

3/13/24 Wednesday

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Biden's \$1Trln Military Budget To Fund 'Boutique, Expensive, Fragile' Equipment

Monday, US President Joe Biden unveiled a \$7.3 trillion budget, including \$895 billion of military funding. That number balloons to over \$1.5 trillion when including the "emergency supplemental" military spending that Biden requested from Congress and other military expenses like the Veteran Affairs and interest on security-related debt.

The request, representing the most expensive military in world history, is the result of military contractors who are incentivized "to sell expensive items, not necessarily the most useful and effective items," Independent journalist Jim Kavanagh told [Sputnik's The Critical Hour](#) on Wednesday.

We have seen in Ukraine "with the [destruction of the Abrams tanks](#) and the HIMARS missiles, that the American equipment is boutique," Kavanagh said. "[Military contractors] send expensive, boutique, very complicated, fragile equipment," which inflates the military budget. Kavanagh contrasted that with the simpler Russian equipment, "that's cheaper to build and is suited for hard condition warfare."

"The whole [US Military Contracting economy](#) from beginning to end is corruption and [the] destruction of society, turning us into a militarized, censored society," referencing the "ludicrous" so-called "TikTok Ban" that just passed the US House of Representatives but gives the government sweeping powers to ban any foreign website or app it deems a threat.

Kavanagh decried the corruption while there are issues in America that could be addressed with that money, but he asserted that would get in the way of "neoliberal capitalism."

"They're not going to put \$1 trillion or half a trillion or \$10 billion into building housing for the people because that's going to compete with private market housing," Kavanagh explained.

"Capitalists don't care if [the government] spends billions of dollars on a sector of the economy that is going to be controlled by the government one way or another," he continued. "But you want to build houses? You want to spend money on healthcare? You want to spend money on jobs for the people? No, because you'll be competing with capitalists."

The issue cannot be solved by voting for Biden's most prominent opponent in the upcoming presidential election Kavanagh explained, because former President Donald Trump is also "focused on getting all the money to the military-industrial-complex."

"This is the best you're going to get from either party. Perpetual warfare, nothing to do for your healthcare, nothing to do for housing and rental, nothing to do for jobs... But \$1 trillion for military plus supplemental appropriations, this is what the United States is in for if we don't have a change and that is not going to come from either the Democrats or the Republicans."

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Ted Rall: 'No Appetite' for French Deployment, Even Within Military

According to internal French defense establishment documents leaked earlier this week by French media, the Ukraine lacks the “critical mass of land forces” to challenge Russia and that “the gravest error of analysis and judgment would be to continue to seek exclusively military solutions” adding that “Ukraine cannot win this war militarily.”

The leaked documents were published soon after French President Emmanuel Macron raised the possibility of deploying French troops to Ukraine. Political analyst and cartoonist Ted Rall told [Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) on Tuesday that he suspects the documents were leaked because there is no “appetite for sending French troops [to Ukraine], and that includes within the French military.”

“There are at least some factions inside the French military who think this would be a truly idiotic idea, and they’re not into it. So, they’re like ‘Alright, we’ll leak this and once the public gets wind, they’ll blow it up.’”

Rall said it surprised him that Macron would consider military action, considering French history. “The last time they had something like an invasion, I think it was in New Caledonia, which is a French island, kind of like Guam is for the United States. But, it didn’t go well, and the French troops were met with heavy resistance,” Rall explained, also pointing to Algeria’s independence struggle against France which he called “basically their Vietnam.”

“I don’t know why [Macron] would say that a French [operation], or even a French [operation] as part of a European project in Ukraine would be likely to go any better than these other disasters,” he added.

Among the general public, Rall notes that they have always been “highly distrustful of government,” saying “They’re just going to hate this. This was a dumb idea [by Macron]. It’s very strange because Macron really did have complete domination of the French political system for a number of years. I don’t know if he’s in the Élysée bubble. He just doesn’t seem to have any access to what ordinary people are thinking.”

Co-host Garland Nixon asked about parliamentary commissioner for the Bundeswehr, Eva Hoegl’s comments on Tuesday that the German military is short on “everything” after sending supplies to Ukraine.

Rall said he is “never sad to hear that Germany of all countries...might not have enough military hardware” but said it is not limited to just Germany. “We’re sort of in the state here in the United States, right?” he asked. “I mean, at the risk of sounding... America first, French first, Germany first, maybe the main purpose of a military should be to defend your own country.”

“It’s kind of like if you’re broke and your friend says, ‘Hey, lend me my rent money’ and you end up getting evicted because you didn’t pay your rent. You know that’s stupid,” Rall concluded.

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Former DoD Official: US To Be Isolated With Israel

On Monday, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence released its Annual Global Threat Assessment which warned that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's grasp on power is "in jeopardy."

The United States risks becoming isolated in the world along with Israel as it continues to support Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip, former senior security analyst at the US Office of the Secretary of Defense, Michael Maloof [told Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) on Wednesday.

"What's unfortunate is that [the United States] is going to get dragged into it. So that the United States and Israel ultimately could become isolated," Maloof explained. "We're hypocrites in that regard as long as we continue to support this action, we are going to be labeled and isolated in the world right along with Israel and we will have only ourselves to blame."

Israel's actions in Gaza have been described as "plausible" genocide by the International Court of Justice, an assessment Maloof seemed to agree with.

"[Israel is] following the old Talmudic notion that everyone else is beneath them, that [everyone else] are animals to serve them, and that's how they're treating people today," Maloof argued.

"They want ethnic cleansing, they want the Palestinians out, they want to expand and extend their Jewish state concept.... If Netanyahu deviates from that, then he is out [of office]."

Earlier, Melik Abdul asked about the political situation in Israel and Benjamin Netanyahu's grasp on power, noting that the Israeli PM is facing ethics charges as soon as he leaves office.

"We saw [Netanyahu's tenuous grasp on power], glaringly, last week when [National Unity Party leader Benny] Gantz, who's part of their crisis team, actually defied Netanyahu and visited the United States and went not only to the Department of Defense but also had a chat with the vice president," Maloof recalled. "That sent a very serious signal from, I believe, the [Joe] Biden administration that Netanyahu's popularity in the United States is on a respirator... [and] it was a broad signal that he's not popular at home."

However, the likely alternative to Netanyahu is even worse, Maloof explained. "Ben-Gvir is insanity on steroids. He, in the way he acts and carries on, is tantamount to what we used to see with the Nazis themselves. I mean, they have learned from their masters at one time, as it were."

Maloof said he fears that even after Israel halts its campaign in Gaza, Israel will expand its operations to nearby countries. "Even if they have a conclusion [in] Gaza, they're going to go into Lebanon and they're already showing it," Maloof explained.

"This war could go on in perpetuity and extend indefinitely as long as it keeps Netanyahu in power. But if the Israelis were to put boots on the ground in Lebanon, I envision that you're going to see the elimination of Israel. You will see all the axis [of resistance] powers coming to bear all at once," Maloof predicted. "That also will include Iraqi resistance and other Shia resistance, and you may even have the Sunnis involved because of the way Palestinians and others are being treated indiscriminately by the Israelis."

US President Joe Biden's request for over \$1 trillion in military spending is the result of military contractors who are incentivized "to sell expensive items, not necessarily the most useful and effective items," Independent journalist Jim Kavanagh told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Wednesday.

We have seen in Ukraine “with the destruction of the Abrams tanks and the HIMARS missiles, that the American equipment is boutique,” Kavanagh said. “[Military contractors] send expensive, boutique, very complicated, fragile equipment,” which inflates the military budget. Kavanagh contrasted that with the simpler Russian equipment, “that’s cheaper to build and is suited for hard condition warfare.”

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“This is the best you’re going to get from either party. Perpetual warfare, nothing to do for your healthcare, nothing to do for housing and rental, nothing to do for jobs... But \$1 trillion for military plus supplemental appropriations, this is what the United States is in for if we don’t have a change and that is not going to come from either the Democrats or the Republicans.”

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Political analyst and cartoonist Ted Rall told Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Tuesday that he suspects the recent internal French documents leak was motivated by a lack of appetite for sending troops to France. There is no “appetite for sending French troops [to Ukraine], and that includes within the French military,” Rall said.

