

2/21/24 Wednesday

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US 'Always Planned' For Assange to Die in Prison

On Tuesday, the final appeal for WikiLeaks co-founder Julian Assange to avoid extradition to the United States began. Days earlier, his wife and lawyer, Stellar Assange, warned that if the journalist is not released soon, the stress of the case and his confinement could kill him, adding that he "will die" if extradited to the US.

"His health is in decline, mentally and physically. His life is at risk every single day he stays in prison, and if he's extradited, he will die," Stellar Assange said at a media briefing in London. Julian Assange, an Australian national, could face up to 175 years in prison if extradited to the United States on espionage charges.

But the US has no plans for Assange to stand trial in the United States, Dan Kovalik, a professor, human rights lawyer and peace activist [told Sputnik's The Critical Hour](#) on Tuesday. "If [Julian Assange] is sent to the US, they're just going to delay the trial as long as they can so that they can guarantee that he'll die in jail," Kovalik explained. "That's always been the plan." Kovalik noted that there is documented evidence that the CIA plotted to kill Julian Assange in 2017 which revealed their intentions. "Here's a guy, even if you believe everything is true that they're charging him with, he is not charged with any violent crime. There's no reason for him to be in jail while he awaits extradition... They're holding him so that he'll die," Kovalik said. The US government would like to avoid an actual trial with Assange, Kovalik contended, because their misdeeds would come to light. "[Defense lawyers] could call a former secretary of state [or] a former secretary of defense. It would be a circus and it would not go well for the United States."

"People would be called from the US government, present and past, to talk about their crimes, to talk about the war crimes, [the things](#) that Julian Assange and WikiLeaks have exposed. So they don't want any part of that," Kovalik predicted.

Co-host Wilmer Leon mentioned the seeming lack of support in US media for Assange, even as WikiLeaks' revelations are reported on by those media outlets. Pointing to a Washington Post article that included the passage "US prosecutors want him to stand trial. They allege he violated the Espionage Act when he conspired to obtain thousands of classified documents related to the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan."

"Well, if he has conspired to obtain, then what does The Washington Post do? What does The New York Times do? What do most mainstream media outlets do as they gather information for their stories?" Leon asked.

"They even gathered [information] from WikiLeaks," Kovalik replied. "The New York Times, The Washington Post.... And those papers haven't stood by Julian Assange when they've used his materials for their own stories. It's just a disgrace.

"I mean, the whole thing is just a travesty. It's an absolute travesty of any idea of due process and justice," he concluded.

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How the Narrative on Ukraine, Palestine Has Accelerated Western Media's Decline

Over the past few months, multiple major legacy media outlets have announced decisions to drastically downsize their news departments, including CNN, LA Times and Vox, among others. The latest series of layoffs is part of a larger pattern going back years of former media institutions being gutted, closed or sold off.

Historian and author Dr. Gerald Horne [told Sputnik's The Critical Hour](#) on Tuesday that the decline of mainstream Western media was accelerated by the press' narratives on the conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine.

"I think that an astute historian would point out that the Ukraine crisis helped to trigger or helped to accelerate the continuing decline of the news media," Horne said, adding that the media crisis was "accelerated on October 7, 2023, because it's no secret that the Zionist lobby has a stranglehold over a good deal of the US media."

Horne also noted the US media coverage of the death of Alexey Navalny, particularly its lack of coverage of his documented Islamophobia. "We want to get an account of what happened when we pick up a newspaper or tune into CNN, but instead we oftentimes just get the current line of the neocons, or the neoliberals," he explained, adding that there is "no guarantee" that CNN will be around by the end of the decade.

The crisis goes beyond just the media, Horne argued, saying it is a crisis of "the entire capital system" and is part of "the inevitable demise of capitalism."

"You see a similar crisis unfolding in Europe," Horne said. "The party of [German] Chancellor [Olaf] Scholz is on the ropes because he has led his country [into an abyss](#) [by going] along with the Ukrainian caper and misadventures. His prospects for electoral success going forward are slim and none."

But it's not only Scholz who's headed down a troubled political future, Horne said, pointing out that [French President Emmanuel Macron](#) and [UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak](#) are in similar positions.

"All in all, it's not a good look or good prognosis for the North Atlantic countries," he concluded.

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Third Time's a Genocide - Cartoon

The US again vetoed a ceasefire resolution for Gaza, after nearly 30,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israel in Gaza and as Israel faces increasing international condemnation and flagging support among the US public.

The latest move marked the third ceasefire resolution vetoed by the United States and comes after Israel bombed the last remaining refuge in Gaza, the city of Rafah, where 1.4 million Gazans are currently sheltering.

The United States was the only UN Security Council member to vote against any of the three ceasefire resolutions, though the United Kingdom partially joined the US by abstaining from the votes.

The US support of Israel has not improved US security, with the US State Department issuing a “worldwide caution” warning for all American citizens traveling abroad as a result of the conflict. It also has not improved Israel’s security, which is now facing increasingly hostile and unified neighbors.

But American support has been good for business, especially within the defense industry. For just one example, Lockheed Martin and its subsidiaries have been awarded [at least \\$28.8 million](#) in taxpayer money through the modification of contracts by the US Department of Defense to support weapon systems previously provided to Israel. The company's stock price also jumped nearly 9% the day after the October 7 attack, the company's largest single-day jump of 2023.

When and if the US foreign aid package that is being debated in Congress passes, which includes \$14 billion for Israel, there are sure to be more contracts in the pipeline for Lockheed Martin and its competitors. But a ceasefire would lessen the urgency in Washington to fund military aid. Peace, unfortunately, has a pesky habit of getting in the way of [war profiteering](#). Historian and author Dr. Gerald Horne told Sputnik’s The Critical Hour on Tuesday that the decline of mainstream Western media was accelerated by the outlet’s narratives on the conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine.

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Horne also noted the US media coverage of the death of Alexey Navalny, particularly their lack of coverage of his Islamophobia. “We want to get an account of what happened when we pick up a newspaper or tune into CNN but instead we oftentimes just get the current line of the neocons, or the neoliberals,” He explained.

The crisis goes beyond just the media, Horne argued, saying it is a crisis of “the entire capital system” and is part of “the inevitable demise of capitalism.”

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The US has no plans for Assange to stand trial in the United States and prefers for him to die awaiting trial, Dan Kovalik, a professor, human rights lawyer and peace activist told Radio Sputnik on Tuesday.

"If [Julian Assange] is sent to the US, they're just going to delay the trial as long as they can so that they can guarantee that he'll die in jail," Kovalik explained. "That's always been the plan."

The comments came after Assange's wife, Stellar Assange, that the WikiLeaks founder will die in prison if he is extradited to the United States.

"His health is in decline, mentally and physically. His life is at risk every single day he stays in prison, and if he's extradited, he will die," Stellar Assange said at a media briefing in London.

The US government would like to avoid an actual trial with Assange, Kovalik contended, because their misdeeds would come to light. "People would be called from the US government, present and past, to talk about their crimes, to talk about the war crimes, the things that Julian Assange and WikiLeaks have exposed. So they don't want any part of that," Kovalik predicted.

"I mean, the whole thing is just a travesty. It's an absolute travesty of any idea of due process and justice," he concluded.

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US Navy Sailor Based in Japan Charged With Espionage - Charge Sheet

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - A US Navy sailor assigned to a guided-missile destroyer based in Japan has been charged with espionage for allegedly providing national defense information to a foreign government, according to a charge sheet seen by Sputnik.

The charges state that Chief Fire Controlman Bryce Steven Pedicini on at least seven occasions "with reason to believe that it would be used to the injury of the United States and to the advantage of a foreign nation" delivered classified information relating to national defense, "to a citizen and employee of a foreign government."

On an eighth occasion, Pedicini is accused of attempting to deliver sensitive "photographs including images of a SIPR [Secret Internet Protocol Router Network] computer screen to a citizen and employee of a foreign government."

The charge sheet does not reveal which foreign government Pedicini is accused of working with.

