) All-Up-Rounds (AURs) and eight GBU-53/B SDB-II Captive Carry Reliability Tests (CCRTs), the release said.

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Avdiivka May Come Under Russia's Control Due to Ukraine's Lack of Ammunition - White House

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The current situation in (the city of) Avdiivka is critical and the city may come under Russia's control because the Ukrainian forces lack ammunition,

National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Thursday.

"Unfortunately, we are getting reports from the Ukrainians that the situation is critical," Kirby said during a press briefing. "Avdiivka is at risk of falling into Russian control. In very large part, this is happening because the Ukrainian forces on the ground are running out of artillery ammunition."

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Biden Administration Funding New Pioneer Technology Projects This Year - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has approved a new round of innovative technology projects that it will be funding this year, the Defense Department announced in a press release on Thursday.

"The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering (OUSD(R&E)) announced the next round of projects to receive funding via the pilot program to Accelerate the Procurement and Fielding of Innovative Technologies (APFIT)," the release said.

The projects are the first to be selected during Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 with additional selections expected following an appropriation, the release said.

"The purpose of the APFIT pilot program is to expeditiously transition technologies into production, and to accelerate the fielding of needed technologies to the warfighter, with priority given to technologies developed by small businesses and nontraditional defense contractors," the release added.

The National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal year 2022 established APFIT as a program to support innovative and mature military technologies that lack the necessary funding to transition the capability into the production phase, according to the release.

Congress funded \$100 million for the program in FY22 and \$150 million in FY23.

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US Air Force Base Says Lifting Lockdown, No Threats to Public After Active Shooter Alert

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Malmstrom US Air Force Base in the state of Montana said it lifted a lockdown order imposed on Thursday due to reports of an active shooter, after confirming that there were no shots fired or threats to the public.

"Malmstrom AFB has lifted the base lockdown... A suspicious person was reported on base as an active shooter. There were no confirmed shots fired and there are no casualties or injuries reported. There is no threat to the public at this time," the base said in a statement.

Officials continue to investigate the incident, the statement added.

Earlier on Thursday, the base announced a lockdown due to reports of an active shooter, prompting nearby schools to lockdown as well.

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Dollar Seen Dominant Despite Alarmist Headlines About Reserve Currency - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The US dollar's dominance is likely to stay despite headlines about trade blocs, cryptocurrencies and sanctions supposedly undermining its standing as the world's reserve currency, Federal Reserve Governor Christopher Waller said on Thursday.

"Acceptance as an 'international currency' is typically assessed along three dimensions: its use as a store of value, as a medium of exchange, and as a unit of account," Waller said. "Alarmist headlines notwithstanding, the dollar continues to dominate in all three of these measures, and generally by a large margin compared with any other currency."

Waller admitted there were potential challenges to the dollar's standing in the future, especially with recent developments flagging the potential for other currencies to chip away at its status.

For instance, the dollar's role could be threatened by a move toward the so-called geoeconomic fragmentation, where trade and financial flows realign and become restricted within blocs of allied countries.

Waller did not comment directly about the BRICS group of countries and de-dollarization. But he conceded that the formation of a trade bloc that excludes the United States - or even explicitly seeks to counter the US role in the global economy - could make some countries less likely to denominate international transactions in dollars.

That scenario sounds alarming but trends that appeared consistent with fragmentation could be explained by specific policy actions, Waller said.

"One example is the dramatic reallocation of US-China trade in recent years, as firms in each country decrease reliance on imports sourced from the other," he said. "While this shift has coincided with a period of heightened geopolitical tensions, the evidence suggests a simpler explanation: firms responding to changes in relative prices, in this case caused by the imposition of reciprocal tariffs by the two countries since 2018."

For example, while US imports of tariff-affected goods from China have plunged, imports of goods not subject to tariffs have continued to rise, Waller said. "Despite the reallocation of trade flows across countries, at the end of the day, those trade flows continue to be invoiced mainly in dollars."

Waller also commented on continued efforts to make the Chinese currency a more attractive competitor to the dollar. "Several factors currently weigh against the renminbi as an attractive asset for international investors: It is not freely exchangeable, the Chinese capital account is not open, and investor confidence in Chinese institutions is relatively low."

A shifting payments landscape - such as the rapid growth of digital currencies such as Bitcoin - is another factor often cited as being potentially to the dollar in the long run, Waller said.

"People often conjecture that cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin may replace the US dollar as the world's reserve currency," Waller said. "But most trading in decentralized finance (DeFi) involve

trades using stablecoins, which link their value one-for-one to the US dollar. About 99% of stablecoin market capitalization is linked to the US dollar, meaning that crypto-assets are de facto traded in US dollars. So it is likely that any expansion of trading in the DeFi world will simply strengthen the dominant role of the dollar.”

Increased prominence of the euro, the second most widely used international currency, is deemed a threat too, Waller said.

While the European Union issued an unprecedented amount of jointly-backed debt in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis to reach 400 billion euro by May 2023, this amount was tiny compared with the \$24 trillion outstanding in US Treasury securities, he said.

In addition, the observation that sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies on Russia following the invasion of Ukraine could make the dollar less attractive as a reserve currency for the United States' geopolitical adversaries, Waller also said.