“There are at least some factions inside the French military who think this would be a truly idiotic idea, and they’re not into it. So, they’re like ‘Alright, we’ll leak this and once the public gets wind, they’ll blow it up,’” Rall theorized.

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“[Israel is] following the old Talmudic notion that everyone else is beneath them, that [everyone else] are animals to serve them, and that’s how they’re treating people today,” Maloof argued. “They want ethnic cleansing, they want the Palestinians out, they want to expand and extend their Jewish state concept.”

Maloof said he fears that even after Israel halts its campaign in Gaza, Israel will expand its operations to nearby countries. “Even if they have a conclusion [in] Gaza, they’re going to go into Lebanon and they’re already showing it,” Maloof explained.

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SpaceX Launches Third Test Flight of Starship Rocket - Correspondent

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND, Texas, March 14 (Sputnik), Lenka White - SpaceX launched its third test flight of its Starship rocket on Thursday from its Boca Chica site in Texas, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Thursday.

SpaceX founder Elon Musk has previously expressed hope that the third flight will reach orbit after the second test flight fell short of that goal due to a mishap.

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SpaceX Fans Show Huge Excitement to Watch Starship Launch 3 - Correspondent

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND, the United States, March 14 (Sputnik) - Space and SpaceX enthusiasts are gathered to watch the third launch of Elon Musk's private space company's Starship craft in Boca Chica, Texas, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Thursday.

People started walking over to South Padre Island's park in Texas, one of the best spots to see the launch, at a very early hour.

"We are so excited. We took our two kids here and woke up at 4 a.m. [08:00 GMT] to see the launch," Mariah from Dallas told Sputnik.

Mariah came with her boyfriend and their two kids to camp just to see the launch. But it's not only Americans who got all the way down to the furthest corner of the United States — right next to Mexico's border — it is also people from around the world - Belgians, Germans and Swedish, for example.

The lucky ones are staying at the island and paid enormous prices for hotels: those could just walk over. Others, who had to find accommodation outside the island, were not able to go to sleep at all as the car queue was extremely long.

As of 6 a.m. local time, around 2,000 cars have entered the South Padre Island park in Texas. The rocket is expected to launch at 7 a.m. local time but it is uncertain, whether it will happen. The weather is windy and cloudy, not the best atmosphere for rocket launches, as the wind can sway the rocket.

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Mnuchin Says Putting Together Investor Group to Try to Buy TikTok

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) – Former US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said on Thursday that he is putting together an investor group to buy TikTok amid a push by US lawmakers to force the sale of the app.

Mnuchin made the remarks after the US House of Representatives on Wednesday passed a bill requiring TikTok to cut ties with its Chinese parent company ByteDance within 180 days or face a ban in the US. It remains unclear whether the Senate will also pass the legislation.

"I think the legislation should pass, and I think it should be sold," Mnuchin told CNBC in an interview. "It's a great business, and I'm going to put together a group to buy TikTok."

Mnuchin said he was confident that China would agree to the sale of TikTok "so long as there's not a technology transfer along the way."

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RPT - Putin on Possible Treaty With West: We Need Written Guarantees

MOSCOW, March 14 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin, when commenting on the possibility of a "fair treaty" with the West, has said that he does not trust anyone, but Russia needs written guarantees.

"I do not want to say this, but I do not trust anyone. However, we need guarantees. And these guarantees should be in writing, they should be good enough for us, and they should be something that we would believe in. That is what I am talking about," Putin said in an interview with Rossiya Segodnya Director General Dmitry Kiselev for the Rossiya 1 broadcaster and Ria Novosti.

Putin added that currently it was premature to discuss this prospect.

"But we would certainly not fall for some empty promises," he said.

Putin elaborated that he preferred to rely on facts, not some "good intentions and talks that anyone can be trusted."

"We would never do anything that runs counter to the interests of our country," he added.

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RPT - Putin: If US Conducts Nuclear Tests, I Do Not Rule Out That Russia May Do Same

MOSCOW, March 14 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin has not ruled out that if the United States conducts nuclear tests, Russia may do the same.

"If they conduct such tests, I do not rule out - it is not necessary that we need it or not, we still need to think about it, but I do not rule out it that we can do the same," Putin has said in an interview with Rossiya Segodnya Director General Dmitry Kiselev for the Rossiya 1 broadcaster and Ria Novosti.

Putin noted that there is an agreement banning such tests. The United States did not ratify this Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and Russia, to maintain parity, withdrew its ratification, Putin reminded.

"Since the treaty was not ratified by the United States, it did not finally enter into legal force because it did not receive the required number of ratifications. But nevertheless, we adhere to these agreements," Putin said.

However, such tests are being considered in the United States, Putin added. "This is due to the fact that when new warheads appear, some experts believe that it is not enough to test them only on a computer; they need to be tested in their natural form."

"These are the ideas in certain circles in the United States, they are floating around, and they have a place to be. We know about this. And we are watching," Putin said.

In November 2023, Putin signed the bill to revoke the ratification of the CTBT, which had been signed by Russia in New York on September 24, 1996. The CTBT is a multilateral treaty that bans nuclear weapon test explosions and all other nuclear explosions for civilian and military purposes. The treaty was adopted in 1996 but never entered into effect, as it would require ratification by all 44 countries that had nuclear power or research reactors at the time it was signed. Of the nine recognized nuclear powers, only France, the United Kingdom and Russia had signed and ratified the treaty before Moscow's withdrawal. The United States, China and Israel have signed but not ratified the treaty, while India, Pakistan and North Korea have neither signed nor ratified it.

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US Notified Israel It Would Support Surgical Operation Against Hamas in Rafah - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration in private talks with Israeli officials said it would support an Israeli military operation in Rafah that targets high-value Hamas targets while avoiding a large-scale invasion that minimizes civilian casualties, Politico reported

citing US and Israeli officials.

The report on Wednesday added that the public's opinion of Biden's handling of the war is at stake.

The Israeli military has not finalized a plan for its anticipated military operation in Rafah as it looks into ideas for ensuring the safety of some 1.3 million Palestinian civilians in the region, according to the report.

A US defense official told Politico that the Israeli operation in Rafah does not appear to be imminent, possibly a signal that it is heeding the United States' advice.

In February, Netanyahu's office said that Israel was preparing to conduct a large-scale operation in Rafah, where, according to Israeli military data, four Hamas battalions remain. The UN and many countries have warned Israel against the move, as more than a million displaced Palestinians are now in the area.

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US Market Interest Rates Unlikely to Return to Pre-Pandemic Lows - Yellen

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US market interest rates, determined by Treasury yields, are unlikely to return to the lows seen prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen was reported as saying on Wednesday.

"It seems unlikely that yields are going to go back to being as low as they were before the pandemic," Yellen said at an event in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, Bloomberg reported.

Yellen said such an outcome reflects current market realities and the forecasts seen in the private sector.

White House projections released on Monday showed sharply higher expectations for interest rates in coming years compared with projections from a year ago.

Yellen said the new numbers were in line with private sector forecasts, although she had said earlier that inflation will moderate despite being on a bumpy path.

The US Consumer Price Index (CPI), one of the oft-used indicators of US inflation, grew 3.2% year-on-year in February, higher than January's 3.1%. When compared with January 2021, shortly before the start of pandemic-measures-triggered inflation crisis, prices are also up 18.5%. The current reading for the CPI is far lower than in July 2022, when it stood at a four-decade high of 9.1%.

The Fed is looking to cut interest rates later this year as inflation moderates, but the US central bank says it needs the CPI reading to drop to 2% per year or lower. The Fed hiked interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023, responding to the pandemic measures-induced runaway inflation.

"It's important that the assumptions that we built into the budget are reasonable and consistent with the thinking of a broad range of forecasters," Yellen said, referring to White House projections on Treasury yields released earlier in the week.

The projections were modeled on President Joe Biden's \$7.3 trillion fiscal 2025 budget proposal. It projects markedly higher average rates over the next three years on the US

Treasury's three-month and ten-year bills and notes compared with forecasts made a year ago. The three-month rate, for instance, would average 5.1% this year, versus the 3.8% projected for last March while the overall debt figure grows with higher rates.