A US Naval Surface Force spokesperson confirmed that "a sailor assigned to the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Higgins (DDG 76) is suspected of mishandling classified documents and information."

"The incident remains under investigation and legal proceedings continue," the spokesperson said in a statement quoted by US media.

Pedicini joined the navy in 2009 and has served on multiple naval ships. He received several awards throughout his career, according to media reports.

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NASA Chief on Allegations of Russian Space Nukes: US Wants Space Cooperation With Russia

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – NASA Administrator Bill Nelson, commenting on allegations that Russia is developing space nuclear weapons, said on Thursday that the US hopes space cooperation with Moscow will continue.

“We built the space station together. We operate it together. We want that to continue. We don’t want these other issues that are anything but peaceful to get in the way,” Nelson told CNN.

He pointed out that there are 15 partners on the International Space Station, and Russia is one of them.

Nelson also recalled that space cooperation between the two countries started in 1975 when they launched the Soyuz-Apollo mission. “We’ve peacefully cooperated with Russia ever since,” he said.

Russia on multiple occasions warned against an arms race in space and advocated for its use for peaceful purposes. President Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday that Moscow has always opposed the deployment of nuclear weapons in space.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has said that the United States and its allies are taking steps to place weapons in space and use outer space for combat operations, not only for defensive purposes.

The West continues to regard space as a new arena of rivalry and conflicts between countries, in which Russia and China are identified as the main opponents, the ministry said.

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American Public Satisfaction Falls During Biden Administration – Poll

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – Americans’ overall public satisfaction has fallen since US President Joe Biden took office three years ago, according to a Gallup poll released Thursday.

Gallup tracked 29 indicators during Biden’s presidency. Public satisfaction declined in 12, remained steady in 12, and improved in five. Overall, poor ratings exceeded strong ones by a substantial margin in the latest annual Mood of the Nation survey conducted from January 2-22.

Public satisfaction fell the most, by 11-12 percentage points, when it came to “military strength and preparedness;” “level of immigration;” “energy policies;” and “laws or policies on guns.” Ratings for all four were at or near their record lows, and a majority reported some degree of

satisfaction only for military strength and preparedness (62%).

Public satisfaction also fell regarding the amount of federal taxes; quality of medical care; abortion policies; wealth distribution; the economy; quality of public education; government regulation of businesses and industries; and "the position of women."

Overall, aside for military strength, the majority of Americans reported some degree of satisfaction only for "the position of women" (57%); "overall quality of life" (67%); "acceptance of gays and lesbians" (54%); "nation's security from terrorism" (52%); and "the opportunity for a person in this nation to get ahead by working hard" (56%).

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Top US Mobile Networks Face Mass Outage Reports - Downdetector

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – Tens of thousands of users of the three major mobile networks in the United States reported outages on Thursday beginning around 3:45 a.m. EST (8:45 GMT), according to reports compiled by the Downdetector website.

As of 7:00 a.m. EST, more than 51,000 reports had been filed on Downdetector for AT&T, more than 2,700 reports for Verizon, and more than 1,100 for T-Mobile.

It is unclear what may have caused the outages.

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US Lawmakers Arrive in Taiwan to 'Show Support' For President-Elect Lai - Statement

(Updates with details in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US House Chinese Communist Party Committee Chairman Mike Gallagher said in a statement that he and other US lawmakers have arrived in Taiwan to show support for President-elect Lai Ching-te.

"We are thrilled to be in Taipei to show our support for our friends in Taiwan, President-Elect Lai and the newly elected Legislative Yuan," Gallagher said on Wednesday. "The United States stands with Taiwan. By promoting deeper ties between our leaders and our economies we can enhance peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait."

The Committee in a separate press release said the US delegation will meet with senior Taiwan leaders and members of civil society to discuss US-Taiwan relations, regional security, trade and investment, and other significant issues of mutual interest.

Other lawmakers in the US delegation in Taipei include Raja Krishnamoorthi, John Moolenaar, Dusty Johnson and Seth Moulton, according to the release.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington told Sputnik China "firmly" opposes any form of official US interaction with Taiwan.

"We urge the US to have a clear understanding of the extreme complexity and sensitivity of the

Taiwan question, earnestly abide by the one-China principle and the three China-US joint communiqués, and act seriously in accordance with the commitments that have been reaffirmed multiple times by the US leaders to not supporting 'Taiwan independence', 'two Chinas' or 'one China, one Taiwan', and not seeking to use the Taiwan question as a tool to contain China," Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu said.

The United States must exercise extreme caution in handling Taiwan-related issues, and avoid sending any wrong signal to "Taiwan independence" separatist forces, Liu added.

Taiwan has been governed independently of mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province, while Taiwan — a territory with its own elected government — maintains that it is an autonomous country but stops short of declaring independence. Beijing opposes any official contact of foreign states with Taipei and considers Chinese sovereignty over the island indisputable.

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Pentagon to Cut Certain Weapon Programs to Stay Under Budget for 2025 - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon will cut \$10 billion worth of weapon programs to stay under budget for fiscal year 2025, Politico reported citing US and industry officials.

The report said on Wednesday that plans include cuts to F-35 fighter jet purchases, an attack submarine, and development of new Army helicopters and drones.

The Pentagon plans to submit its budget to Congress in early March, which is expected to be under \$850 billion for fiscal year 2025, the report added.

According to the report, under the expected budget proposal, the US military will cancel the replacement of the OH-58 Kiowa scout helicopter; end a service-life upgrade program for the Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter; delay production of improved turbine engines for the AH-64 Apache and Black Hawk helicopters; and retiring its fleet of AAI RQ-7 Shadow and AeroVironment RQ-11 Raven drones.

The Navy is also only expected to be able to build one new Virginia-class submarine under the 2025 budget, instead of two as has been usual for the last few decades. One Virginia-class submarine costs more than \$4 billion to be built.

Moreover, the report said the US Air Force will likely reduce its purchases of F-35 fighter jets by 18 percent this year.

Inflation is reportedly contributing to these tight budget cuts.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) –

RUSSIAN SUPREME COURT ON PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE CAMPAIGN CASE

* The Russian Supreme Court on Wednesday recognized the Central Election Commission's refusal to register Boris Nadezhdin as a presidential candidate legal.

* Nadezhdin said that he will appeal the Supreme Court's decision to reject his lawsuit related to the Central Election Commissions (CEC) refusal to register him as a presidential candidate.

* Nadezhdin told Sputnik that he plans to run in the 2026 State Duma (the parliament's lower house) elections in order not to be obliged to collect signature before the next presidential election in the country.

RUSSIA – CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS

* The relations between Russian and Uzbekistan are developing very intensively and have good prospects, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday.

* Uzbekistan has no doubts that Putin will decisively win his reelection on March 15-17, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev said.

* Relations between Moscow and Dushanbe are developing successfully, as the sides can easily resolve any issues, Putin told his Tajik counterpart, Emomali Rahmon.

* The relations between Russian and Kazakhstan are developing successfully, Putin said.

ISRAELI INVASION IN GAZA

* Israel needs to stop violating the international law and stop settlement activities on Palestinian lands, Russian representative at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) Vladimir Tarabrin said on Wednesday.

* The Palestinian movements of Fatah and Hamas are expected to have a direct dialogue in the course of the inter-Palestinian meetings in Moscow, a member of the Fatah governing body, Ayman al-Raqab, told Sputnik.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) has lost connection to its last remaining back-up external line and now receives electricity from one working line, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said on Tuesday.

* Ukraine has lost up to 450 soldiers in the Avdiivka direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* Republika Srpska is trying to discourage any possibility of joining sanctions against Moscow and refuses to move towards NATO membership, Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik said on Wednesday.

* The EU's 13th sanctions package against Russia will include the listing of additional 200 individuals and entities, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.

* The EU permanent representatives have approved on the 13th package of sanctions against Russia, the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU said.