In practice, however, US adversaries had few practical alternatives to the dollar, he said, as other prominent reserve currencies - such as the euro, yen and British pound - were all issued by close US allies, who also participated in sanctions on Russia, Waller added.

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US House Passes Bill to Bolster Cooperation With Quad Countries, Form New Working Group

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a bill on Thursday to bolster cooperation between the United States and other Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) countries, including through the establishment of an intra-parliamentary working group.

House lawmakers passed the bill, titled the Strengthening the Quad Act, in a vote of 379-39. Quad countries include the US, Australia, India and Japan.

The bill requires the US Secretary of State to begin talks with Quad governments within 60 days on the formation of an intra-parliamentary working group. The working group would sustain and deepen engagement between senior Quad officials on a full spectrum of issues, according to the bill text.

The legislation also requires the Secretary of State to submit a report to lawmakers within 180 days on a strategy to bolster engagement and cooperation with the Quad.

The US should expand dialogue and cooperation through the Quad with a range of partners to support peace, prosperity, the rule of law and democratic resilience in the Indo-Pacific region, the bill said.

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US Reaches Out to Russia Over National Security Threat, No Talks Secured at Moment - Kirby

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States has contacted Russia regarding a potential threat to US national security, but has not secured actual talks so far, National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We reached out to the Russian side, but we have not secured actual conversations at this point," Kirby said in a press briefing, when asked if any contact had been made with Russia.

Commenting on an alleged Russian-related "security threat" to the US, the Kremlin said Thursday that the White House is trying to get Congress pass a bill on new assistance to Kiev by hook or crook.

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Avdiivka May Come Under Russia's Control Due to Ukraine's Lack of Ammunition - White House

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The current situation in Avdiivka is critical and the city may come under Russia's control because the Ukrainian forces lack ammunition, National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Thursday.

"Unfortunately, we are getting reports from the Ukrainians that the situation is critical," Kirby said during a press briefing. "Avdiivka is at risk of falling into Russian control. In very large part, this is happening because the Ukrainian forces on the ground are running out of artillery ammunition."

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Greenpeace Canada Activists Stormed Freeland Office Demanding Climate Action – Statement

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – Greenpeace Canada said on Thursday that several activists stormed the Toronto office of Canadian Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland to demand climate action and banking regulations.

"Earlier this morning, Greenpeace Canada activists entered Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland's downtown Toronto office calling on the Liberal government to stop backsliding on existing climate commitments and commit to regulating Canadian fossil banks in the 2024 federal budget," the environmental organization said in a statement.

Greenpeace said Thursday's action was motivated by delays and attenuations of the federal government's long-promised climate policies, and Ottawa's refusal to tackle the "irresponsible" funding of fossil fuels by banking institutions.

Freeland was not present at the time the activists stormed her office. However, the protesters said they would remain on site until the Minister understood the "urgency" of climate action.

The organization noted that since Canada signed the Paris Agreements in 2015, the country's major banking institutions have increased their investments in fossil fuels by over C\$1 trillion

(US\$742.15 billion) and fallen short on their voluntary climate pledges.

"With the release of a new Federal Budget just around the corner, Greenpeace activists are calling on Minister Freeland to ramp up rather than backslide on climate action, including climate-aligned finance legislation," the statement added.

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US Sues Tennessee Over ADA Violations in HIV-Related Prosecutions - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department issued a statement on Thursday that it has filed a lawsuit against the state of Tennessee and its Bureau of Investigation (TBI) for infringing the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) through the application of its aggravated prostitution law against individuals with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

"The [Justice] Department previously notified Tennessee and the TBI that they violated the ADA by enforcing the state's aggravated prostitution statute against people living with human immunodeficiency virus," the statement said.

According to the statement, the Justice Department investigation revealed Tennessee and the TBI unfairly imposed stricter penalties on individuals with HIV, breaching the ADA by elevating misdemeanor actions to felonies without considering actual harm risk.

"A person convicted of aggravated prostitution faces three to 15 years in prison and a fine up to \$10,000, while a person convicted of a misdemeanor charge based on the same conduct is subject to a penalty of no more than six months in prison and up to a \$500 fine," the statement said.

Tennessee classifies aggravated prostitution as a "violent sexual offense," requiring lifetime registration on the state's Sex Offender Registry, the statement added.

Individuals placed on the registry for aggravated prostitution face restrictions on residency, employment, and public access, according to the statement.

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US House Passes Bill to End Restrictions on Liquid Natural Gas Exports
(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed legislation to end restrictions on liquid natural gas (LNG) exports imposed by the Biden administration, despite opposition to the bill from the White House.

House lawmakers passed the legislation, dubbed the Unlocking our Domestic LNG Potential Act, in a vote of 224-200.

"We should be unleashing American energy production and providing our allies with a secure energy source, not making it harder to produce by adding permitting red tape, threatening our

energy and national security, and killing American jobs,” House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the bill.

The bill eliminates the US Energy Department’s requirement to authorize the export of LNG to any country with which the United States does not have a free trade agreement.

In January, the White House announced a temporary pause on pending LNG export decisions to such countries until the Energy Department can update the underlying analyses for authorizations.

Earlier this week, the White House Office of Management and Budget said the Biden administration strongly opposes the bill. The legislation would undermine the United States’ ability to ensure that LNG exports are consistent with its economic, foreign policy and environmental interests.