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SpaceX's Starship Clear for Launch Thursday After Receiving Federal Launch License - FAA

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND, March 14 (Sputnik) - SpaceX's Starship is clear to conduct its third fully integrated test flight on Thursday after receiving the required federal launch license, the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said in a statement to Sputnik.

"The FAA is authorizing the SpaceX Starship Super Heavy Orbital Flight Test 3 (OFT-3) launch," the FAA said on Wednesday. "The FAA determined SpaceX met all safety, environmental, policy and financial responsibility requirements."

The license applies to all phases of Starship's third test flight, including preflight preparations and liftoff from Texas, the water landing of the Super Heavy booster in the Gulf of Mexico and the water landing of the Starship vehicle in the Indian Ocean, the FAA said.

The test flight is scheduled to take place between 8:00 a.m. ET to 9:50 a.m. ET on Thursday. SpaceX founder Elon Musk has previously expressed hope that the third flight will reach orbit after the second test flight fell short of that goal due to a mishap.

The Starship spacecraft triggered its automated flight termination system during the second phase of its flight, destroying the vehicle before reaching orbit.

The Starship is the centerpiece of SpaceX's efforts to develop a fully reusable transportation system designed to carry humans to the Moon and on long-duration flights to Mars and beyond. The system is designed for in-space refueling and the ability to land at destinations across the solar system and return to Earth.

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US Army Orders More BAE Systems Armored Vehicles in \$754M In Contract Boost - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The US Army has approved a more than three-quarters of a billion-dollar extension of its contract with BAE Systems to produce an unspecified additional number of Armored Multi-Purpose Vehicles (AMPVs) over the next three years, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"BAE Systems Land and Armaments [of] York, Pennsylvania was awarded a \$754,335,634 modification ...contract to procure Armored Multi-Purpose Vehicles," the release stated on Wednesday.

"Work on the vehicles will be performed in York, Pennsylvania over the next three years with an estimated completion date of February 28, 2027," the Defense Department said.

The Army Contracting Command based in Detroit Arsenal in the state of Michigan will oversee the work as its contracting activity, the Defense Department said.

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Blinken, Kenyan President Ruto Discuss Expediting Haiti Security Mission - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken talked with Kenyan President William Ruto about hastening the Multinational Security Support mission's deployment to Haiti, the State Department said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Kenyan President William Ruto today to discuss the expeditious deployment of the Multinational Security Support mission to provide security and stability to the Haitian people, including immediate next steps to facilitate deployment," the State Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

Blinken and Ruto emphasized that the Multinational Security Support mission to Haiti should be deployed as quickly as possible, aligning with the UN Security Council's expectations to offer assistance to the Haitian National Police, the statement added.

According to reports, Kenya paused its plan to send some 1,000 police officers to Haiti due to escalating violence and the forthcoming resignation of Prime Minister Ariel Henry upon the forming of a presidential council.

Kenyan Foreign Minister Alfred Mutua said earlier that Kenya was prepared to send 1,000 police officers to train and assist the Haitian police in restoring normalcy and guarding strategic facilities. In late August, a delegation of Kenyan law enforcement agents visited Haiti to collect information about the mission requirements.

On February 29, gang violence erupted in the downtown area of the capital Port-au-Prince while Prime Minister Ariel Henry was visiting Kenya to seek an agreement for the deployment of foreign forces in Haiti to fight organized crime. The gangs said their goal was to prevent the prime minister from returning to Haiti. They stormed Haiti's largest prison and freed an unconfirmed number of inmates. The Haitian government declared a state of emergency in the capital region.

Haiti has long been mired in a social and political crisis that escalated after the assassination of President Jovenel Moise on July 7, 2021. The country has faced an unprecedented increase in the activities of criminal groups, while the humanitarian situation has deteriorated due to a multitude of natural disasters.

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Florida Governor Says Deploying Additional 250 Soldiers to Stop Influx of Haitians

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis ordered 250 additional soldiers and equipment deployed to stop a potential influx of Haitian illegal migrants amid a political and security crisis in that country.

"Given the circumstances in Haiti, I have directed the Division of Emergency Management, the Florida State Guard, and state law enforcement agencies to deploy over 250 additional officers and soldiers and over a dozen air and sea craft to the southern coast of Florida to protect our state," DeSantis said in a statement issued by the Office of the Governor on Wednesday.

The additional human resources and equipment will help combat illegal vessels coming from a range of Latin American countries, including Haiti, DeSantis added.

Earlier on Wednesday, US Southern Command head Laura Richardson said the US Navy is prepared to send vessels to respond to a potential mass migration event near the coast of Florida that could be spurred by the crisis in Haiti.

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No Trial Date Set in Hunter Biden Tax Case in Delaware But Both Sides Agree on Early June

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US federal judge Maryellen Noreika did not set a trial date in Hunter Biden's tax case in the state of Delaware but the defense team and federal prosecutors proposed it could take place in early June.

"So why don't we pencil this in for the weeks of June 3 and June 10, and we can figure out whether we would need to start later in the week of the third to accommodate any proceedings in California," Noreika said during a trial conference hearing on Wednesday.

Prosecutors said the trial would take at least four days and proposed it begin in early May, but Biden's defense team stated that it would not be possible for them.

Last year, Hunter Biden pleaded "not guilty" to federal tax charges after judge Noreika rejected a potential plea agreement that would have resolved his case without time in jail.

Biden also faces federal-tax related charges in federal court in Los Angeles.

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Johnson Says Believes US House Will Pass Appropriations Bills Before Shutdown Deadline

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said during a press conference that he believes the House of Representatives will pass a second set of appropriations bills before a partial government shutdown deadline on March 22.

"We passed the first six bills, the first appropriations bills. The second batch is due by March 22. I believe we're going to meet that deadline," Johnson said on Wednesday.

Earlier this month, the US Congress passed legislation covering six appropriations areas, funding for which was set to expire on March 8.

House lawmakers have engaged in "very deliberative work" on the second set of appropriations bills, Johnson said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) -

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The EU Committee of Permanent Representatives has agreed to increase the European Peace Facility by 5 billion euros (\$5.5 billion) for military aid to Ukraine, the Belgian presidency of the European Council said on Wednesday.

* The German Defense Ministry said that the work to update Taurus missiles is ongoing, but this process is standard and unrelated to discussions on their possible delivery to Ukraine, spokesperson Arne Collatz said.

* Berlin will not supply long-range weapons to Kiev even if German military officers participate in this from outside of Ukraine, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said.

* Russia has prevented Ukraine's attempt to infiltrate the Belgorod and Kursk regions, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

US NUCLEAR POLICY

* US President Joe Biden is aware of Russian President Vladimir Putin's comments on Moscow's readiness to use its nuclear arsenal and considers this a restatement of the country's nuclear doctrine, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

* The United States does not need to return to nuclear testing given the investments made in US nuclear stockpiles, Principal Deputy Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NSA) at the Department of Energy Frank Rose said.

* Rose said that the agency is examining "very very closely" whether it will adjust the US nuclear arsenal in response to the nuclear challenges posed by Russia and China.

* The United States needs to keep channels of communication with Russia on arms control and

risk reduction and is trying to do that, Rose said.

* The United States believes that while any major arms control agreements with China and Russia are unattainable in the near future, arms control has a future with new actors, technology and experts, Rose said.

MOLDOVAN ANTI-RUSSIA MEASURES

* Moldovan politicians may be held accountable for paying visits to Russia, Prime Minister Dorin Recean said on Wednesday.

* Moldovan President Maia Sandu may revoke the citizenship of businessman and opposition politician Ilan Shor and the former leader of the Democratic Party Vladimir Plahotniuc, Moldovan leaders administration's chief Adrian Balutel said.

* Shor said in response to the threat of revoking his citizenship that Sandu understands she will lose the future elections.

ARMENIA DEVELOPMENTS

* Russia has not received a notification from Yerevan on the withdrawal of Russian border guards from Zvartnots international airport, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Wednesday.

* Moscow is aware of the statement by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan about a possible withdrawal of Armenia from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a lot of work needs to be done, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* The statements of the Armenian leadership regarding the issue of the CSTO are in an ultimatum form and are an example of offensive rhetoric, Zakharova said.