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US Began Developing Latest Russia Sanctions Package Prior to Navalny's Death - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - A sanctions package against Russia set to be unveiled by the Biden administration on Friday has long been in the works and was not developed in response to the death of Alexei Navalny, Politico reported, citing three officials familiar with the matter.

The Biden administration has been working on the sanctions package to mark the two-year anniversary of the launch of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the report said on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, the White House said that the United States would unveil the sanctions package on Friday, in response to Navalny's death. Navalny died last week while serving a 19-year sentence for fraud and extremism. The cause of Navalny's death is being established.

US officials have been discussing whether to expand the sanctions package, although it appears difficult to manage in such a short timeframe, the report said.

The Biden administration is considering one military and two economic options, the report said. The United States could surge advanced weapons to Ukraine, impose more sanctions or crack down on sanctions evasion, the report said.

The US could also restrict Russian oil exports or seize frozen Russian assets to give to Ukraine, although such actions are unlikely to be part of the coming package, the report said.

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General Dynamics Wins \$1.3Bln Deal to Make 225 Armored Vehicles For Austria - Release

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - General Dynamics European Land Systems - Steyr (GDELS) has won a \$1.3 billion contract to produce 225 more PANDUR 6x6 EVO wheeled armored vehicles to the Austrian Armed Forces, the company announced in a press release.

"General Dynamics European Land Systems - Steyr (GDELS) said it has been awarded a contract to deliver an additional 225 PANDUR 6x6 EVO wheeled armored vehicles to the Austrian Armed Forces," the release said on Wednesday. "The contract has an initial value of 1.2 billion euros (US \$1.3 billion)."

GDELS already has 100 PANDUR EVO vehicles under contract, with the third batch currently in production and delivery, the company noted.

The new order also "includes eight new vehicle variants, including vehicles equipped with a 120mm mortar combat system, as well as mobile air defense and electronic warfare variants," GDELS said.

The PANDUR EVO 6x6 is built at GDELS' Steyr facility in Vienna Simmering and some 850 of the vehicles are currently operated by the armed forces of Belgium, the Czech Republic, Indonesia, Kuwait, Portugal, Slovenia, and the United States as well as other countries, the release said.

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US Navy Orders Almost \$790Mln Sharkcage Cybersecurity Program - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Accenture Federal Services has won an almost \$790 million US Navy contract for its Sharkcage Total Solution cybersecurity program, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Accenture Federal Services [of] Arlington, Virginia is awarded a ...\$789,507,575 ...contract for procurement of SHARKCAGE Total Solution," the release said on Wednesday.

Under the contract, Accenture will provide the Program Executive Office, Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence Program Manager, Warfare Cybersecurity (PMW 130) with ashore and afloat SHARKCAGE systems, the Defense Department explained.

The system will include "integrated Commercial and Commercial Off-the-Shelf (COTS) hardware and software specifically configured to provide Defensive Cyberspace Operations analytics across Navy networks (including) Information Technology-21, ONENet [and] Navy/Marine Corps Intranet," the release said.

Tasks supporting the delivery of these integrated Commercial and COTS systems include design, architecture, testing, production, delivery, installation support, and integrated logistics support, the Defense Department added.

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Stepanov Tells Canadian Officials That Navalny's Death Russia's Internal Matter- Statement

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik that during his meeting with Canadian officials, he called on Ottawa to refrain from interfering with Russia's internal affairs amid the death of Alexei Navalny.

"[Our Canadian counterparts] told us the same ... that they are concerned over [Navalny's] death, to which I replied that, as we said before, the death of any person is a tragedy, but this is a Russian national we are talking about and that means this is an internal matter of Russia. We do not interfere in Canadian affairs and urge Ottawa to follow the same principle," the statement said on Wednesday.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Canadian government summoned Stepanov in protest over Navalny's death in a prison in Russia.

On Friday, the Russian prison service said that Navalny died while incarcerated, adding that an investigation into the cause of death is underway.

In August 2023, Navalny, 47, was sentenced to 19 years in prison on extremism charges. At the time, he was already serving several sentences for fraud, embezzlement, contempt of court, and violation of probation. He pleaded not guilty to all the charges.

President Joe Biden said on the same day that the United States is unaware of how exactly Navalny died but he nevertheless blamed Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin has called such statements by Western politicians outrageous and unacceptable.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said that US officials should "show restraint" and wait for the results of the medical examination before commenting on Navalny's death.

The Foreign Ministry said it is interesting that the US government considers Navalny's death more important than the death of journalist Gonzalo Lira, a US citizen who was imprisoned and tortured in Ukraine for criticizing Volodymyr Zelenskyy's regime and subsequently died in a Ukrainian prison.

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Pentagon Says Turkish Firm to Help US Produce 30,000 Artillery Shells Per Month in Texas

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - A Turkish defense contractor will help the United States build munition lines capable of producing 30,000 artillery shells each month by the end of next year, a US Defense Department spokesperson said in a statement.

"The US Army is building three 155mm projectile metal parts lines in Texas," the spokesperson said on Wednesday. "The contract for the construction, installation, and follow-on production was awarded to General Dynamics Ordnance and Tactical Systems whose subcontractors include Turkish industry. By the end of 2025, all three lines are planned to be in operation and producing 30,000 projectile shell bodies per month."

The Pentagon highlighted that without additional supplemental funding or appropriations, the

US Defense Department is unable to make further investments of this type in the US defense industrial base.

The Pentagon is highlighting Congress' inaction on additional supplemental funding for Ukraine, Israel, and other programs deemed important for US national security.

The Senate sent over a \$95 billion foreign aid bill to the House of Representatives, but House Speaker Mike Johnson has been reluctant to take it up for a vote over differences in national security priorities.

The supplemental package includes funding to bolster US defense industrial supply chains. Moreover, US lawmakers have yet to pass a full spending package as deadlines loom in March 1 and 8 for the current short-term spending measure keeping the US government operating temporarily.

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Two-Thirds of US Voters Now Believe Biden Too Old to Serve Four More Years - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Two-thirds of American voters now believe President Joe Biden is too old to serve another four-year term in the White House, a dramatic doubling of the figure a year ago, a Quinnipiac University national poll of registered voters reported.

"Voters 67% – 31% think that President Joe Biden is too old to effectively serve another 4-year term as president, compared to 68 – 28% in Quinnipiac University's September 2023 poll," the organization reported on Wednesday.

By contrast, voters by 57% to 41% think that former president Donald Trump is not too old to effectively serve another 4-year term in the White House, compared to 63% – 34% in September, Quinnipiac said.

"Voters were asked whether Biden and Trump have the physical fitness and the mental fitness to serve a second presidential term. Physical fitness: Biden: 35% say yes, 62% say no; Trump: 60% say yes, 37% say no. Mental fitness: Biden: 34% say yes, 64% say no; Trump: 48% say yes, 51% say no," Quinnipiac said.

However, in a hypothetical 2024 general election presidential matchup, Biden holds a small lead over Trump with 49% of registered voters supporting Biden and 45% the pollsters found.

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Biden's Shepherd Commander Bit Secret Service Personnel At Least 24 Times – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden's dog, a German shepherd named Commander, bit Secret Service (USSS) personnel at the White House and other locations at least 24 times, CNN reported citing USSS internal records.

Commander joined the Bidens at the White House in December 2021 after his predecessor

Major, another German shepherd, was similarly banished for biting people. Major was rehomed with a Biden family friend in Delaware. He stayed at the White House for one year only to be banished after a series of biting incidents.

The documents describe a series of incidents that left some of Biden's guards seriously injured and bleeding as on July 29, 2023, at Rehoboth Beach, Delaware when a Secret Service agent received six stitches to his left forearm after Commander severely bit him while being off the leash, the report said on Wednesday.

During another incident, Commander bit another agent on the forearm while he was holding the door open for President Biden in the area between the West Wing and the residence at the White House, according to the report.

The biting incidents made the Biden family feel "awful" and "heartbroken" and apologize to Commander's victims verbally or by sending them flowers, the report cited a source close to the President as saying.