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US in Process of Contacting Russia, Consulting With Allies Over Alleged 'Threat'-Kirby

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The US is in the process of contacting Russia and consulting with its allies regarding the “threat” to national security, National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said during a press briefing.

“We are in the process of consulting with allies and partners, we are in a process of engaging with Russia about this,” Kirby said. “We plan to engage directly with the Russians about this as well as our allies and partners.”

Earlier, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that it was too early to comment on the so called 'national security threat', adding that the White House is attempting to push Congress to vote on a bill to allocate money to Ukraine.

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Biden Orders Diplomatic Engagement with Russia on National Security Threat - Kirby

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has instructed his team to initiate direct diplomatic contacts with Russia in connection with a "national security threat" related to Russia's ongoing development of anti-satellite capabilities, Strategic Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Thursday.

"He [Biden] has directed a series of initial actions including additional briefings to congressional leaders, direct diplomatic engagement with Russia, with our allies and our partners as well, and with other countries," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Commenting on an alleged Russian-related "security threat" to the US, the Kremlin said Thursday that the White House is trying to get Congress pass a bill on new assistance to Kiev by hook or crook.

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Kirby Says National Security Threat Stems From Russia's Alleged Anti-Satellite Capability

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The White House confirmed that the national security threat stems from Russia's ongoing development of anti-satellite capabilities, Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday during a press briefing.

"While I'm limited by how much I can share about the specific nature of the threat. I can confirm that it is related to an anti-satellite capability that Russia is developing," Kirby said.

Kirby said that while Russia's development of this particular capability is concerning, it does not pose an immediate threat to anyone's safety. "Our general knowledge of Russian pursuit of this kind of capability, goes back many months, if not a few years," he added.

Earlier, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that it was too early to comment on the so called 'national security threat'.

"I cannot comment on this at all. Let's wait for this briefing to see if there will be any information. But it is obvious that the White House is trying ... to push Congress to vote on a bill to allocate money [to Ukraine]. It is obvious," Peskov told reporters.

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Architect of Biden's Russia Sanctions Daleep Singh to Rejoin White House - Reports

WASHINGTON, February (Sputnik) – Daleep Singh, a former US official at the Department of the Treasury under Obama and a key architect of the Biden administration's economic sanctions on Russia, will soon rejoin the White House to continue his work on the Russia sanctions regime amid the conflict in Ukraine, Axios reported on Thursday.

Singh is expected to return to the administration as the deputy national security adviser for

international economics, a position he held between February 2021 and June 2022, and will be responsible for looking for innovative ways to sanction Russia for its conflict with Ukraine, the report said.

In this position, Singh will replace Mike Pyle who is scheduled to leave the administration at the end of the month, according to the report.

First Deputy Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund Gita Gopinath said earlier this week that the Russian economy had outperformed previous forecasts of the fund and grew faster than any G7 economy in 2023 despite the unprecedented pressure from the sanctions. The IMF expects it to do so again in 2024.

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US Air Force Base Says Locked Down Due to Suspected Threat, Officials Monitoring Situation

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Malmstrom US Air Force Base in Montana locked down on Thursday due to a suspected threat, initially reported as an active shooter alert, the base said in a statement.

"Malmstrom Air Force Base was placed on lock down today due to a suspected real world threat located on base," the statement said.

US Air Force and emergency personnel are securing the area, the statement said.

Earlier on Thursday, the base said it locked down due to an active shooter alert. Great Falls Public Schools also said that it initiated precautionary shelter-in-place procedures at nearby schools.

Montana Governor Greg Gianforte and members of Montana's congressional delegation said that they are monitoring the situation.

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US Air Force Base Says Entered Lockdown in Response to Active Shooter Alert

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Malmstrom US Air Force Base in Montana said on Thursday that it locked down, amid reports of an active shooter.

"Malmstrom Air Force Base has entered a lockdown status as of 10:29 AM [Mountain Time] on February 15 in response to an active shooter alert on base," the base said in a statement to social media.

The statement advises people on the base to shelter in place. The base will continue to provide updates through official channels, the statement said.

Great Falls Public Schools also said that it initiated precautionary shelter-in-place procedures at nearby schools in response to the situation.

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US Cyberspace Envoy Neither Confirms nor Denies Russia Using SpaceX's Starlink Service

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador for Cyberspace and Digital Policy Nathaniel Fick on Thursday avoided commenting on claims that Russia is using SpaceX's Starlink satellite internet service, emphasizing that the United States does not support the Russian military use of any US technology.

"The Ukrainian government has said in the last several days that they believe the Russians were using Starlink for military purposes, I would have to refer questions on that to the Ukrainian government," Fick said. "I think a fair overarching statement, of course, is that we do not support the Russian military use of any American technology."

SpaceX founder Elon Musk already denied Ukrainian government's claims, labeling reports on such matters as "false news."

"A number of false news reports claim that SpaceX is selling Starlink terminals to Russia," Musk said on Sunday. "This is categorically false."

Musk added that to the best of their knowledge, no Starlinks have been sold directly or indirectly to Russia.

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Americans Should Be Confident in US Election Security Despite Expected Interference - CISA

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Votes in the United States should be confident in the country's security system in spite of expected foreign interference in the November elections, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) Director Jen Easterly said on Thursday.

"We can expect to see that [foreign influence] this year," Easterly said. "The American people should have confidence in the security and the integrity of this year's election."