* The European Parliament called on the European Union to increase cooperation with Armenia in security and defense amid Yerevan's revision of its membership in the CSTO.

US BILL TO BAN TIKTOK

* The US House of Representatives on Wednesday passed legislation that requires TikTok to cut ties with its China-based parent company ByteDance within 180 days or face a ban in the United States.

* The White House said the Biden administration supports the bill that would ban TikTok and is urging the Senate to take swift action on it.

AUSTRIAN DECISION TO EXPEL TWO RUSSIAN DIPLOMATS

* The Austrian Foreign Ministry informed two Russian diplomats earlier this week that they will be expelled from the country due to actions contrary to their diplomatic status, the Austrian die Presse newspaper reported on Wednesday.

* Moscow will respond to Vienna's decision to expel two Russian diplomats from Austria, the Russian Foreign Ministry told Sputnik.

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Oil Prices Increase Almost 3% as US Supplies Shrink, Russia Refinery on Fire

NEW YORK, March 13 (Sputnik) - Oil prices jumped almost 3% on Wednesday as traders reacted to reduced US stockpiles of the commodity and a fire at a major Russian oil refinery.

US West Texas Intermediate crude oil settled up \$2.16, or 2.8%, at \$79.22 per barrel. The so-called WTI benchmark earlier hit a session high of \$79.90.

London-traded Brent crude finished the day's trading up \$2.11, or 2.6%, at \$84.03, after an intraday peak at \$84.22.

US crude inventories fell last week for the first time in seven weeks, after a build of more than 28 million barrels from late January, according to data on Wednesday from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) that helped trigger the rally.

A fire at the largest oil refinery run by Russia's state-owned Rosneft also supported the run-up, traders said.

Crude balances fell by 1.536 million barrels during the week ended March 8, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report. The drop compared with the 900,000-barrel build forecast by energy analysts on Wall Street and the prior week's gain of 1.367 million.

Crude stockpiles had climbed nonstop between the weeks ended January 4 and March 8, according to the EIA.

Gasoline balances slid a sixth week in a row, showing a deficit of 5.662 million in the latest week, well above the forecast decline of 1.9 million and the prior week's drop of 4.46 million. Gasoline stockpiles fell almost 16 million barrels between the weeks ended February 1 and March 8. Gasoline is the primary motor fuel in the United States and accounts for the largest component in the country's energy mix.

Distillate inventories rose for the first time in eight weeks. The EIA reported a build of 888,000 barrels in distillates last week versus the forecast slide of 150,000 barrels and the prior week's tumble of 4.131 million. Distillates are primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses and ships, and also go into making airline fuel. They had seen an approximate inventory loss of 13.5 million barrels between the weeks ended January 19 and March 8.

Crude prices have been in an uptrend since the year began, with WTI rising just over 10% and Brent more than 8%.

The rally was triggered first by fears that the Israel-Hamas war could disrupt crude shipments from oil-rich countries around the conflict zone.

Over the past week, crude prices had also benefited from a commitment by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies to extend production cuts into the second quarter. The so-called OPEC+ alliance, led by Russia and Saudi Arabia, intends to maintain its current run of 2.2 million barrels per day supply cuts until the end of June.

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US, Iran Engage in Secret Dialogue to Curb Red Sea Shipping Attacks - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The United States has conducted secret talks with Iran aimed at persuading Tehran to use its leverage over Yemen's Houthi movement to convince them to halt their attacks on vessels in the Red Sea, the Financial Times reported on Wednesday.

According to the report, the talks took place in Oman this January and also addressed concerns over Iran's nuclear program. Omani officials facilitated the talks by shuttling between the two sides so they did not have to engage directly, the report said.

The report said that the US was represented by Middle East adviser Brett McGurk and Iran envoy Abram Paley, while Iran's delegation was led by deputy foreign minister and top nuclear negotiator, Ali Bagheri Kani.

Yemen's Houthi rebels said in November they would attack Israeli-linked ships passing through the Red Sea in retaliation for the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip. They have since launched dozens of attacks on ships in the region, prompting retaliatory airstrikes from the UK and the US.

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US Oil Reserve to Get 3.25Mln Barrels in August in Another 'Good Deal' - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration announced on Wednesday the purchase of an additional 3.25 million barrels to refill the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR), saying the crude will be delivered throughout August in what would be another "good deal" for the United States.

"The 3.25 million barrels are being purchased for an average price of \$77.43, well below the average of about \$95 per barrel that SPR crude was sold for in 2022, securing a good deal for taxpayers," the US Department of Energy said in a news release on behalf of the Biden administration.

Since it began refilling the heavily-drawn oil reserve two years ago, the Energy Department said it has purchased 29.61 million barrels at an average price of \$76.57 per barrel.

The Energy Department has also accelerated returns of nearly 4 million barrels to the SPR from US energy companies that borrowed crude from the SPR for a fee.

The 3.25-million-barrel purchase was initiated on February 26 and a total of seven companies tendered for the deal and three were awarded contracts to deliver the crude oil between August 1 and August 31.

The Biden administration leaned heavily on the SPR at the height of an oil supply crisis in 2022 triggered by the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Crude prices initially skyrocketed that year, with the US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) overshooting \$130 a barrel and London's Brent virtually reaching \$140, both 14-year highs. Supplies and prices have eased since, with the WTI trading below \$80 a barrel and Brent under \$85.

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US Says Expects Number of NATO Allies Spending At Least 2% of GDP to Grow By Summer Summit

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is anticipating the number of NATO countries spending at least 2 percent of their GDP on defense to grow before the Summit in Washington, DC, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

"This year, for the first time since the alliance's creation, 19 NATO allies will spend at least 2 percent of their GDP on defense spending, which is a six-fold increase since 2014," Jean-Pierre said. "We expect that number to increase before the Washington Summit."

NATO allies set the 2% defense spending target in 2014, expecting to reach it by 2024. However, the military spending in many member states is still significantly below the agreed figure. In February, Polish Defense Minister Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz said that the country's spending on defense exceeded 4% of GDP, making it the leader among NATO states in terms of defense spending as a percentage of the economy.

The next NATO summit will be held in Washington in July 2024.

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US Expects Summit for Democracy to Discuss DPRK, Human Rights Worldwide – Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – The US expects that the upcoming Summit for Democracy in Seoul will address the human rights situation in North Korea and worldwide, US Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Democracy and Human Rights Kelly Razzouk said on Wednesday.

"Obviously, the human rights situation in North Korea is something we have taken very seriously," Razzouk told reporters when asked what countries would be discussed during the summit.

She pointed out that Washington considers the summit a place where countries can share their views on democracy. The forum will also provide an opportunity to discuss human rights issues around the world and share best practices for implementing democracy, she added.

The third Summit for Democracy will take place in South Korea on March 18-20.

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Biden Aware of Putin's Interview, Restatement of Russia's Nuclear Doctrine - White House

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is aware of Russian President Vladimir Putin's comments on Russia's readiness to use its nuclear arsenal and considers this a

restatement of the country's nuclear doctrine, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

"So the president certainly is aware [of Putin's comments], I can say that. We understand that Mr. Putin was restating Russia's nuclear doctrine," Jean-Pierre told reporters.

The White House added that the United States has not seen any reasons to adjust its own nuclear posture or any indication that Russia is preparing to use a nuclear weapon in Ukraine.

On Wednesday, Putin said in an interview with Rossiya 1 and Ria Novosit that Russia is ready to make use of its nuclear arsenal to safeguard the existence and sovereignty of the Russian state, but that it would not be needed in the special military operation in Ukraine.

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US Inflation Might Face Bumpy Return to Normal, But Will Come Down - Yellen

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US inflation could face a bumpy return to normal as the annual price growth of goods and services remains above Federal Reserve targets, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Wednesday.

"I wouldn't expect this to be a smooth path month to month, but the trend is clearly favorable," Yellen said, appearing on Fox News' business slot.

Prices of groceries, cars, and health insurance skyrocketed in 2021-2022 from a combination of supply disruptions forced by the COVID-19 pandemic and tight labor supply, as millions of job layoffs weren't correspondingly filled.