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Julian Assange's Wife Says UK Could Extradite Wikileaks Founder to US in 'Matter of Weeks'

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The wife of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, Stella Assange, said in an interview with Tucker Carlson that her husband could end up in the United States in a matter of weeks, pending the results of an extradition hearing in the United Kingdom. A UK court held hearings on Tuesday and Wednesday to consider a US extradition request for Assange. The US seeks to prosecute under the Espionage Act for obtaining and disclosing sensitive materials, for which he could face 175 years in prison.

"If the UK decides in favor of the US, then it will put Julian on a plane to the US. That is how imminent it is," Stella Assange said on Wednesday. "Julian could be on US soil within a matter of weeks."

The UK judges said they would withhold their decision for at least a week, Assange said. There are no further chances to appeal the extradition in UK courts, although the case could be brought to the European Court of Human Rights, Assange said.

Any US president who values constitutional protections for journalists should free the Wikileaks founder, Assange said. The case is politically motivated and "rotten to the core," Assange said.

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US Does Not Seek 'AI Arms Race' With Its Adversaries - Deputy Defense Chief

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The United States does not seek an artificial intelligence (AI) arms race with its adversaries, US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks said at the annual Defense Data and Artificial Intelligence Symposium.

"Investments in data, AI, and computers are empowering warfighters today...These efforts are advancing US capability in material ways, but they are not signs of an 'AI arms race,'" Hicks said on Wednesday. "That's not how we see it. Nor do we seek such an arms race."

Hicks further said that data and artificial intelligence are not weapons.

Data and artificial intelligence are fundamental, general purpose technologies, such as electricity, Hicks added.

Earlier this week, US House Speaker Mike Johnson and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries announced the establishment of a bipartisan task force on artificial intelligence.

The task force will aim to produce a report with guiding principles, recommendations, and policy proposals.

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Risk of US Weapons Diversion From Ukraine Will Continue After Conflict Ends - Think Tank

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The risk of the illegal diversion of US-provided weapons in Ukraine will continue after the conflict in the country ends, the Stimson Center think tank said in a report.

"Moreover, the weapons currently being transferred to Ukraine have long shelf lives that may extend well beyond the duration of this conflict. And as incentive structures that have thus far acted as a constraint on weapons diversion evolve, so too will the risks," the report said on Wednesday.

There are numerous examples of a cessation in hostilities preceding a surge in illicit arms flows, the report said. The United States must remain vigilant and respond to the evolving situation in the long term, the report said.

Artillery rounds and cluster munitions will leave behind "literal tons" of unexploded ordnance in Ukraine, which illicit actors could easily repurpose for unintended uses, the report said.

US oversight of weapons sent to Ukraine remains inadequate, despite investments in diversion mitigation, the report said. Last month, a US Defense Department inspector general report found that the Pentagon failed to meet monitoring requirements for approximately \$1 billion worth of equipment.

The US should also bolster efforts to ensure Ukraine complies with international humanitarian law and civilian protection obligations, the report said. The US should place conditions on the use of long-range strike capabilities, the report said.

Moreover, the US should work with European partners on diversion mitigation plans to ensure synchronization and deconfliction, the report said.

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US, Allies to Continue to Act to Protect Shipping From Houthi Attacks - State Dept

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies will continue taking "appropriate action" to protect commercial shipping in the Red Sea from ongoing Houthi attacks, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a statement.

"We and our partners will continue to take appropriate action, as needed, to protect freedom of navigation and commercial shipping from Houthi attacks in this critical international waterway and to safeguard vital economic and humanitarian assistance to countries in the region," the statement said on Wednesday.

Miller added that on February 16, the Houthis attacked and disabled a civilian ship, risking a spill of fertilizer and fuel that could threaten Yemen's fishing industry. On February 18 and 19, they targeted additional civilian vessels, including the Sea Champion, which was delivering food supplies to Yemen, Miller said.

"The Houthis actions ... are preventing the delivery of food and essential items on which the Yemeni people rely and making it difficult for humanitarians to do their essential work, endangering an already fragile humanitarian situation," Miller said.

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.

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House Conservatives Seek Major Policy Changes in Budget Bill, Risk Gov't Shutdown - Letter

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The House Freedom Caucus in a letter to House Speaker Mike Johnson said it would not support an omnibus spending package that does not include policy changes on their wishlist, increasing concerns of a government shutdown.

The current short-term spending bill keeping the US government open expires on March 1 and 8.

"If we are not going to secure significant policy changes or even keep spending below the caps adopted by bipartisan majorities less than one year ago, why would we proceed when we could instead pass a year-long funding resolution that would save Americans \$100 billion in year one?" the lawmakers said in the letter on Wednesday.

The House Freedom Caucus prefers another short-term spending bill if lawmakers can't agree on a federal spending budget that includes policy changes the caucus wants, including restricting parole for illegal migrants in entering the United States, defunding the Pentagon's abortion travel fund, defunding Biden's climate change actions, defunding anti-American organizations, prohibiting the Justice Department from censoring lawful speech, among other proposals.

There are many policies and personnel that Congress should not be funding, and a failure to eliminate them will reduce the probability that the appropriations bills will be supported by even a majority of Republicans, the letter stated.

The letter points out that the previous short-term spending bill passed with 107 Republicans supporting it and 106 Republicans opposing it.

The House Freedom Caucus requested an update on the appropriations negotiations going on behind closed doors to prevent rushing the legislation to a vote without giving lawmakers enough time to review any draft text of the legislation.

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CIA Head to Hold Hostage Talks With Qataris, Israelis, Egyptians in Paris – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Burns will be meeting with Israeli, Qatari and Egyptian officials in Paris this week to discuss a potential deal to release hostages taken by Hamas during its October 7 attack on Israel, Axios reported, citing an Israeli official in the know.

Burns is expected to travel to Paris on Friday in a bid to secure another hostage deal before the beginning of Ramadan while major gaps between Israel and Hamas remain, the report said on Wednesday.

The Biden administration has indicated that it wants to see a six-week ceasefire as part of the hostage deal between Israel and Hamas.

A delegation of senior Hamas officials arrived in Cairo on Tuesday for talks with Egyptian intelligence officials regarding the potential deal, and President Biden's top Middle East adviser Brett McGurk later met with director of the Egyptian intelligence service Abbas Kamel, the report said.

State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday that the United States wants Israel and Hamas to reach an agreement on a humanitarian pause before the Islamic holy month of Ramadan begins.

Ramadan begins on March 10. Observance of Ramadan through acts such as fasting and prayer is considered a fundamental practice of Islam.

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IMF Discusses Financial Program With Ukraine, Does Not Confirm It Is Close to New Payment

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund is currently discussing a financial program with Ukraine but cannot confirm that the parties are close to an agreement that would allow a new disbursement, an IMF spokesperson told Sputnik.

“An International Monetary Fund (IMF) team, led by Gavin Gray, is currently in Warsaw to

conduct the Third Review under the Extended Fund Facility Arrangement for Ukraine,” the spokesperson said.

The IMF team will disclose details at the end of the mission, the spokesperson added.

Western media reported earlier in the day that the IMF and Ukraine are close to an agreement over the next \$900 million disbursement from a \$15.6 billion loan.

When asked if the IMF could confirm that the fund and Ukraine are close to a new tranche of financing, the spokesperson answered negatively.

The IMF said in late January that external funds remain important for Ukraine to close its funding gap and their absence would adversely impact the country's macroeconomic environment.

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Judge in Georgia Case Against Trump Donated to Fani Willis' Campaign – Contribution Report

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Judge Scott McAfee in the Georgia election interference case against former US President Donald Trump donated to District Attorney Fani Willis' campaign in 2020 before his appointment, according to a campaign contribution disclosure report.

According to the contribution report, McAfee donated \$150 in June 2020 while serving as an assistant US Attorney for the Department of Justice.

Besides leading the court trial, McAfee is also the one who will decide whether Willis should be disqualified due to her romantic relationship with Special Prosecutor Nathan Wade who has been the key investigator in the election meddling case against Trump.