Easterly emphasized that the American people should also understand that US election officials ran safe and secure elections in 2018, 2020 and 2022.

"There is no evidence that malicious actors changed, altered, deleted votes or had any impact on the outcome of the elections," Easterly added.

The US presidential election is scheduled to be held on November 5.

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DC Suspends Train Service Amid Fire Department Activity at Eastern Market Station - Alert

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) suspended service on several train lines due to fire department activity at the Eastern Market metro station, AlertDC said on Thursday.

“WMATA reports the train service (orange, blue, and silver lines) are suspended between Federal Center SW and Stadium-Armory stations due to fire department activity at Eastern Market metro station,” the alert said.

Shuttle bus service has been requested, the alert said. Travelers should expect delays and use alternative routes, the alert added.

The Eastern Market metro station was evacuated after smoke was detected on the platform, DC Fire and EMS said in a statement via social media platform X.

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US Lawmakers Set to Unveil New Border Security, Ukraine Aid Proposal - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - US House lawmakers will unveil a new proposal with both foreign aid and border security measures on Thursday, Politico reported.

The legislation includes military assistance for Ukraine and Israel but trims humanitarian and economic aid that was proposed as part of a \$95 billion supplemental funding bill passed by the US Senate, the report said, citing US Congressman Don Bacon.

The legislation also includes a version of a so-called “remain in Mexico” immigration policy, the report said.

The new proposal was developed by a bipartisan group of House lawmakers, the report said. The proposal is set to cost approximately \$60 billion, the report said.

Earlier this week, the US Senate passed a \$95 billion supplemental funding bill with Ukraine and Israel aid, but no border security measures. US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that the lower chamber of the US Congress has no plans to consider the legislation.

However, US Congressman Pete Aguilar said on Wednesday that House Democrats are considering using a discharge petition to force a floor vote on the bill.

Bacon reportedly said that the new proposal still requires more support among House Republicans, but that enough Democrats are in agreement with the bill to pursue it.

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Video Shows Officer Shot at Man After Mistaking Falling Acorn for Gunshot - Sheriff

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Officer Jesse Hernandez opened fire on a detained man in a patrol vehicle after mistaking the noise produced by a falling acorn, the Okaloosa

County Sheriff's Office said in a statement on Thursday after releasing a video of the incident. On November 12, officers responded to a disturbance in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, and detained Marquis Jackson after his girlfriend reported him for stealing a car and for issuing threats, the statement said.

Jackson was unharmed during the incident, the statement said.

The review of Hernandez's actions concluded that he used force unreasonably, the statement said.

Hernandez's partner, Sgt. Beth Roberts, who also opened fire toward the vehicle prompted by Hernandez's actions, was exonerated from wrongdoing, the statement said.

Hernandez resigned on December 4, according to the statement.

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US Justice Dept Says Disrupted Hacking Network Affiliated With Russian Intelligence

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States Justice Department said in a statement on Thursday it disrupted a hacking network with ties to Russian intelligence.

"The Justice Department is accelerating our efforts to disrupt the Russian government's cyber campaigns against the United States and our allies, including Ukraine. In this case, Russian intelligence services turned to criminal groups to help them target home and office routers, but the Justice Department disabled their scheme," wrote US Attorney General Merrick Garland in the statement.

According to the statement, this is the second time in 2 months that the Justice Department has disrupted state-sponsored hackers from using compromised US routers to launch cyber attacks.

Through a court-ordered operation, US authorities neutralized the network, which utilized hundreds of small office and home office (SOHO) routers allegedly controlled by Russian intelligence as a screen for a 'variety of crimes,' the statement said.

The FBI is currently working to notify the owners of infected SOHO routers covered by the court's authorization.

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NATO Member States Should Jointly Spend on Defense as Much as US Does or \$200Bln - Trump

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The NATO member states should spend yearly on defense as much as the United States does, or about \$200 billion, rather than the current \$25 billion, former President Donald Trump said on Thursday.

"NATO countries have to pay up, they have to pay their bills. The United States is in for \$200 billion and they're in for \$25 billion. Their economy, when you add them up, is about the same

size as our economy," Trump told reporters.

Trump pointed out that NATO is more important to European countries than the United States because the Atlantic Ocean protects the latter from a possible attack.

Trump also criticized President Joe Biden for seeking a \$60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine and noted that the United States should not providing more assistance.

On Saturday, Trump said a leader of an unspecified NATO member state asked him whether the United States would protect that or other countries in the event of a possible Russian attack if they do not meet their defense spending obligations. Trump responded by saying the United States would not and moreover, he would encourage Russia to "do whatever the Hell they want," reiterating again that NATO members "got to pay."

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Austin Says Progress Made in NATO Defense Leaders Summit, Urges Partners to Boost Spending

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on Thursday noted that progress was made at the NATO defense ministers' summit in Brussels, but urged allies to ensure they are contributing enough to meet the alliance's new goals to strengthen its defense.

Austin said he was pleased by "progress" in the NATO defense ministers meeting held in Brussels earlier on Thursday, adding that the defense ministers continued work to provide the full resources necessary for the alliance's new regional plans from the Vilnius Summit last year to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defense.