The US Consumer Price Index, one of the oft-used indicators of US inflation, grew 3.2% year-on-year in February, higher than January's 3.1%. When compared with January 2021, shortly before the start of the COVID-triggered inflation crisis, prices are also up 18.5%.

Notwithstanding those comparisons, the current reading for the so-called CPI is drastically lower than in July 2022, when it stood at a four-decade high of 9.1%.

The Fed is looking to cut interest rates later this year as inflation moderates, but the central bank says it needs the CPI reading to drop to 2% per annum or lower. The Fed hiked interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023, responding to the runaway COVID-induced inflation. The central bank's actions have added to the burden of Americans as the basic rate for lending rose to 5.25 percentage points from a pre-pandemic level of just 0.25%.

Yellen opposed Fox's suggestions that the US economy may be in a state of stagflation — where inflation was persistently higher, along with stagnant demand and spiraling unemployment.

"I don't think we're going to see stagflation," the treasury secretary said. "Most forecasters believe we're on a path where inflation will come down over time."

Yellen also said she expects the cost of rental housing, one of the biggest inflation drivers over the past two months, to ease as tenants sign leases with lower rents.

"I have every expectation that the single biggest contributor to inflation is going to be moving down over this year," she added.

Jobs data released each week and month by the Labor Department has steadily shown

unemployment at 50-year lows over the past year. Progress on inflation has also not stalled, Yellen said, adding: that the Biden administration's top priority was high costs that were a concern to so many Americans.

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Blinken Says Discussed Maritime Corridor to Gaza With Regional Partners, EU, UN

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that he held a video conference call with counterparts from Cyprus, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, the European Union and the United Nations to discuss efforts to get the maritime corridor into Gaza up and running.

“A short while ago I did a video conference with colleagues from Cyprus, from the United Kingdom, the UAE, Qatar, the European Union, and the United Nations to coordinate our efforts in getting this maritime port up and running,” Blinken said during a press briefing.

Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Canada will also support this effort, Blinken added.

According to Blinken, the United States remains “intensely engaged every single day and almost every single hour” with Qatar and Egypt on the issue of a ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel.

On Tuesday, Al Arabiya broadcaster reported, citing a top-level Hamas source, that the movement had agreed to the US-initiated proposal for a ceasefire and a gradual return of displaced people.

Last week, delegations from Qatar, the United States and Hamas arrived in Egypt for a new round of de-escalation talks in the Gaza Strip. Israel reportedly decided not to send its delegation to the Cairo talks.

The framework of a proposed deal for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip includes an exchange of some 400 Palestinian prisoners held in Israel for 40 Israeli hostages, media reported earlier in the month. The draft deal also reportedly included a six-week pause in hostilities and a gradual return of Palestinians to the northern Gaza Strip.

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US Government Regulation Will Need to Supplement Private Sector Action on AI - FEC

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US Federal Election Commission (FEC) Commissioner Shana Broussard said on Wednesday that government regulation of artificial intelligence (AI) technology will need to supplement private sector action.

“Until you have the step up of legislation, this [private sector action] is the best option that we have available for us,” Broussard said during a Brookings Institution event. “But I don’t see that

it's going to be sufficient to resolve the problems that we're having.”

Broussard said she appreciates private entities working in their own capacity to address AI-related issues. However, the private sector is waiting on the government to begin regulating AI, Broussard said.

Earlier this week, billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said that AI will probably be smarter than any single human by 2025 and smarter than all humans combined by 2029.

The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence said in an annual report on Monday that rapid developments in the fields of AI and biotechnology will likely pave the way for asymmetric threats to the United States' interests and economic prosperity.

On Wednesday, the European Parliament approved one of the world's first comprehensive pieces of legislation to regulate AI.

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White House Says Supports Proposed TikTok Ban Bill, Urges Senate to Act Swiftly

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The White House said on Wednesday that the Biden administration supports a bill that would ban the Chinese-owned TikTok app and urges the Senate to take swift action on it.

"We're gonna support it in a technical way. We want to make sure that this bill...is on the strongest possible legal footing....we want to see the Senate take swift action," said White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre.

Earlier on Wednesday, the US House of Representatives passed legislation that requires TikTok to cut ties with its parent China-based company ByteDance within 180 days or face a ban in the US, amid concerns about user privacy and foreign influence.

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Bernie Sanders Says 'Not A Radical Idea' To Have A 32-Hour Workweek - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - Chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Bernie Sanders on Wednesday said that a 32-hour workweek at full pay should be seen as a fair step forward, pushing for workers to gain from tech advances, not just executives and investors.

"Moving to a 32-hour workweek with no loss of pay is not a radical idea. It's time for working people to benefit from advancements in AI, automation, and new technology, not just corporate CEOs and wealthy stockholders on Wall Street," Sanders said in a statement.

Earlier today, Sanders announced his intention to propose a bill on Thursday that would establish a 32-hour workweek in America without reducing pay. He received support from Senator Laphonza Butler and Representative Mark Takano, according to the statement.

The announcement comes right before a HELP Committee hearing on the same issue this Thursday, led by Sanders, with testimony from UAW President Shawn Fain, Professor of Sociology at Boston College Dr. Juliet Schor, and Chief Strategy Officer of Kickstarter and Cofounder of the WorkFour-The National Campaign for the 4-day Workweek, the statement added.

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UN to Reduce Non-Essential Personnel in Haiti Due to Volatile Situation - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 13 (Sputnik) - The United Nations wants to reduce the number of its non-essential personnel in Haiti due to the unstable situation in that country, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"Due to the volatile security situation in Haiti and based on the outcome of a revised Security Risk Management Process, we will be reducing the footprint of non-essential personnel," Dujarric said in a statement.

However, Dujarric emphasized that the United Nations is not leaving Haiti.

"[The] colleagues who carry out life-saving activities will remain in Haiti to continue operations. We continue to monitor the situation closely," Dujarric added.

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Trudeau Says His Job to Do 'Right Thing for Canada' Amid Calls to Cancel Carbon Tax Hike

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday that his job was not to be popular but to "do the right thing for Canada" amid calls by seven provincial premiers to halt the planned 23% carbon tax increase.

In early March, a Leger poll revealed that more than two-thirds of Canadians (69%) were opposed to the carbon tax hike by the federal government. The planned increase is expected to be 23% or C\$80 (US\$59) per ton.

"My job is not to be popular ... although it helps my job. My job is to do the right things for Canada now and do the right things for Canadians a generation from now," Trudeau said.

The prime minister explained it was necessary to put a price on pollution today so that Canada harvests success in the future. Trudeau also said that it was easy for "short-term thinking politicians" to call for the tax removal without thinking of the consequences.

Regarding Saskatchewan Prime Minister Scott Moe's intent not to collect or pay the carbon tax, Trudeau said no province could opt out of the federation, adding that Canada was one and ruled by laws.

"You can't opt out of the federation. You can't opt out of Canada. We're a country of laws. We're a country of rules and responsibilities ... we expect people to obey the law," Trudeau

added.

On Tuesday, the prime ministers of Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island issued letters addressed to Trudeau in which they urged him to either halt the planned hike or to scrap the carbon tax altogether. The calls were echoed by the premiers of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario, for a total of seven provinces calling on Trudeau to at least suspend the tax increase.

Several provincial premiers criticized Trudeau for making life increasingly more unaffordable for ordinary Canadians while others called on him to listen to pleas of the people who are being hurt by continued increases in the costs of living.

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Leveraging Russian Frozen Assets in Negotiations 'Negative Scenario' - Ukraine Minister

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - Leveraging Russia's frozen assets in peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine would be a "negative scenario" for Kiev as it would mean that Moscow retains a strong position, Ukrainian Justice Minister Denys Maliuska said during a discussion at the US Institute of Peace on Wednesday.

"Using sovereign funds as a leverage during peace negotiations is a negative scenario for us [Ukraine]. That would mean that Russia still has a stronger line positioning in negotiations," Maliuska said.

The minister pointed out that leveraging Russia's assets would likely mean Ukraine would have to surrender certain ideas and positions during potential peace talks, which would also be done in a context where Kiev has a weak negotiating hand.