Last week, McAfee heard two days of testimony as part of Trump's motion to have Fani Willis disqualified due to her allegedly inappropriate ties with Wade.

During her testimony, Willis answered several questions detailing her romantic relationship with Wade, including their financial ties and joint trips to Caribbean resorts for which she claimed to reimburse Wade with cash.

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

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

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US Congressman Says Lawmakers Could Shut Down Government to Compel Border Security

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Matt Rosendale said on Wednesday that the US Congress could shut down the federal government in an effort to persuade the

Biden administration to secure the United States' borders from illegal immigration.

"The Biden administration is not going to do anything about securing our border ... unless we use the power of the purse strings, which means we have to stop funding other portions of government. Am I prepared to do that? Absolutely," Rosendale said in a video on social media platform X.

The situation at the southern border poses an existential threat to US national security, Rosendale said.

The US Congress has been considering several foreign aid packages in recent weeks, some of which also include border security measures. Lawmakers are attempting to address the national security issues ahead of government funding deadlines on March 1 and 8.

The House Freedom Caucus, of which Rosendale is a member, sent a letter to House Speaker Mike Johnson on Wednesday, requesting information on the status of funding negotiations. The House Republicans fear that lawmakers will attempt to rush an omnibus spending bill to the floor at the last moment, the letter said.

The letter requested information on negotiations related to several policy areas, including border security.

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US Extradites Czech Suspect for Iran-Directed Plot Against Journalist-Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The Justice Department revealed on Wednesday that Polad Omarov has been extradited from the Czech Republic to face charges in New York for his alleged role in a murder-for-hire plot targeting a journalist, as directed by contacts in Iran.

"Damian Williams, The United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Merrick B. Garland, the Attorney General of the United States; and Christopher A. Wray, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, announced the extradition of Polad Omarov from the Czech Republic on murder-for-hire and money laundering charges contained in a Superseding Indictment," the Justice Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

Polad Omarov, linked to an Eastern European crime syndicate, worked with colleagues to assassinate a US journalist of Iranian origin on Iran's orders, engaging in surveillance and a failed mid-July 2022 assassination attempt stopped by law enforcement, according to the statement.

Omarov was arrested in the Czech Republic on January 4, 2023, upon the United States' request and arrived in the Southern District of New York on February 21, 2024, the statement said.

The statement added that later today, Omarov is set to be arraigned on the charges outlined in the Superseding Indictment before US Magistrate Judge Sarah Cave.

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

State Dept Claims Russia Has No Advantage on Battlefield in Ukraine Despite Avdiivka

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – The United States believes Russia has no advantage on the battlefield even though it has had significant successes over the past weeks, including in Avdiivka, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"No, we do not believe that at all," Miller said when asked if Russia now has an advantage on the battlefield after it ousted Ukrainian armed forces from Avdiivka.

On Tuesday, Miller said that the takeover of Avdiivka became the first notable gain in months amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

On Saturday, Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrskyi announced the decision to withdraw troops from Avdiivka. Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that the decision to pull out the troops had been made to "save people's lives." On the same day, the Russian Defense Ministry confirmed that the Russian military had taken full control of Avdiivka.

For the last nine years, Avdiivka has been one of the most fortified outposts of the Ukrainian armed forces in Donbas. The town was used by Ukraine for sometimes daily artillery shelling of residential areas of Donetsk, killing hundreds of civilians.

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US WWII Veteran on Hunka: Nazi Criminals Should Never Have Survived Unpunished

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – Nazi criminals who have committed crimes against humanity should never have survived so long without punishment, US World War II veteran Frank Cohn told Sputnik on Wednesday when asked about Canada's refusal to extradite Ukrainian SS veteran Yaroslav Hunka.

"They are now in the late 90s or above, and they should never have survived this far without a proper punishment. But they did," said Cohn, a 98-year-old retired US Army Colonel.

Canada rejected earlier in February Russia's request to extradite Yaroslav Hunka, the Ukrainian Nazi veteran who received a standing ovation in the Canadian parliament in September during the address of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Cohn lamented the fact that Nazi criminals have been able to avoid prosecution for decades, and that many more have escaped than were prosecuted. "And I am talking about real criminals, not just minor participants " he said.

"At this stage, I do not have much satisfaction even if we have a conviction, because for all practical purposes, the offender has beat the system by not getting punished when he should have been punished," Cohn said.

Cohn emphasized that criminals have to be prosecuted despite their age if authorities have proper evidence of their crimes. However, he conceded that doing so can be quite difficult after so many years.

"But at a minimum, don't start singing praises for them, that would set me off and require a

correction. They will die, but let them do that without a thank you," he said.

In September 2023, Hunka, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Canadian, was invited to attend Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address at the Parliament of Canada. Hunka was introduced as a hero who fought against the Russians during World War II and received two standing ovations from the entire Canadian legislature.

In October, Hunka was charged in absentia with genocide of civilians during World War II by the Russian Investigative Committee. He is accused of participating in large-scale executions of at least 500 civilians in the Lviv region of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic from 1943-1944. In December, the Russian Prosecutor General's Office told Sputnik that it had requested that Hunka be extradited to Russia to face criminal charges of genocide against Soviet citizens.

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Head of Boeing's 737 Max Program Leaves Company After Midair Mishap Last Month - Memo

(Updates with changes to attribution in headline, para 1; details in paras 2,3)

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The head of Boeing's 737 Max program is leaving the company following a midair mishap with the 737 Max 9 aircraft last month, according to an internal company email obtained by Sputnik on Wednesday.

"Ed Clark is leaving the company. Ed departs with my, and our, deepest gratitude for his many significant contributions over nearly 18 years of dedicated service to Boeing," Boeing Commercial Airplanes President and CEO Stan Deal said in an email sent to all employees on Wednesday morning.

Deal added that Katie Ringgold will succeed Clark as vice president and general manager of the company's 737 program at the Renton site.

Clark, who took over the 737 Max program in 2021, oversaw production of Boeing's Max 737 aircraft at the factory in Renton, Washington, media reported.

Boeing's 737 MAX jet saw a string of in-flight incidents following its recertification in 2020. Most recently, the United States ordered the aircraft grounded again after a cabin panel blew out in midair on a flight from Oregon last month.

Clark previously attributed the decline in the US aircraft manufacturer's standards to management and governance missteps driven by Boeing's overbearing concerns about gains.

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Yakuza Leader Charged in International Nuclear Trafficking Scheme - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department announced on Wednesday a superseding indictment against Yakuza leader Takeshi Ebisawa for his role in an international nuclear materials trafficking operation.

"The United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York ... announced the issuance today of a Superseding Indictment charging Takeshi Ebisawa with conspiring with a network of associates to traffic nuclear materials from Burma to other countries," the Justice Department said in a statement.

Beginning in early 2020, Ebisawa disclosed to undercover agents and a confidential source his possession of a vast amount of nuclear materials for sale, sent evidence including photographs and lab analyses, and engaged in discussions to sell these materials and military-grade weapons, the statement said.

"In the course of this conspiracy, Ebisawa and his confederates showed samples of nuclear materials in Thailand to a DEA undercover agent, who was posing as a narcotics and weapons trafficker. With the assistance of Thai authorities, the nuclear samples were seized and subsequently transferred to the custody of US law enforcement," the statement said.

Later, a US nuclear forensic laboratory confirmed the samples contained uranium and weapons-grade plutonium after analysis, the statement said.

Ebisawa and co-defendant Somphop Singhasiri were previously charged in April 2022 with international narcotics trafficking and firearms offenses. Both are set for arraignment on the superseding indictment before US District Judge Colleen McMahon tomorrow.

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Head of Boeing's 737 Max Program Leaves Company After Midair Mishap Last Month - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The head of Boeing's 737 Max program is leaving the company following a midair mishap with the 737 Max 9 aircraft last month, the New York Times reported on Wednesday.

The report said, citing an internal company memo, that Ed Clark, the head of Boeing's 737 Max program is leaving the company immediately.