"These plans will improve our ability to deter and defend against any threat, well into the future," Austin said in a press release. "But to do so, we need all of our allies to provide resources for the plans and allocate the necessary troops and capabilities. Allies also must continue to invest in their defense industrial bases, which is crucial to the future strength of the alliance ... Any ally not spending at least two percent of GDP on defense this year should have plans to swiftly meet that target."

Moreover, Austin urged Hungary to support immediate NATO accession for Sweden, and expressed hope that Sweden could be welcomed into the alliance as an ally at the NATO leaders summit in Washington in July.

The United States, Austin said, will continue to stand with its NATO allies and to defend the sovereignty and the territory of every alliance member.

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 if they do not meet their defense spending obligations. Trump said he would not protect NATO countries if they lag on their defense spending. The former US president warned he would then encourage Russia "to do whatever the hell they want," stressing that NATO member states "got to pay."

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UN on Deadly Shelling of Russia's Belgorod: Attacks Against Civilians Prohibited

UNITED NATIONS, February 15 (Sputnik) - Attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure must end, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday, commenting on Ukraine's deadly shelling of Belgorod.

Earlier in the day, seven people were killed - including one child - and another 18 were injured in an attack by the Ukrainian armed forces on the Russian city of Belgorod, the Russian Health Ministry said.

"We've also seen reports of missile strikes on the Russian city of Belgorod, and we reiterate one more time that attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure are prohibited under international humanitarian law and unacceptable and must stop immediately," Dujarric said in a briefing.

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UPDATE - Venezuela Halts Work of OHCHR to Review Terms of Cooperation - Minister

(adds details in paras 3-6)

UNITED NATIONS, February 15 (Sputnik) – Venezuela is suspending the work of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in the country and will review terms of cooperation with the agency, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Yvan Gil said on Thursday.

"The Bolivarian republic of Venezuela announces its decision to suspend the activities of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Venezuela, and proceed to an integral review of the technical cooperation terms," Gil wrote on X.

Accordingly, Caracas is requesting that OHCHR personnel currently working in Venezuela leave the country in the next 72 hours. In the meantime, Gil called on the agency to publicly rectify its "colonialist and abusive" attitude which violate the UN Charter.

The decision was taken amid the increasing lack of impartiality by the agency who has become a tool for "coupists and terrorists" constantly plotting against the country, a statement attached to Gil's announcement said.

OHCHR is actively falsifying facts in relation to the country with the sole purpose of violating Venezuelan sovereignty and self-determination through lies, disinformation and manipulation, the statement added.

Caracas calls on OHCHR to respect international, the statement said however reiterating Venezuela's intention to continue its cooperation with international mechanisms for the protection of human rights as long as interactions are based on objective, impartial and non-meddling dialogue.

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Pentagon Says University Researchers Made Propellant to Triple Range of Hypersonics

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - University researchers developed a propellant that triples the range of hypersonic systems, US Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering Heidi Shyu said on Thursday.

“We have a joint hypersonic university consortium, literally to bring together the best and most brilliant minds in the area of hypersonics ... One of the activities that the researchers developed is a very high-performance propellant that would enable us to triple the range [of hypersonics],” Shyu said during a House Armed Services Committee hearing.

Earlier this month, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia leads the world in the development of hypersonic systems.

The United States may have already lost the race to develop hypersonic systems, US Sen. Angus King said during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing last month.

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Libya's Key Institutional Stakeholders Seem Unwilling to Solve Issues for Elections-Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 15 (Sputnik) - Libya's key institutional stakeholders appear unwilling to resolve the outstanding politically contested issues that would clear the path to the long-awaited elections, UN Special Representative for Libya Abdoulaye Bathily said on Wednesday.

“I continued my engagement with those major players, appealing to their wisdom. So far, none of them have made a decisive move from their initial position, with each continuing to articulate pre-conditions for their participation in the dialogue as a way to maintain the status quo, which seems to suit them,” Bathily told the Security Council members during a meeting on Libya.

At the same time, all fears expressed by stakeholders need to be addressed before moving forward, he added.

Libya has faced multiple crises since the 2011 Western military intervention that toppled longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi and created a power vacuum that split the nation into rival factions. Although the warring parties agreed to a historic ceasefire in 2020, the differences have never been resolved, and the country continues to be ruled by two rival governments.

The Tripoli-based bank split along political lines in 2014, with the branch in the eastern city of Benghazi announcing its self-governance. The UN has been struggling to fill the void by helping Libyans hold a general election, although internal divisions led it to cancel the vote set for 2021.

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

Venezuela Halts Work of OHCHR in Country to Review Terms of Cooperation - Minister

UNITED NATIONS, February 15 (Sputnik) – Venezuela is suspending the work of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in the country and will review terms of cooperation with the agency, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Yvan Gil said on Thursday.

"The Bolivarian republic of Venezuela announces its decision to suspend the activities of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Venezuela, and proceed to an integral review of the technical cooperation terms," Gil wrote on X.

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Prospects for Achieving Lasting Settlement in Libya 'Not Yet in Sight' - UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 15 (Sputnik) - There are no prospects for a political reconciliation in Libya in the near future, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Wednesday.

"In Libya, prospects for achievement of a lasting settlement unfortunately are not yet within sight," Polyanskiy told the Security Council members during a meeting on Libya.

Russia also believes that the UN plays a central role to the Libyan political settlement and there is no alternative to it, he added.

Libya has faced multiple crises since the 2011 Western military intervention that toppled longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi and created a power vacuum that split the nation into rival factions. Although the warring parties agreed to a historic ceasefire in 2020, the differences have never been resolved, and the country continues to be ruled by two rival governments.

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Blinken Says Russian 'Threat' Not Active Capability, But US Taking It 'Very Seriously'

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that an alleged Russia-related "national security threat" is not an active capability, but a potential one that Washington is taking "very, very seriously" and discussing with its allies.

"This is not an active capability, but it is potential one that we're taking very, very seriously, and I would expect that we'll have more to say soon, in fact, very soon, so stay tuned for that, and of course, we're also conferring with allies and partners on this issue," Blinken said during a joint

press conference with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama in Tirana, Albania.

On Wednesday, US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner announced that he made information about the alleged security threat available to all lawmakers. Turner also called on US President Joe Biden to declassify all information related to the threat.

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Over Half of 22 Injured Persons in Kansas City Shooting Younger Than 16 - Police Chief

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - More than half of the 22 people injured in the shooting during the Super Bowl celebration rally in Kansas City are under the age of 16, Kansas City Police Department Chief Stacey Graves said.

"At least half of our victims are under the age of 16," Graves said during a press briefing.

The police chief pointed out that age range of all injured individuals spans between eight and 47.

"We have confirmed one deceased person," Graves said.

The authorities continue the investigation and have detained subjects, two of which are juveniles, Graves said.

"We are working to determine the involvement of others and it should be noted we have recovered several firearms," Graves added.

On Wednesday, a shooting ear the site where fans of the Kansas City football club celebrated the victory in the Super Bowl game over the team from San Francisco.

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Libyan Peace Impeded by Political Stalemate Despite no Violations of Peace- UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 15 (Sputnik) - Libya still faces a stalemate on a political reconciliation track despite that no violations of the Ceasefire Agreement have been recorded, UN Special Representative for Libya Abdoulaye Bathily said on Wednesday.

"While no violations of the Ceasefire Agreement were recorded during the reporting period, progress on implementing outstanding provisions of the Agreement, particularly on the withdrawal, continues to be impeded by the stalemate on the political track," Bathily told the Security Council members during a meeting on Libya.

At least some positive achievement was that hundreds of Chadian mercenaries and foreign ministers returned from Libya back to Chad, he added.

Libya has faced multiple crises since the 2011 Western military intervention that toppled longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi and created a power vacuum that split the nation into rival factions. Although the warring parties agreed to a historic ceasefire in 2020, the differences have never been resolved, and the country continues to be ruled by two rival governments.

The Tripoli-based bank split along political lines in 2014, with the branch in the eastern city of Benghazi announcing its self-governance. The UN has been struggling to fill the void by helping Libyans hold a general election, although internal divisions led it to cancel the vote set for 2021.

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US Concerned by Russia's 'Going to Capacity, to Scale With What They Are Doing' - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned about Russia's "going to capacity and to scale with what they are doing," Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment William LaPlante said on Thursday.

"I am particularly concerned about Russia's going to capacity and to scale with what they are doing," LaPlante said.

The United States is implementing a national offense strategy that has China as a pacing threat, but developments with Russia even during the last several months have been very concerning, LaPlante said.

La Plante pointed out that he pays particular attention to the new technologies Russia and China acquire as well as the two countries' rate of production.

The United States has been reluctant to go to high rates of production since the end of the Cold War but Washington is taking a different look at the issue.

"Right now we are operating off of a budget that was constructed in 2021 before Ukraine happened. We have no more supplemental. We were largely rebuilding our industrial base on the supplementals," LaPlante added.

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UPDATE - US Prison Bureau's Mismanagement Contributes to Inmate Deaths – Justice Dept.

(Updates to add acronyms to para 1, details in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – The US Federal Bureau of Prisons' (BOP) "numerous operational and managerial deficiencies" have contributed to unsafe conditions that lead to inmate deaths, according to a report released Thursday by the Department of Justice's Office of the Inspector General (OIG).

"Today my office released a report on inmate deaths in federal prisons over an 8-year period in four categories: suicides, homicides, accidental deaths, including drug overdoses, and deaths resulting from unknown factors ... Today's report identifies numerous operational and managerial deficiencies, which created unsafe conditions prior to and at the time of a number of these deaths," Michael Horowitz, inspector general for the Department of Justice, said in a video release.

The OIG evaluated 344 inmate deaths at BOP institutions from 2014-2021. Suicides accounted

for just over half of the deaths, with homicides the next most prevalent reason. The report found that BOP's recurring policy violations and operational failures contributed to inmate suicides.

Additionally, BOP's response to medical emergencies often fell short, due to a lack of clear communication, urgency or proper equipment.

BOP's lack of documentation about inmate deaths that was required by its own policies also limited its ability to potentially prevent additional deaths.

Longstanding operational challenges, such as contraband interdiction, further limited its ability, with contraband drugs or weapons contributing to nearly one-third of the 344 inmate deaths, including 70 drug overdoses.

The OIG made 12 recommendations to help BOP address risk factors that contribute to inmate deaths. The BOP agreed with all the recommendations, according to an OIG release.

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US Seizure of Russian Assets Would Axe Hope for Diplomacy, Destroy Ukraine - Senator

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - A possible confiscation of frozen Russian assets by the United States would convince Russia that any diplomatic solution is impossible and would result in a "destroyed Ukraine," Sen. Rand Paul said in an article for Responsible Statecraft on Thursday.

"Confiscating Russia's sovereign assets is an act of economic war," Paul said. "Passage of this bill will only reinforce the view of hardliners in Moscow that Russia's war lies not just with Ukraine, but really with the United States and the West. Any hope that the United States and Russia could work toward stabilizing or improving relations will subsequently be destroyed."

Last month, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee advanced a bill dubbed the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity (REPO) for Ukrainians Act to authorize the transfer of seized Russian assets to Kiev. Paul opposed advancing the bill. The US House Foreign Affairs Committee advanced their version of the bill in November.

Paul warned in the article said that enacting the bill will make peace less likely.

"Seizing and transferring these assets to Ukraine may make Washington feel virtuous, but it will not bring peace," he said. "Confiscation will only convince Moscow that there is no negotiated settlement to be had with Ukraine. The result will be a destroyed Ukraine."

If the Congress passes this bill, the US will not be able to use Russia's frozen assets as a bargaining chip during negotiations, Paul noted. In addition, once Congress provides the president the authority to seize Russian assets, there will be immense political pressure on him to "carry out the policy to avoid looking weak," the senator said.

Confiscating Russia's assets will also prove to other nations, including China, that Washington cannot be trusted as the guarantor of the global economy, the senator warned.

"They will seek to move away from the dollar and hold their reserves in other currencies," he said. "This process of de-dollarization will be an unmitigated disaster as it will degrade America's financial strength and ensure the prosperity Americans have come to expect is no longer attainable."

Moscow has maintained that any attempt to confiscate its assets would violate international law. The Russian Foreign Ministry has dismissed the freezing of Russian assets as outright theft.

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Fani Willis' Ex-Friend Says Her Relationship With Special Prosecutor Began in 2019

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – Robin Yearti, a former friend and colleague of Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, said on Thursday that Willis' romantic relationship with Special Prosecutor Norman Wade in the election interference case against former President Donald Trump began in 2019 and not in 2022.

"No doubt," Yearti said during a court hearing when asked if the romantic relationship between Willis and Wade started in 2019.

Yearti noted that she has not spoken with Willis since they had an argument in 2022.

Earlier in the day, a court in Atlanta, Georgia began hearing Trump's 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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Biden to Meet Poland Leaders at White House on March 12 – Press Secretary

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden will meet with Poland's President Andrzej Duda and Prime Minister Donald Tusk at the White House on March 12, according to a White House statement.

"President Biden will welcome President Andrzej Duda and Prime Minister Donald Tusk of Poland for a joint meeting at the White House on March 12. The leaders will reaffirm their unwavering support for Ukraine's defense against Russia's brutal war of conquest," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a release.

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US Prison Bureau's Mismanagement Contributes to Inmate Deaths - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The Federal Bureau of Prisons' numerous operational and managerial deficiencies have contributed to unsafe conditions that lead to inmate deaths, the US Justice Department's Office of the Inspector General said in a report on Thursday.

"Today's report identifies numerous operational and managerial deficiencies, which created unsafe conditions prior to and at the time of a number of these deaths," Inspector General Michael Horowitz said.

The report on inmate deaths in US federal prisons covers a period of eight-year and four categories: suicides, homicides, accidental deaths, including drug overdoses, and deaths resulting from unknown factors, Horowitz said.

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Canada Should Have Sovereignty to Take 'Own Decisions,' Not Depend on US – Tory Leader

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – Canada should have the sovereignty to make its own decisions and not to depend on the United States for its defense, the leader of the country's Conservative Party and official opposition Pierre Poilievre said on Thursday.

"Justin Trudeau has made Canada weak, poor and defenseless. His plan for national defense is to rely on Joe Biden or Donald Trump to protect Canada. That puts America in charge of Canada's future," Poilievre told reporters. "I don't want that. I want to bring home control of our country and our defense."

Poilievre said that the Conservatives' defense plan would entail cutting what he characterized as wasteful foreign assistance to "dictators, terrorists, and multinational bureaucracies," and would focus on bringing those funds back home to strengthen the Canadian military.

The Tory leader added that his plan also includes cuts to office bureaucracy and getting rid of the "corruption and incompetence" of the Canadian Armed Forces procurement processes. He further noted that billions of dollars are being wasted to profit defense contractors instead of getting the best value for the military and taxpayers.

Addressing the same question in French, Poilievre said that he wanted Canada to have the strength to ensure its own defense necessities, and the sovereignty of taking its own decisions.

"This is a commonsense plan to reinforce our armed forces, and to once again become an independent country who's able to defend itself," he said.

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Fed Test for US Banks in 2024 Includes 10% Unemployment, Real Estate Collapse Scenarios

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve released on Thursday hypothetical scenarios in its annual stress test for 32 large US banks to ensure their ability to lend in a severe recession with a 10% jobless rate and collapse in real estate prices.

"This year, 32 banks will be tested against a severe global recession with heightened stress in both commercial and residential real estate markets, as well as in corporate debt markets," the Fed said in a policy statement. The central bank made clear that the "scenarios are not forecasts" and "should not be interpreted as predictions of future economic conditions".

The Fed also said it had released for the first time four hypothetical elements designed to probe different risks through an "exploratory analysis" of the banking system.

"The exploratory analysis will not affect bank capital requirements," the Fed added.

This year's most severe test scenario includes a 36% plunge in housing prices, compared with 38% in the 2023 scenario, and a 40% slump in the commercial real estate prices, similar to that in last year's test.

In addition, there is the imagined situation of US unemployment going up to 10% from a current 3.5%.

Under the exploratory test, banks will be watched for funding stresses that will impact a large proportion of their deposits, similar to what happened during the March 2023 banking crisis. The largest and most complex lenders will also be tested against the possibility of five large hedge funds failing at the same time.

The Fed began its stress test on large US banks after the 2007-2009 financial crisis. The annual exercise seeks to determine how much capital a bank needs to stay solvent at all times while giving out dividends and participating in activities like share buybacks.

This year's test comes at a particularly interesting time after the 2023 banking crisis that culminated with a series of failures and bankruptcies among midsize US lenders. In response, the Fed established an emergency lending facility called the Bank Term Fund Program to offer impacted banks loans of up to one year based on qualifying assets. That program is due to expire by next month.

Since the crisis, there has been a heightened watch on the sector, with the biggest banks fighting proposed new capital adequacy capital rules they say are excessive and that they should not face, given their strength versus smaller lenders.

There has also been additional scrutiny on banks lately, after the New York Community Bank reported last month losses on soured commercial real estate loans that caused its share price to plummet.

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US Maintains 'High Rate' of F-35 Fighter Jet Production - Defense Department

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States maintains a high rate of production for F-35 fighter jets, US Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment William LaPlante said on Thursday.

"We're at high rates of production for the F-35, for all you want to say about it," LaPlante said

during a House Armed Services Committee hearing.

LaPlante's statement comes amid reports that US President Joe Biden is seeking to reduce the number of F-35 purchases in the coming year by 18% to stay within military budget limits set by the US Congress.

The US Defense Department reduced its F-35 request from 83 units to 70, saving \$1.6 billion, according to US media reports.

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New York Judge Rejects Trump Request to Dismiss Criminal Indictment in 'Hush Money' Case

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-9)

NEW YORK, February 15 (Sputnik) - New York Supreme Court Acting Justice Juan Merchan rejected former President Donald Trump's request to dismiss the criminal indictment against him in the "hush money" case involving pornography actress Stormy Daniels, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the courtroom on Thursday.

"Defendant's motions to dismiss are denied. We will plan for the hearing on March 25," Merchan said.

Trump told reporters before the hearing that he has done nothing criminal and therefore there is no case against him.

"There is absolutely no case, it is not a crime," Trump said.

In addition, Trump said that while the establishment has initiated an alleged criminal case against him, the United States actually faces a very high level of violent crime.

"It is a great double standard," Trump said.

Trump called this case "election interference," which is being run by President Joe Biden and his administration.

"This is just a way of hurting me," Trump said, adding that the United States is going through a dark period in its history given the abuse of the judicial system for political goals.

Trump is accused of not disclosing hush-money payments to Daniels during the 2016 presidential campaign.

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US Pre-Positioned Arms for Ukraine Were Poorly Maintained, Not Functional - Audit Report

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Some of the weapons the US had prepositioned in Europe to send to the Ukrainian armed forces (UAF) were non-functional due to poor maintenance and conditions, a Pentagon Special Inspector General said in a report to Congress out Thursday.

"In February 2023, the DoD OIG determined that some of the weapons and equipment that the

DoD had prepositioned in Europe—items it was transferring to the UAF —were not functional due to improper maintenance and poor conditions at Army warehouses," the report said.

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US Auditors Initiated 57 Probes Into Fraud Related to Ukraine Aid Since 2022 - Watchdog

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - US auditors initiated 57 investigations into fraud, corruption, theft and abuse related to US aid provided to Ukraine since 2022 and 43 of them remain open, the Department of Defense (DoD) Office of Inspector General (OIG) said in a new report for Congress on Thursday.

"The DoD, State [Department] and USAID OIG investigative agencies established the Ukraine Fraud and Corruption Investigative Working Group to coordinate investigative efforts among the federal investigative services with some jurisdiction over the Ukraine response. Since February 2022, these agencies have initiated 57 investigations, 14 of which have been closed and 43 of which remain open," the report said.

Open investigations involve grant and procurement fraud, corruption, theft, program irregularities as well as counter-proliferation of technology and weapons systems components, the report added.

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Austin Returns to Work at Pentagon After Latest Hospitalization - Defense Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin returned to work at the Pentagon on Thursday, the Defense Department announced in a statement.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III returned to work at the Pentagon today," the statement said. "The Secretary has been conducting his duties from home since his release from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on Feb. 13, 2024."

Austin was hospitalized on Sunday for the second time in 2024, in connection with a bladder issue. He was released from the hospital on Tuesday.

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US Judge Rejects Trump's Request to Dismiss Criminal Indictment in 'Hush Money' Case

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – A court in New York rejected former US President Donald Trump's request to dismiss a criminal indictment against him in the "hush money case"

involving porn actress Stormy Daniels, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the courtroom on Thursday.

"Defendant's motions to dismiss are denied. We will plan for the hearing on March 25," Judge Juan Merchan said.