Maliuska characterized as "nightmarish" the possible use of the frozen Russian assets as a bargaining chip and said he would rather avoid doing so. He pointed out that Russia could allow losing its assets given the significant revenues it earns from the sales of oil and gas.

"That's why I do not see that they [Russians] are aggressive to the maximum point possible when they hear about confiscation," Maliuska said, adding that Russia might have already forgotten about the frozen funds.

The European Union together with its Group of Seven (G7) allies holds an estimated \$300 billion in frozen Russian assets. The allies have been discussing ways to legally tap the frozen funds. Russia has said that such acts would be illegal in addition to ruining the West's already shaken image as a safe haven for investors.

On February 12, the EU Council decided that the profits from frozen Russian assets would be stored for their further use in the interests of Ukraine. European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen later suggested that the European Union would use these windfall profits to buy weapons for Kiev, marking a change in rhetoric from Brussels, which has previously discussed using Russian central bank money to finance Ukraine's reconstruction.

Russia views potential attempts by the US and EU to seize Russian assets as theft and also an act of trade war, and Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has warned that Moscow

would have a tough response to such an escalation of economic aggression.

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US Transportation Safety Panel Says Unaware Who Worked on Boeing Plane Door Before Failure

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) Chair Jennifer Homendy said on Wednesday that the panel is still unaware who did repair work on a Boeing plane operated by Alaska Air, the door of which fell off in midair in January.

On January 5, the door of an Alaska Air Boeing 737 Max 9 aircraft fell off during a flight from Portland, Oregon. The aircraft underwent repairs at a Boeing facility in Washington in September 2023, during which its door plug was opened to work on rivets - the same door plug that failed due to a lack of bolts.

"To date, we still do not know who performed the work to open, reinstall, and close the door plug on the accident aircraft. Boeing has informed us that they are unable to find the records documenting this work," the NTSB said in a letter to lawmakers, who requested information on the matter.

The NTSB made a verbal request for security camera footage to obtain the information but were informed that the footage was overwritten, the letter said. The absence of such records will complicate NTSB's investigation moving forward, the letter said.

NTSB investigators are not seeking information about the employees who worked on the door plug for punitive purposes, but rather, to learn about Boeing's quality-assurance processes and safety culture, the letter said.

Earlier this week, US media reported that the aircraft was scheduled to undergo maintenance later on the day of the door failure, due to concerns about the plane's pressurization system. However, the aircraft did not meet standards to immediately remove it from service, Alaska Airlines reportedly said.

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US Navy Prepared to Send Vessels to Deal With Potential Migration From Haiti - SOUTHCOM

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The US Navy is prepared to send vessels to respond to a potential mass migration event near the coast of Florida that could be spurred by the crisis in Haiti, US Southern Command Commander Laura Richardson said during a congressional hearing.

"I have put in a request for increased capability to do exactly that. We are ready if we need to deal with a mass migration," Richardson told Congressman Matt Gaetz on Tuesday when asked if the US Navy would assist.

Richardson said the US military and other federal agencies did a full walkthrough of contingency plans for a mass migration event in the region during a drill on Guantanamo Bay last summer.

On February 29, gang violence erupted in the downtown area of the capital Port-au-Prince while Henry was visiting Kenya to seek an agreement for the deployment of foreign forces in Haiti to fight organized crime. The gangs said their goal was to prevent the prime minister from returning to Haiti, and they stormed Haiti's largest prison and freed an unconfirmed number of inmates. The Haitian government declared a state of emergency in the capital region.

Haiti has long been mired in a social and political crisis that escalated after the assassination of President Jovenel Moise on July 7, 2021. The country has faced an unprecedented increase in the activities of criminal groups, while the humanitarian situation has deteriorated due to a multitude of natural disasters.

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US Sanctions Republika Srpska Officials for Undermining Bosnia and Herzegovina Stability

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury sanctioned three people on Wednesday who allegedly contributed to Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik's efforts to undermine the peace and stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) through the commemoration of "Republika Srpska Day" in January, according to a release.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating three individuals who have contributed to Specially Designated National (SDN) and Republika Srpska (RS) President Milorad Dodik's (Dodik) efforts to undermine the peace and stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) by organizing and executing the commemoration of "Republika Srpska Day" (RS Day) on January 9, 2024, an activity determined to be unconstitutional in BiH. These individuals facilitated Dodik's efforts to undermine the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) and the authority of the BiH Constitutional Court and the High Representative," the release stated.

On January 8-10, the RS government organized celebrations of RS Day in defiance of BiH Constitutional Court decisions that the commemoration of January 9 prioritizes "the religious heritage, tradition, and customs of only the Serb people" and thus violates the constitutional obligation of non-discrimination. The High Representative also said that the celebration of January 9 as RS Day represented "a clear and direct failure to implement the final and binding decisions of the BiH Constitutional Court."

The sanctioned individuals include Branislav Okuka, a former advisor to Dodik; Jelena Pajic Bastinac, the secretary general for the RS president; and Srebrenka Golic, the chair of the People's Council of the RS and a long-time politician in Dodik's party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD). They were appointed by Dodik to the RS organizing committee and took part in the widely publicized November 27, 2023 meeting that launched the committee's activities and approved the schedule of events.

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US House Oversight Panel 'Called Hunter Biden's Bluff' About Public Hearing Desire - Comer

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer said on Wednesday that the panel called Hunter Biden's bluff about wanting to participate in an open hearing as part of an impeachment inquiry into his father, US President Joe Biden.

Earlier on Wednesday, Hunter Biden's legal team reportedly sent a letter to Comer, informing the lawmaker that the president's son does not intend on participating in an open hearing.

"The House Oversight Committee has called Hunter Biden's bluff. Hunter Biden for months stated he wanted a public hearing, but now that one has been offered alongside his business associates that he worked with for years, he is refusing to come," Comer said in a statement.

The US House of Representatives is conducting an impeachment inquiry into Joe Biden, based on allegations of criminal activity by him and his family, including foreign bribery and influence peddling. Joe Biden denies having ever discussed business affairs with his son, and Hunter Biden denies that his father ever benefited from his activities.

Last month, Hunter Biden participated in a closed hearing with lawmakers. However, parts of Biden's testimony contradicted the testimonies of associates Devon Archer, Jason Galanis and Tony Bobulinski, Comer's statement said.

Earlier this month, Comer invited Biden, Archer, Galanis and Bobulinski to testify publicly on March 20. The House Oversight Committee fully expects the hearing to move forward and for Hunter Biden to participate, the statement said.

The American people demand the truth and accountability for the Biden family's alleged corruption, the statement added.

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IMF Says Board Intends to Complete Process of Selecting Managing Director by End of April

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) Executive Board issued a release on Wednesday that it intends to complete the selection process for the next Managing Director by the end of April.

"The Board intends to complete the process by end-April," the release said.

The IMF Executive Board underscores the importance it places on a successful candidate having the requisite global standing to lead the organization, which stands at the center of the global financial system, the release added.

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

Ukraine Minister Says Russia Demanded Reparations Waiver During 2022 Peace Negotiations

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - Russian negotiators demanded during the 2022 peace negotiations that Ukraine sign a waiver refusing any reparations or compensation, Ukrainian Justice Minister Denys Maliuska said during a discussion at the US Institute of Peace on Wednesday.

Maliuska noted that he was a member of the Ukrainian delegation of negotiators who sought to achieve a peace treaty in the first months following the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

"One of the major and crucial demands of the Russian delegation was that we sign a waiver and refuse to require any sort of reparations or compensations and all our suits to the International Tribunal be withdrawn," Maliuska said.

In February, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the negotiations with Ukraine in 2022 were almost completed, but Ukraine "threw out" all agreements after Russia withdrew its troops from Kiev and then Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy legally prohibited negotiations with Russia.

Moscow launched its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24. Russian and Ukrainian delegations held several rounds of peace talks in the early days of the conflict, including in Turkey in March 2022.

Ukraine's former chief negotiator with Russia David Arakhamia later said that then UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson talked Kiev out of signing the agreement with Russia to end the conflict in the spring of 2022.

In October 2022, Zelenskyy signed a decree stating that Kiev could not hold peace talks as long as Putin was in power in Russia.

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Using Russian Assets for Kiev's Military Needs to Affect Ukraine Reconstruction - Minister

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - Using Russia's frozen assets for Ukraine's military needs would negatively affect the country's proper reconstruction, Ukrainian Justice Minister Denys Maliuska said on Wednesday.

"If we would accept the idea that Russian assets shall be sent also to cover military needs, then, technically, that would mean that we shall forget about proper reconstruction. That would destroy our dreams," Maliuska said at the United States Institute of Peace.

The minister did not rule out that Kiev at a certain point in time would have to use the frozen Russian assets for its military needs.

"But that would be the most pessimistic scenario I could ever imagine," Maliuska said.

Kiev would like to get a part of the frozen Russian assets as financial assistance for the country's budget, Maliuska added.

The European Union together with its Group of Seven (G7) allies holds an estimated \$300 billion in frozen Russian assets. The allies have been discussing ways to legally tap the frozen funds. Russia has said that such acts would be illegal in addition to ruining the West's already shaken image as a safe haven for investors.

On February 12, the EU Council decided that the profits from frozen Russian assets would be stored for their further use in the interests of Ukraine. European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen later suggested that the European Union would use these windfall profits to buy weapons for Kiev, marking a change in rhetoric from Brussels, which has previously discussed using Russian central bank money to finance Ukraine's reconstruction.

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Senator JD Vance Proposes Bill to Secure US Munitions, Assess Defense Readiness - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US Senator for Ohio JD Vance announced a new bill to strengthen the US munition supply chain and assess defense readiness, Fox News reported on Wednesday.

According to the report, the new bill, named the Knudsen Defense Remobilization Act, introduced by Vance with the support of Florida Senator Marco Rubio and Missouri Senator Eric Schmitt, aims to establish a commission for "American Defense-Industrial Mobilization" to advise the president and Congress on strengthening the defense-industrial base.

Additionally, the commission will comprise 12 bipartisan members with expertise in industrial policy, manufacturing, and defense, selected by leadership from both the Senate and House and various committees, the report added.

This comes in response to House lawmakers attempting a discharge petition to bypass House Speaker Mike Johnson's postponement of the \$95 billion foreign aid bill vote.

Western countries have provided hundreds of billions of dollars worth of aid to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022. Aid shipments began in 2022 with artillery munitions and training and have escalated to include tanks, advanced air-defense systems, missiles and cluster munitions. The Kremlin has consistently warned against the West's continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

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'Oppenheimer' Film Spurred Reversal of 1954 Security Clearance Revocation –Energy Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – The 2023 hit movie “Oppenheimer” was the impetus for the US Secretary of Energy to review the Atomic Energy Commission’s revocation in 1954 of Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer’s security clearance, according to a US National Nuclear Security Administration official on Wednesday.

"A number of members of Congress...really believed that Oppenheimer did not get a fair hearing by the Atomic Energy Commission... in many ways, the movie was an impetus to re-look at this issue," Frank Rose, principal deputy administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, said at a Brookings event.

Rose added that Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm received a letter from about 20 members of Congress asking her to reverse the decision. Following the recommendation from the general counsel, she vacated the decision in December 2022.

At the time, the Department of Energy stated in a release that "As time has passed, more evidence has come to light of the bias and unfairness of the process that Dr. Oppenheimer was subjected to while the evidence of his loyalty and love of country have only been further affirmed."

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UPDATE - US Judge Dismisses 6 Counts Against Trump in Georgia Election Case - Order

(Updates with new source and more information in paras 2-6; modifies headline)

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - Six counts against Donald Trump and five co-defendants in the Georgia election interference case have been quashed, presiding judge Scott McAfee of the Superior Court of Fulton County ordered on Wednesday.

"Under the standards articulated by our appellate courts, the special demurrer must be granted, and Counts 2, 5, 6, 23, 28, and 38 quashed," the order said.

Demurrers provide a means for the criminally accused to ensure that the state's charging document satisfies the constitutional mandates of due process of law and the Sixth Amendment to the US Constitution. A special demurrer challenges the form of the indictment by claiming that the defendant is entitled to additional information or specificity.

The counts concerned claims that the defendants solicited from December 2020 to September 2021 members of the Georgia Senate and House as well as the secretary of state to breach their oath of office and unlawfully appoint presidential electors and influence the 2020 US presidential election outcomes.

Judge McAfee also said in the order that other criminal counts against the defendants, including Trump, remain.

"However, these pleading deficiencies do not apply to the corresponding overt acts listed in Count 1, specifically, overt acts 23, 42, 55, 102, 112, and 156," the order said.

In February, a US federal appeals court ruled that Trump is not immune from prosecution in his 2020 election interference case, which Trump appealed to the US Supreme Court.

Trump faces a total of 91 charges in four criminal cases in what the Republican politician calls an attempt by the Democratic establishment to prevent him from returning to the White House. The most severe counts might cost Trump 20 years in prison. If the punishment were to be determined by adding up the terms, he could be behind bars for more than 700 years.

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US House Minority Leader Says American Lives Endangered by Russian Victory in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries said on Wednesday that American lives could be placed at risk if Russia continues to defeat Ukraine on the battlefield.

"We cannot allow Ukraine to be overrun by Russia, because what will happen is that American lives are likely to be on the line," Jeffries said during a press conference.

It would be reckless for the US House of Representatives not to advance a Senate-passed supplemental aid bill for Ukraine before leaving the capital on March 22, Jeffries said.

House lawmakers would pass the legislation with bipartisan support if it were put to a vote on the floor, Jeffries added.

Any US troops deployed to Ukraine would be treated as "interventionists," Russian President Vladimir Putin said in an interview with journalist Dmitry Kiselev for Rossiya 1 and RIA Novosti.

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US Judge Dismisses 6 Counts Against Trump in Georgia Election Case - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - A US judge dismissed six counts against Donald Trump and five co-defendants in the Georgia election interference case, CNBC reported on Wednesday.

The defendants challenged counts 2, 5, 6, 23, 28 and 38 of the indictment by way of special demurrer, the report said.

The counts include allegations that the defendants solicited from December 2020 to September 2021 members of the Georgia Senate and House as well as the secretary of state to breach their oath of office and unlawfully appoint presidential electors and influence the 2020 US presidential election outcomes, the report said.

However, other criminal counts against the defendants, including Trump, remain after the order by Judge Scott McAfee, the report added.

In February, a US federal appeals court ruled that Trump is not immune from prosecution in his 2020 election interference case, which Trump appealed to the US Supreme Court.

Trump faces a total of 91 charges in four criminal cases in what the Republican politician calls an attempt by the Democratic establishment to prevent him from returning to the White House.

The most severe counts might cost Trump 20 years in prison. If the punishment were to be determined by adding up the terms, he could be behind bars for more than 700 years.

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US Trying to Maintain Channels of Communication With Russia on Arms Control - US Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The United States needs to keep channels of communication with Russia on arms control and risk reduction and is trying to do that, Principal Deputy Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NSA) Frank Rose said on Wednesday.

"We also need to maintain channels of communication with regard to arms control, risk reduction, and I will tell you, we are trying to talk to the Russians," Rose said during a discussion hosted by the Brookings Institution. "But quite frankly, every time we try to engage on these issues, we are rebuffed, and the central message we hear back from the Russians is this given the situation in Ukraine, everything else revolves around that. And that's very disturbing."

Rose went on to say that throughout the Cold War and through several conflicts, the United States continued to engage in discussions on arms control and risk reduction with the Soviet Union.

"Unfortunately, that does not seem to be happening today. And that makes me very, very concerned," he added.

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Hunter Biden Declines US House Request to Attend Public Impeachment Hearing - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, rejected the House of Representatives' request to participate in the hearing related to his father's impeachment, Axios reported on Wednesday.

Hunter Biden's legal team sent a letter to US Congressman James Comer informing him of their client's decision not to participate in the hearing.

Last month, Hunter Biden testified in a closed hearing as a part of the Republican-led probe about the president's alleged corrupt activities, the report said.

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US Nuclear Agency 'Closely' Considering Adjustments to Nuclear Arsenal – Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – A US National Nuclear Security Administration official said Wednesday that the agency is examining "very very closely" whether it will adjust the US nuclear arsenal in response to the nuclear challenges posed by Russia and China.

“The US Strategic Posture Commission said we may need more and/or different types of weapons to respond to the evolving security challenge, especially that two-peer challenge. And what I would say at this point is the administration has not made a decision on whether we need more, but we are examining it very, very closely,” Frank Rose, principal deputy administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, said at a Brookings event.

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US Does Not Need to Return to Nuclear Testing Given State of Stockpiles – Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – The United States does not need to return to nuclear testing given the investments made in US nuclear stockpiles, Principal Deputy Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NSA) at the Department of Energy Frank Rose said on Wednesday.

“NSA is of the opinion that, given the investments we've made in stockpile stewardship, we do not need to return to testing,” Rose said during a discussion hosted by the Brookings Institution. The W93 nuclear warhead, which is scheduled to be deployed on US ballistic missile submarines by 2040, is the first warhead that has been designed by the United States in the past 30 years without testing, Rose added.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said in an interview earlier in the day that he is not ruling out doing nuclear tests if the United States conducts them first.

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UPDATE - Russian-Canadian National Sentenced to 4 Years in Prison Over Involvement in Cybercrimes

(Updates with comments in paras 6, 7)

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - A Canadian court sentenced Russian-Canadian national Mikhail Vasiliev to nearly four years in prison on eight counts of cyber extortion, mischief and weapons charges, the defendant's lawyer Louis Strezos told CTV News.

In February, Vasiliev pleaded guilty to eight counts of cyber extortion, mischief and weapons charges against Canadian victims, accepting full responsibility for his actions in Canada.

During the same month, the US Justice Department charged Vasiliev along with four other individuals for their alleged involvement in the LockBit cyber-criminal group. Following a request by the Justice Department, Vasiliev consented to being extradited to the United States, where he faces more cybercrime charges, including conspiracy to intentionally damage protected computers and to transmit ransom demands.

"Mikhail Vasiliev took responsibility for his actions, and that played out in today's courtroom with

the sentence that was imposed," Strezos said.

Vasiliev, who is now 34, moved to Canada from Russia more than 20 years ago. He admitted being a ransomware hacker who held sensitive computer data hostage until ransoms were paid, among them businesses in the provinces of Saskatchewan, Quebec and Newfoundland.

Vasiliev's criminal activities began during the COVID-19 pandemic, Strezos said.

The Russian Embassy in Ottawa, however, said Vasiliev had not requested any sort of assistance from Russia's consular missions in Canada.

"If he contacts us, we will try to help. It should be taken into account that he is a citizen of Canada and the country's authorities consider him in this status," the Russian Embassy said in a comment to Sputnik.

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US House Passes Bill Requiring TikTok to Separate From Parent Company or Face Ban

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Wednesday passed legislation that requires TikTok to cut ties with its parent company ByteDance within 180 days or face a ban in the United States, amid concerns about user privacy and foreign influence.

House lawmakers passed the legislation, dubbed the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, in a vote of 352 in favor, 65 opposed and one present, with two-thirds support required for passage under suspension of the rules.

"House Republicans are bringing forward bipartisan legislation that places the choice in TikTok's hands: Either they can sever their ties with the Chinese Communist Party or no longer be available in the United States. Refusing to divest would suggest China's real purpose behind TikTok in America is to spy on Americans and use the platform for China's own interest," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the bill.

However, US Congressman Thomas Massie said that the legislation is a "Trojan horse" that allows the president to ban websites and target US-based internet service providers and application stores. Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk echoed Massie's concerns and said that the legislation is about censorship and government control.

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Major Arms Control Agreements With China, Russia Unattainable in Near Future - US Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – The United States believes that while any major arms control agreements with China and Russia are unattainable in the near future, arms control has a future with new actors, technology and experts, Principal Deputy Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration at the Department of Energy Frank Rose said on Wednesday.

"Although any major arms control agreements with Russia and China are likely unattainable in

the near future, I believe that arms control does have a future, but one that will involve new actors, emerging technology, and new experts," Rose said during a discussion hosted by the Brookings Institution.

To this end, the Nuclear Security Administration has established a new arms control advancement initiative to invest in the next generation of arms control capabilities, Rose added.

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Russian Canadian National Sentenced to 4 Years in Prison Over Involvement in Cybercrimes

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – Russian-Canadian national Mikhail Vasiliev was sentenced in court on Tuesday to nearly four years in prison over eight counts of cyber extortion, mischief, and weapons charges, defendant lawyer Louis Strezos told CTV News.

In February, Vasiliev pleaded guilty to 8 counts of cyber extortion, mischief, and weapons charges against Canadian victims, accepting full responsibility for his actions in Canada.

The same month, the US Department of Justice charged Vasiliev along with four other individuals for their alleged involvement in the LockBit cyber-criminal group. Following a request by the Justice Department, Vasiliev consented to being extradited to the United States, where he faces more cybercrime charges such as conspiracy to intentionally damage protected computers and to transmit ransom demands.

"Mikhail Vasiliev took responsibility for his actions, and that played out in today's courtroom with the sentence that was imposed," Strezos said from outside the courthouse.

Vasiliev, who is now 34, moved to Canada from Moscow over 20 years ago. He admitted being a ransomware hacker who held sensitive computer data hostage until ransoms were paid, among them businesses in the provinces of Saskatchewan, Quebec and Newfoundland. His criminal activities began during the COVID-19 pandemic, Strezos said.

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Russian Embassy in Canada Works With Law Enforcement to Ensure Safe Voting Sunday - Envoy

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The Russian Embassy in Ottawa is working with the local law enforcement authorities to ensure the safety of the polling stations in the presidential election on Sunday, Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"The preparations are proceeding rhythmically. We are working with law enforcement agencies in Canada to ensure the safety of polling stations, and so that everyone can safely vote in a good, calm environment," Stepanov said.

Early voting in the Russian presidential election started abroad on March 1.

Russians will go to the polls from March 15-17 to elect a new president. Contenders for the position in addition to incumbent President Vladimir Putin include the State Duma's International Affairs Committee Chairman Leonid Slutsky, Far East and Arctic Development Committee Chairman Nikolai Kharitonov and Deputy Speaker Vladislav Davankov.

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China Not Interested in Joining Strategic Stability Arms Control Talks – US Official

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – China has shown no interest in joining strategic stability arms control discussions, and the United States therefore finds it difficult to determine its deterrence strategy concerning Beijing, including integrating the People's Republic of China in any future arms control frameworks, Principal Deputy Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration at the Department of Energy Frank Rose said on Wednesday.

“Beijing has shown no interest in engaging in either the strategic stability or arms control discussions expected of a responsible nuclear power. This opacity makes determining an effective strategy more difficult, both in terms of maintaining deterrence and in finding a way to integrate China in a future arms control in strategic stability framework,” Rose said during a discussion hosted by the Brookings Institution.

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Trump Gains 40%-38% Lead Over Biden in US Presidential Race – Poll

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump has gained a slight lead over his successor President Joe Biden in the presidential race, a new poll conducted by USA Today and Suffolk University showed on Wednesday.

The poll showed that Trump has edged Biden 40%-38%, a near-tie for the two candidates, who on Tuesday secured their respective party nominations.

Trump gained a slight lead over Biden despite the fact that slightly more Americans, or 33%, believe the nation's economy is recovering. This is the high record since August 2021, when 32% of voters shared this opinion, USA Today said.

When it comes to party affiliation, 81% of Democrats back Biden, while 5% were undecided and the rest back a variety of third-party candidates.

Among those who said they support Biden, 54% said they were voting in favor of his candidacy, while 41% said they were voting mostly against Trump, the poll found.

According to the survey, 85% of Republicans support Trump, while 6% of party members are backing Robert Kennedy, and 2% still have not made their decision.

However, 15% of potential voters are unsatisfied with both major candidates. The poll revealed that a quarter are ready to support Trump, 18% lean towards Biden, and 44% consider various

third-party candidates.

The poll was conducted among 1,000 registered voters by phone on March 8-11.