Clark, who took over the 737 Max program in 2021, oversaw production of Boeing's Max 737 aircraft at the factory in Renton, Washington, according to the report.

Boeing's 737 MAX jet saw a string of in-flight incidents following its recertification in 2020. Most recently, the United States ordered the aircraft grounded again after a cabin panel blew out in midair on a flight from Oregon last month.

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State Dept Says Luxury Car Putin Gifted to Kim Constitutes Violation of UNSC Resolutions

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - A Russia-produced luxury limousine that President Vladimir Putin presented to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un violates UN Security Council resolutions, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"Once again, Russia is violating UN Security Council resolutions," Miller told reporters, when asked to comment on the gift.

Miller quipped he "frankly didn't know there is such a thing as a Russian luxury car" and "hopes" Kim "got an extended warranty."

"UN Security Council resolutions do require all member states to prohibit both the supply of transportation vehicles and the supply of luxury automobiles to the DPRK," Miller said.

North Korean media reported that Kim had received a gift from Putin. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov confirmed that the Russian president had gifted a luxury Aurus car to Kim. Kim had liked an Aurus car when he visited the Vostochny Cosmodrome with President Putin in September, Peskov said.

A South Korean Foreign Ministry spokesperson said in response that all UN member states should "strictly abide" by UN Security Council resolutions regarding North Korea. Seoul is closely monitoring compliance with resolutions and will "continue, in cooperation with the international community, to make diplomatic efforts to faithfully implement UN Security Council resolutions," the ministry stated.

If South Korea has concerns about compliance with UN sanctions against North Korea, it should appeal to the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

Along with this issue, the committee will have an opportunity to discuss the illegal restrictions on Russia and West-led sanctions wars that have "killed the very nature of international law," Zakharova pointed out.

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'Online Harms Bill' Focused on Protecting Kids, Not Against Freedom of Speech – Trudeau

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday that the Online Harms Bill, set to be introduced in the coming weeks in the House of Commons, is not aimed at restricting free speech, but rather at protecting children.

"We need to make sure ... to protect our kids online. Now, how to go about doing that is a very careful balance? We need to make sure we're protecting freedom of expression. We need to make sure we're protecting the freedoms and the rights of Canadians while we protect kids," Trudeau said during a press conference.

Earlier on Wednesday, the leader of Canada's Conservative Party Pierre Poilievre said he would oppose the Online Harms Bill as he considered it an attack on freedom of expression and an attempt to censor "speech that Trudeau hates."

The Conservative politician then raised the question of who would be in charge of determining what hate speech consists of in Canada, arguing that Trudeau was unfit to do so considering his "racist" past, alluding to the blackface scandal and instances of him dressing in ethnic attire,

seen by many as hateful behavior.

Addressing the comments made earlier by Poilievre, Trudeau said that the Conservative leader was not demonstrating responsible leadership as he was already telling Canadians what the bill was about without having read the yet-to-be tabled legislation.

“I think responsible leadership is about dealing in facts, actually reading a piece of legislation before you start telling people what you think it does, and then having a rigorous debate in Parliament about how to best protect kids,” Trudeau said.

In 2014, the then Conservative government repealed Section 13 of the Canadian Human Rights Act. The part in question said it was a discriminatory practice for an individual or a group of people acting in concert to expose someone to "hatred and contempt" based on a prohibited ground for discrimination such as race, national or ethnic origin, color, or religion, among others.

Following the 2021 elections, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised to table an online harms bill within 100 days that would also target terrorist content, hate speech, and images of child sexual abuse. The proposal was however met with concerns about its implications for freedom of speech, notably as web giants would be required to monitor and take down publications on their platforms.

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Progress on US Inflation Could Stall, Magnifying Risks of Cutting Rates Too Quickly - Fed

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The progress made by inflation fighters at the Federal Reserve could stall if current restrictive policies are taken away too soon, the central bank's policymakers noted at their meeting last month in another sign that it may not be time yet to cut rates, minutes of the meeting released showed on Tuesday.

“Several participants mentioned the risk that financial conditions were or could become less restrictive than appropriate, which could add undue momentum to aggregate demand and cause progress on inflation to stall,” said the minutes of the January 30-31 meeting of the central bank's Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC.

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UPDATE - Progress on US Inflation Could Stall, Magnifying Risks of Cutting Rates Too Quickly - Fed

(Adds details, comments and context, paragraphs 3-15)

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At the January meeting, the FOMC said it will “carefully assess incoming data, the evolving outlook, and the balance of risks” in considering any adjustments to rates, which it left unchanged for a fourth month in a row at between 5.25% and 5.5%.

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

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

Prior to the release of the Fed’s meeting minutes on Tuesday, Michelle Bowman, one of the central bank’s seven governors, reportedly said it might be premature to roll back on monetary tightening at this point, or even contemplate a rate cut.

The Fed hopes to cut rates after bringing inflation back to an annual rate of 2%. Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, grew 3.1% in the year to January.

Prior to the 2020 coronavirus outbreak, CPI rarely crossed 2% a year. In June 2022, it, however, hit a four-decade high of more than 9% per annum.

The FOMC meeting minutes noted that while the risks to achieving the committee’s goals on employment and inflation were moving into better balance, the Fed’s policymakers remained highly attentive to inflation risks.

“In particular, they saw upside risks to inflation as having diminished but noted that inflation was still above the Committee’s longer-run goal,” the minutes noted. “Some participants noted the risk that progress toward price stability could stall, particularly if aggregate demand strengthened or suppyside healing slowed more than expected.”

The FOMC said participants at the January meeting also highlighted the uncertainty associated with how long a restrictive monetary policy stance would need to be maintained and whether the Fed could risk cutting rates too quickly.

“Most participants noted the risks of moving too quickly to ease the stance of policy and emphasized the importance of carefully assessing incoming data in judging whether inflation is moving down sustainably to 2 percent,” the committee said in the January meeting minutes.

Only a couple of participants pointed to the downside risks of maintaining an overly restrictive stance for too long, the FOMC said.

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Biden’s Brother Says President Never Had Involvement, Financial Stake in Business Ventures

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden’s brother, James Biden, said on Wednesday that his sibling never got involved or financially benefited from his business activities.

“I have had a 50-year career in a variety of business ventures. Joe Biden has never had any involvement or any direct or indirect financial interest in those activities,” James Biden said in an

opening statement as part of his deposition before the House Oversight and Judiciary Committees.

Biden said he never asked his older brother to take any official action on behalf of him or his business associates. Biden said he relied on his own talent, not his connection to the president, in his career.

Biden's testimony comes amid an impeachment inquiry by the US House of Representatives into alleged criminal activity by the Biden family.

House lawmakers are also seeking information from Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, who will sit for his own deposition with the two committees on February 28.

There is no basis for the investigation to continue, James Biden said in the statement.

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Progress on US Inflation Could Stall, Magnifying Risks of Cutting Rates Too Quickly - Fed

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NASA Still Committed to Keeping ISS Operating Until 2030 - Administrator

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - NASA plans to keep the International Space Station operating as planned at least until 2030, the US space agency's administrator Bill Nelson said on Wednesday.

"We are going to keep the station going for another six years at least now that you are finally getting breakthroughs in your research and we earthlings are going to be the beneficiaries of what you are doing," Nelson told three astronauts currently serving among the crew of the station.

The research currently being done on the station would hopefully lead to human organs and eye retinas being successfully made by 3D printing in orbit where virtually zero gravity conditions were much more favorable to the process than on Earth, US astronaut Jasmin Moghbeli said.

"Perhaps we can print organs instead of relying on [a limited supply of human] donors ... [On

printing eye retinas] I believe that is going to be done in the future," she said.

Japanese astronaut Satoshi Furukawa said the favorable weightless conditions for research on board the ISS allowed scientists to understand the structure of proteins far better and that this would advance the development of new medicines on Earth.

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Fulton County Ethics Board to Pick Up 2 Complaints About Fani Willis in March - Agenda

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – The Fulton County Board of Ethics will consider two complaints about District Attorney Fani Willis, who is conducting the prosecution in the Georgia case against former US President Donald Trump, on March 7, according to a meeting agenda published by the board on Wednesday.

“The Fulton County Board of Ethics will hold a special meeting on Thursday, March 7, 2024, at 10:00 a.m. at the Fulton County Government Center, 4th Floor, Main Conference Room 4056, located 141 Pryor Street, Atlanta, Georgia 30303,” the text of the agenda read.

The board will consider two complaints about Willis’ ethical misconduct submitted by Gregory Mantel and Steven Kramer, according to the document.

Last week, a court in Georgia began hearing Trump’s motion alleging an improper relationship between Special Prosecutor Nathan Wade and Willis and claiming financial impropriety and lavish vacations funded by taxpayer money.

During her testimony, Willis answered several questions detailing her romantic relationship with Wade, including their financial ties and joint trips to Caribbean resorts for which she claimed to reimburse Wade with cash.

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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Majority of Likely US Voters Think Domestic Issues More Important Than Ukraine Aid - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - A majority of likely voters in the United States believe that the country must address domestic concerns before sending further aid to Ukraine, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll released Wednesday.

More than two-thirds of respondents, 67%, strongly or somewhat agree that the US should “fix” domestic problems before providing more resources to Ukraine, the poll report said.

A significant majority of respondents, 87%, believe that it is very or somewhat important for the US to secure its borders, the poll report said. In comparison, 64% of respondents believe that

sending military aid to Ukraine is very or somewhat important, the poll report said.

The poll comes amid negotiations in the US Congress on legislation to provide Ukraine and Israel with billions of dollars in aid, to which some lawmakers have tried to attach border security measures.

The poll surveyed 868 likely US voters from February 13-15. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Russia Concerned Over Ownership of UAVs by Opponents to CAR Government - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 21 (Sputnik) - Russia is worried about the ownership of new types of lethal weapons, especially UAVs, by opponents of the legitimate Central African Republic (CAR) government, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative Eva Evstigneeva said on Wednesday.

"We are also concerned that the arsenal of the opponents of legitimate Central African authorities now includes new types of lethal weapons. Specifically, cases have been recorded of the use of unmanned aerial vehicles by them," Evstigneeva told the Security Council members during a meeting on the Central African Republic.

We are also concerned about the use of improvised explosive devices, she added.

Earlier today, the UN called Explosive Ordnance Devices including light weapons a constraint to the delivery of humanitarian assistance in an area where half of the CAR population lives.

The President of the Central African Republic Faustin-Archange Touadera paid a visit to Moscow from February 14-16 and discussed current issues of the bilateral and international agenda. Russian President Putin did not hold a meeting with Touadera.

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Extra Secret Service Agent Stationed for Biden's Safety on Air Force One Stairs - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - West Wing aides have disclosed, due to concerns about President Joe Biden's risk of tripping, that an extra Secret Service agent has been positioned at the bottom of Air Force One's stairs, the Daily Mail reported on Wednesday.

According to the report, these measures come in response to Biden's previous incidents, including the one in Delaware in June 2022 when he was riding his bike, at an Air Force Academy Graduation Ceremony in June 2023, and several times on Air Force One stairs, which pose both health and political concerns.

Moreover, the report said that Biden often starts his day with a 45-minute workout with a physical therapist, concentrating on balancing exercises to address his increasingly stiff gait, first observed in a 2021 physical examination by a White House physician.

Additionally, Biden wears slip-resistant sneakers over the traditional dress shoes that would normally accompany his \$2,000 custom Italian suits, the report added.

Biden, 81, is the oldest person to be sworn in as US president. There have been concerns about his age in light of his decision to participate in the 2024 election.

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Blinken in Meeting With Brazil's Lula Discusses Gaza, Venezuela and Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a bilateral meeting with Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula on Wednesday discussed matters related to the conflict in Gaza, as well as regional issues between Venezuela and Guyana, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a press release.

"The secretary discussed US engagement on the conflict in Gaza, including working urgently with partners to facilitate the release of all hostages and to increase humanitarian assistance and improve protections for Palestinian civilians," Miller said.

Media reported that Blinken during the meeting with Lula discussed US efforts to facilitate a temporary ceasefire that would allow for the release of more hostages and increase humanitarian aid assistance for Gaza.

The two also discussed the conflict in Ukraine, and Blinken made clear that the United States does not see the conditions needed for diplomacy, Reuters reported.

Blinken, who is in Rio de Janeiro to attend the G20 foreign ministers meeting, also highlighted Brazil's role in de-escalating tensions between Guyana and Venezuela over the Essequibo region, as well as the urgent need for international assistance to improve the security situation in Haiti, according to Miller.

Blinken also discussed with Lula efforts to strengthen cooperation on critical minerals with Brazil, including through the Minerals Security Partnership, Miller added.

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Texas Moon Lander With NASA Science Payloads Reaches Moon Orbit- Statement

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – Texas space exploration company Intuitive Machines announced in a statement on Wednesday that its IM-1 mission Nova-C class lunar has reached lunar orbit.

"Odysseus completed its scheduled 408-second main engine lunar orbit insertion burn and is currently in a 92 km circular lunar orbit. Initial data indicates the 800 m/s burn was completed within 2 m/s accuracy," the company said.

In addition, the company said that over the next day, while the lander remains in lunar orbit, flight controllers will analyze the complete flight data and transmit imagery of the Moon.

The IM-1 mission launched from Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida on February 15 at 1:05 a.m. EST. It reached its intended orbit approximately 48 minutes later and established first communication with the lander at 1:59 a.m. EST.

Intuitive Machines CEO Steve Altemus acknowledged the "immense challenges that lie ahead" in attempting to conduct the first successful US mission to the Moon in 52 years.

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US Lawmakers Urge Biden to Delete His TikTok Account, Improve National Security - Letter

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – A group of 16 Republican Senators and House members called on US President Joe Biden on Wednesday to delete his TikTok account to prioritize national security.

"We urge you to delete your account and publicly acknowledge the national security threat posed by TikTok," the group led by Senator Marco Rubio and Congressman Troy Nehis said in a letter.

The letter stressed that the Biden campaign made its first post on TikTok during the Super Bowl on February 11. US lawmakers expressed concerns that this platform endangers national security and urged Biden to delete his account and thereby set an example for other Americans.

They recalled that the US administration had already taken steps to limit the use of TikTok on devices linked to federal agencies.

"In short, there was a time when your administration publicly stated the threat posed by TikTok. It is incredibly troubling, then, that you are now ignoring TikTok's well-established national security risks," lawmakers said.

US media earlier reported that the Biden campaign was considering using TikTok to reach out to more younger voters who use this platform.

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UN Official Urges Security Council to Respond to Spread of Lethal Weapons, Ordnance in CAR

UNITED NATIONS, February 21 (Sputnik) - UN Special Representative for the Central African Republic Valentine Rugwabiza on Wednesday urged the UN Security Council to support a multidimensional response aimed at reducing the spread of lethal weapons in the Central African Republic (CAR).

"I therefore wish to request the Council's support for an urgent, dedicated and truly multidimensional response to this threat both for the protection of civilians, and safety and security of our peacekeepers. We need to do the utmost to prevent this spread of these lethal weapons to other regions of the CAR," Rugwabiza said during a Security Council meeting on the Central African Republic.

Rugwabiza underscored the need to prevent weapons from spreading to other regions of the country.

Explosive ordnance devices and light weapons constrain the delivery of humanitarian assistance in places where half of the CAR population live, she added.

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US Energy Secretary Says LNG Export Pause Will Not Impact Ties to Allies

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's pause on new liquefied natural gas (LNG) export projects will not impact the United States' relationships with allies, US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said on Wednesday.

"This is not going to impact any relationship that we have with our allies, or their ability to access energy," Granholm said during an interview with the National Press Club.

In January, the Biden administration paused the approval of new LNG exports, pending an Energy Department review of the underlying analyses used for authorizations.

There is "no logic" to the Biden administration's effort, former Texas energy regulator Ryan Sitton told Sputnik. Opening up LNG export facilities would lower the impact of coal-fired power plants by providing more LNG energy to the world, Sitton said.

Earlier this month, the US House of Representatives passed legislation to end the export restriction. The White House said the Biden administration opposes the bill, contending that the legislation undermines the US' ability to ensure LNG exports are consistent with economic, foreign policy and environmental interests.

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Canada's Conservative Party to Oppose Gov't Bill Addressing Online 'Hate Speech' - Leader

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – Canada's Conservative Party will oppose the Online Harms Bill and sees it as an attack on freedom of expression, leader Pierre Poilievre said on Wednesday.

In 2014, the then Conservative government repealed Section 13 of the Canadian Human Rights Act. The part in question said it was a discriminatory practice for an individual or a group of people acting in concert to expose someone to "hatred and contempt" on the basis of a prohibited ground for discrimination such as race, national or ethnic origin, color, or religion, among others.

Following the 2021 elections, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised to table an online harms bill within 100 days that would also target terrorist content, hate speech and images of child sexual abuse. The proposal was however met with concerns about its implications for freedom of speech, notably as web giants would be required to monitor and take down publications on

their platforms.

"Yes, we will oppose Justin Trudeau's latest attack on freedom of expression ... What does Justin Trudeau mean when he says hate speech? He means speech he hates," Poilievre said.

Trudeau considers everything that has to do with his "radical agenda" for children and opposition to it to be hate speech, Poilievre argued. He also wondered who would be in charge of determining what is to be considered as such.

The prime minister is unfit to determine what could be seen as hate speech in Canada, Poilievre stated, pointing to what he called Trudeau's "racist" past.

"I point out the irony that someone who spent the first half of his adult life as a practicing racist, who dressed up in racist hideous costumes ... should then be the arbiter of what constitutes hate," Poilievre said. "What he should actually do is look into his own heart and ask himself why he was such a hateful racist ... why he had so much hate in his heart that he was such an awful racist."

The Conservative leader was referencing Trudeau's blackface incidents and instances of him dressing in ethnic attire, which were seen by many as hateful behavior.

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US Offers \$15Mln for Information on LockBit Ransomware Leaders - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The State Department announced on Wednesday a reward of up to \$15 million for information that results in the arrest or identification of individuals behind LockBit ransomware attacks.

"The Department of State is announcing reward offers totaling up to \$15 million for information leading to the arrest and/or conviction of any individual participating in a LockBit ransomware variant attack and for information leading to the identification and/or location of any key leaders of the LockBit ransomware group," the State Department said in a statement.

LockBit actors have carried out more than 2,000 attacks globally since January 2020, leading to significant operational disruptions and the loss or theft of sensitive data, according to the statement.

"More than \$144 million in ransom payments have been made to recover from LockBit ransomware events," the statement added.

The reward announcement comes a day after the US Justice Department unsealed an indictment that charged two Russian nationals, Artur Sungatov and Ivan Kondratyev, with allegedly attacking numerous individuals and businesses in the US with LockBit ransomware.

Three additional criminal counts against Kondratyev were unsealed in the Northern District of California in connection with the Sodinokibi/Revil ransomware attack on a corporation located in California in 2020, the DOJ said.

The US Treasury also designated the two individuals on Tuesday.

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Biden Mulls Unilateral Action to Make Gaining Asylum Harder, Deportation Easier - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration is weighing taking a unilateral step without Congress to make it harder for migrants to get asylum at the border with Mexico and fast track deportation of those recently arrived, NBC News reported on Wednesday, citing officials familiar with the matter.

The new policy, which aims to lower the number of migrants at the southern border, is still weeks away from finalization, the report said.

It would instruct asylum officers to raise standards in their "credible fear interviews" with asylum seekers. Immigration and Customs Enforcement would also be asked to prioritize recently arrived migrants for deportation in a so-called "last in, first out" policy, the officials said.

It is still unclear whether the Biden administration would implement the measure through an executive order or a new federal regulation, according to the report.

An official from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) expressed doubts over the "last in, first out" policy, pointing out that the measure would leave millions of migrants already in the US in a long legal limbo, the report said.

Congress should still act on border enforcement, a DHS spokesperson said in a statement to NBC.

"If Congress once again refuses to provide the critical funding needed to support DHS's vital missions, they would be harming DHS's efforts to deliver tough and timely consequences to those who do not have a legal basis to remain in the country," the spokesperson said. "There are real limits to what we can do given current funding because Congress has failed to pass a budget or respond to the President's two supplemental budget requests. We again call on Congress to act and provide the funding and tools our frontline personnel need."

Last week, the US Senate passed a \$95 billion supplemental funding bill with Ukraine and Israel aid, but no border security measures. It came after House Republicans rejected border provisions that a bipartisan Senate group had proposed as inadequate. House Speaker Mike Johnson said that the lower chamber has no plans to consider the current legislation.

A bipartisan group of US House lawmakers has since unveiled a \$66.32 billion spending bill with aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, as well as border security measures to address the migrant influx.

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US Sent Weapons to Ukraine Without Plan to Maintain Them - Pentagon Auditor

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – The Pentagon failed to plan for the upkeep of high-tech military equipment it sent to Ukraine in a move that could render the weapons useless

on the battlefield, Pentagon Inspector General (IG) Robert Storch said.

"The DoD [Department of Defense] provided Ukraine with armored vehicles and air defense systems without a plan to ensure their long-term usefulness," Storch said in a statement on Tuesday as he released two audits of weapons sent to Ukraine between January and September 2023.

The two audits found that the Pentagon's "lack of foresight" could ultimately render weapons including Bradleys, Strykers, Abrams tanks and Patriot air defense systems useless on the battlefield.

"These reports concluded that without deliberate and planned sustainment support, including proper spare parts, ammunition, and maintenance support, the Ukrainians would not be capable of maintaining these weapon systems in their ongoing fight against Russia's full-scale invasion," Storch said.

The audits found that the Pentagon only provided limited spare parts, ammunition and maintenance support to Ukraine and failed to consider the costs of sustaining the weapons in the long term.

Storch pointed out that without resolving outstanding issues, the Pentagon could not accurately predict sustainment costs or assess the long-term readiness impacts to US military units that also operate these systems.

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US to 'Imminently' Open Embassy in Vanuatu, Discussing Embassy in Kiribati - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – The US intends to "imminently" open an embassy in Vanuatu and is "actively discussing" the possibility of opening one in Kiribati, Daniel Kritenbrink, US assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, said on Wednesday.

"We intend to open an embassy imminently in Vanuatu, and we're actively discussing our interest in opening an embassy with the government of Kiribati," Kritenbrink said at an Atlantic Council conference.

The initiatives come as the US attempts to deepen bilateral relationships with countries in Global South in order to fend off Chinese influence, Kritenbrink said.

Last year, in the Pacific region, the US opened embassies in the Solomon Islands, Tonga, and the Maldives and recognized the Cook Islands as a sovereign state and established diplomatic relations with it.

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US Restricts Visas for Transport Operators 'Facilitating Irregular Migration' - State Dept

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will impose visa restrictions on transportation operators used by people who aim to irregularly migrate to the United States, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The State Department is today implementing a new visa restriction policy under Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) Section 212(a)(3)(C) that targets owners, executives, and senior officials of charter flight, ground, and maritime transportation companies providing transportation services designed for use primarily by persons intending to migrate irregularly to the United States," Miller said in a statement.

The new restrictions expand a previous policy that only applied to charter flight operators transporting US-bound migrants to Nicaragua, mostly from Haiti, Cuba and Africa.

Miller said the new policy targets transport operators who "prey on vulnerable migrants," often making them pay "extortion-level prices" and take unnecessary risks to travel to the US or other countries.

"No one should profit from vulnerable migrants—not smugglers, private companies, public officials, or governments," Miller said.

The newly announced US policy comes amid record migration to the United States. US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) documented more than 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded.