

3/22/24 Friday

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Former CIA Officer: US Offered Assange a Deal Because They Fear Acquittal

On Wednesday, it was reported that the US government is considering offering Wikileaks founder Julian Assange a plea deal, dropping the espionage charges and allowing him to walk free on time served by pleading guilty to a lesser charge of mishandling classified documents. Former CIA Officer, whistleblower and co-host of Sputnik's Political Misfits, John Kiriakou [told Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) that the Justice Department offered the deal because it is worried about what might happen in a trial once the Australian citizen is extradited to the United States. "What would be worse for the administration than giving him a deal? What would be worse is bringing him all the way over here and having him acquitted – in an election year," Kiriakou explained. "I think the Justice Department is far less worried about a [US] judge being fair as they are about a jury saying this prosecution is ridiculous and it should never have taken place," he added later.

Kiriakou said he doesn't know if Assange will take the deal offered by the US, noting that he heard that they previously offered to let him plead to one espionage case and get out of prison. That deal, it should be noted, has not been reported. "I think I'm not violating any promises to remain silent by saying [this] now that this news [of the newer plea deal] is out."

Assange, Kiriakou said, declined the offer. "He said, not just no, but hell no. That he will not be responsible for the future prosecution of an American journalist because he set a precedent by taking a guilty plea to an espionage charge."

"This [new offer] is not an espionage charge, but it's in the same part of the US code as the Espionage Act. This is a misdemeanor," Kiriakou explained. "It would be time served and again, they would just open the door, 'You're free to go.'.... But he realized from the very beginning of this that this case is far bigger than just Julian Assange. This case is about the Constitution itself."

Assange standing on his principles shows the strength of the man, Kiriakou, comparing it to his own experience. "I was facing 45 years in prison and I have five kids. So the government offered me two and a half years. I served 23 months. [My other choice was] I roll the dice and go to trial, face 12 to 18 years. I took the deal. Julian Assange hasn't taken the deal."

During the George W Bush administration, Kiriakou revealed aspects of the US torture program taking place at the infamous US military installation in Cuba, Guantanamo Bay. He pleaded guilty to one felony count and became the first CIA officer to be charged for speaking to the press, and remains the only person to serve time in relation to the CIA torture program.

"But, to put me away for 23 months, they spent \$6 million. Now, was it really worth \$6 million of taxpayer's money to put me in prison? Was society better off?" He asked hosts Jamarl Thomas and Melik Abdul. "I got out after 23 months. They made me famous, right? Nobody ever heard of me before I went to prison," he continued. "I write articles that are published all the time in major outlets... I'm making more money now than I ever have in my life because of them."

“I have another soapbox because of them,” he added. “So, do they really want to take that risk with Julian Assange?”

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CIA Protecting Biden by Blocking IRS Interviews, Says Former Whistleblower

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jordan and Oversight and Accountability Committee Chairman Comer revealed that a whistleblower told them the CIA intervened to prevent the IRS from interviewing Kevin Morris, an associate of Hunter Biden who loaned him millions of dollars, as part of the IRS investigation into the first son's alleged tax crimes.

The CIA said it would not comment on specific cases but added that while it cooperates with other law agencies, it does not interfere with investigations and claims to be fully cooperative with its oversight committees.

Jordan and Comer have sent a letter to the CIA requesting more information, but have not yet received a response. They set a deadline for April 4, 2024.

If the whistleblower's testimony is true, it would represent an unprecedented move by the CIA that is tasked with countering foreign threats.

Brad Birkenfeld, a whistleblower who exposed tax fraud and money laundering schemes in the Swiss banking system, told Sputnik's Political Misfits that the problem is that “so many people are trying to help the Bidens get out of the illegal conduct that they're doing,” noting that he has himself attempted to provide investigators with information on the Hunter Biden case, but was met hostile response.

“I was introduced to Dr. Keith Ablow, [who] was Hunter Biden's psychiatrist,” Birkenfeld began. “He wanted me to help him with his whistleblowing case.” Birkenfeld says that Ablow told him things about Hunter Biden but that Ablow didn't show for meetings that Birkenfeld set up for him in Washington. “Then I went to Senator [Charles] Grassley's (R-IA) office and Senator [Ron] Johnson's (R-WI) office, and I felt obligated as an American citizen to tell them about the information that [Ablow] had relayed to us,” including Hunter Biden's involvement with Monkey Island, a Liquefied Natural Gas company in Louisiana.

“Two days later, lo and behold, the Drug Enforcement Agency in Boston raided Dr. Keith Ablow's home,” Birkenfeld continued. “[The DEA] took everything. Now, why would you have 12 people armed with shotguns and machine guns, raid a doctor's home in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and four years later never indict him?”

“Whatever the CIA does,” Birkenfeld added while discussing the CIA's past, including their support of dictators Augusto Pinochet, Saddam Hussein and Ferdinand Marcos, as well as their alleged efforts to undermine Donald Trump while he served as President. “Whatever the CIA does, this is like Cartoon Network over there in Langley. Yes, they do a job and some people work well. But there's a lot of idiots over there that should be fired and prosecuted. And that's the facts.”

Birkenfeld added earlier that Joe Biden -while serving as Vice President- was briefed in defense meetings “about his son interfering in US policies.” That, as of yet, has not been alleged by the committees investigating Hunter Biden but Birkenfeld insisted that it is “not conjecture.”

“A lot of people don’t know this yet, but this is exactly what’s going to be coming out,” he asserted.

While Democrats have consistently declared that the committees have yet to find any concrete evidence that President Biden committed any crimes, Birkenfeld argues that is because the power centers in Washington continue to obfuscate the case by blocking investigative efforts. “Give us the bank records, give us the credit cards offshore, and we can piece it together. But, once again, the Biden White House is obstructing, the DOJ is obstructing, the FBI is obstructing, the CIA [is] obstructing. So nobody can get the facts.”

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Map of Terrorist Attack in Crocus City Hall Concert Venue

A mass shooting has broken out at the Crocus City Hall music venue in Krasnogorsk, a city in the northwest of the Moscow metropolitan area.

Preliminary figures from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) indicate that 40 people were killed and more than a hundred injured in the attack. The Moscow children’s ombudsman said minors are among the victims.

Several people wearing camouflage burst into the venue during the intermission of a concert armed with machine guns. A grenade or incendiary was also set off, starting a major fire in the building. Russia has called on the UN to condemn the attack which has been classified as a terrorist act.

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Track to the Future: Cratered Roads and Lunar Rails - Cartoon

Earlier this week, the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) announced a contract with Northrop Grumman to design a concept for a railroad on the Moon.

The project hopes to facilitate what DARPA’s Strategic Technology Office program manager Michael Nayak described as “a large paradigm shift” in the “lunar economy” that he expects to see over the next decade.

Early in its concept stage, it is unknown how much the project will cost if it goes forward at all. It is part of DARPA’s 10-year Luna Architecture Capability Study (LunA-10) which has a goal of a “thriving lunar economy” including “monetizable commercial services” on the Moon by 2035.

While focused on a projected commercial project, the Luna-10 project is part of a larger push to return to the moon and build a permanent presence. NASA's Artemis Program was launched in 2017 and hoped to land astronauts on the moon by 2024 and build a permanent station by 2028. The goal of landing on the moon has been pushed back to 2026, but NASA says it still plans to settle the Moon by 2028.

Nevertheless, the Artemis project is estimated to cost \$93 billion between 2012 and 2025, before any Artemis missions are physically launched. Each of the four launches are expected to cost \$4.2 billion and does not include the \$42 billion "in formulation and development costs spent over the past dozen years," according to NASA Inspector General George Scott.

Meanwhile, back on planet Earth, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave the United States a C- in its most recent infrastructure report card, noting that there is a "state-of-good-repair" backlog of \$45.2 billion for the American rail system, among a myriad of other issues.

The US government is promising its citizens the Moon, as it ignores them on Earth.

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Most Americans Think World War Is Coming, but They Don't Want to Fight in It

In January, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists announced that it was keeping its "Doomsday Clock" at 90 seconds until midnight, after it moved it to that record setting number in 2023 citing "unprecedented global danger."

According to a [new YouGov poll](#) released Thursday, most Americans, 61%, think a world war is either "very likely" (22%) or "somewhat likely" (39%) in the next 5-10 years. Only 22% of Americans think a world war is "not very likely" or "not at all likely."

However, according to the same poll, far more Americans say they are either unfit for service or would refuse to serve if drafted than those who say they would volunteer or fight if drafted, even when only counting respondents of military age.

Most Americans of all ages, 60%, say they believe the armed services wouldn't want them due to age or disability, and another 13% said they would refuse to go if drafted. Only 6% of Americans said they would volunteer for military service in the event of a world war and just 9% said they would serve if called up.

Focusing on the age groups with the vast majority of fighting-age citizens, 18 to 29-year-olds and 30 to 45-year-olds, improves the numbers somewhat but it remains clear that among the population who would be fighting in a world war, there is little appetite for it, especially if the war is overseas.

Among the 18 to 29 age group, 26% say they would refuse to serve, compared to 12% who say they would volunteer and 19% say they would serve if drafted. In addition, 19% of 18 to 29 year olds do not think the military would want them because they are unfit for service. Similar numbers were found in the 30 to 45 group, with 25% saying they would dodge a draft order, compared to 9% who would volunteer and 11% who would go if drafted. Thirty-eight percent of Americans in that group believe the military wouldn't want them.

Even if the US were under the “imminent threat of invasion” only the 18 to 29 year old category includes more Americans, 39%, who say they would volunteer or serve if called up than those who say they would refuse to serve (16%) or don’t believe they are fit for service (15%). But in the 30 to 44 age group, 43% say they are either unfit (28%) or would refuse to fight (15%) compared to just 31% who would serve either voluntarily or if drafted.

Unsurprisingly, a large majority of Americans think China and/or Russia are most likely to be the US’ opponents, but more than 50% think Iran, North Korea and Iraq will also oppose the US. The UK, Ukraine and Israel were listed as the US’ most likely allies, with Germany, France and Australia also getting higher than 50%.

While far more Americans think the US would win against either the individual or combined forces of Russia and China than those who think the US would lose, large percentages of Americans say they are not sure who would win (36% against Russia, 40% against China, and 42% against both.)

That could be because, as every permanent UN Security Council member (US, China, Russia, France and the UK) affirmed in a rare joint statement in 2022 “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” Towards that point, very few Americans, just 11%, think the US should strike China or Russia with a nuclear weapon if they hit a military target in Taiwan or Ukraine with a nuclear weapon. That number increases somewhat (13% for Russia and 14% for China) if those countries hit a city instead of a military target.

In fact, more Americans think the US should take action short of war or no action at all (42%) than those who think the US should respond by declaring war or using a nuclear weapon (32%). Even if America was itself the victim of a nuclear attack, the appetite for a nuclear response is surprisingly low. Only 27% say the US should respond with nuclear weapons if attacked with a “small nuclear weapon on a military target” and only 38% want the US to respond with a nuclear strike if an American city is hit with a nuclear weapon.

The official policy of the US government is to “rely on nuclear weapons to deter all forms of strategic attack – including nuclear employment of any scale” against “the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners.”

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US Media Falsely Portrays AMLO’s Comments as Pro-Cartel

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said on Friday during a press conference in Veracruz, that his government will not “act as policemen for any foreign government” in what he described as a “Mexico first” policy, noting “Our homes come first.”

The comments were painted as López Obrador’s justification for “his refusal to confront” drug cartels in Mexico by US media outlets.

However, the comments came after López Obrador was asked a question about the US Ambassador to Mexico, Ken Salazar, who recently appeared with several Mexican ministers and praised the Mexican judiciary. López Obrador is currently engaged in a feud with the Mexican supreme court, arguing that it has become corrupted and proposing that judges be

elected through popular vote. The reporter asked López Obrador if Salazar was interfering in Mexican affairs.

López Obrador said that he has a good relationship with US President Joe Biden's administration while also noting the same about former President Donald Trump. He denied that it was interference but did seemingly imply that the ambassador's comments were related to the Biden administration's opposition to López Obrador's "hugs not bullets" program, which focuses on addressing corruption and poverty over the aggressive confrontation of his predecessors. For years, Mexican streets were the site of bloody battles between authorities, including the military, and cartels, sometimes spilling over into the civilian population.

"Our adversaries are looking for anything, I don't know what is wrong with them," López Obrador said. "They are very angry, nervous, but there is no problem [between the United States and Mexico.]"

The comment were [painted](#) as one that "harkens back to the 1970s a period when many officials believed that Mexican cartels selling drugs to gringos was a US issue, not a Mexican one," but López Obrador's comments did not downplay opioid epidemic in the US.

"What we want is peace, tranquility in our country, no murders, no kidnappings. We are not going to act as police for any foreign government. Mexico first, our homes come first," López Obrador said. "Of course, we do help and cooperate in the fight against drugs. Above all because it has already become a very delicate, sad humanitarian issue because a lot of young people are dying in the United States because of fentanyl."

López Obrador, nicknamed AMLO, also mentioned his recent letter to Chinese President Xi Jinping, asking him for help to control the flow of fentanyl.

Earlier in the press conference, López Obrador denounced his "neoliberal" predecessors and conservative opposition.

"In the case of violence, [López Obrador's opponents] are looking for him everywhere, 'Naro-president AMLO' spending millions of pesos. Where is the evidence? [It's] slander," López Obrador said. He praised the Mexican people, 73% of whom approve of his job performance according to a recent poll, for not falling for the ruse.

"[The slander] does not work for them. Because it turns out that the people are very informed, very aware and they do not accept that," he explained. "The people are aware of what is happening and the mentality of the people has changed."

Cuitlahuac Garcia, the governor of Veracruz, also spoke during the press conference and touted the success of the "Hugs not bullets" program in his state. He noted statistics showing that homicides are down 52% in Veracruz since 2017 and kidnappings are down 91% since 2019. He also mentioned López Obrador's "no immunity" policy, which has greatly increased sentences for both homicides and kidnappings, contrasting with the portrayal of López Obrador as soft on crime.

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## IDF General Says US Accused Israel of 'Systematic' Sexual Abuse in Private Meeting

On Sunday, Reem Alsalem, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls said it is "abhorrent" that reports of rape by Israeli forces continue to mount without consequences.

Israeli Defense Force Brigade General Amir Avivi [said on an Israeli radio show](#) that in private, a US State Department official accused Israel of "systematically sexually abusing Palestinian women," which may have revealed an internal stance of the US State Department that contradicts its public comments.

"It was a meeting that shook me. We sat there, talked about the situation, and suddenly [the US State Department official] accused Israel of systematically sexually abusing Palestinian women," Avivi said.

"This is absolutely disconnected from reality. But without hesitation, she said 'The UN presented evidence to the Israeli government.," he said, describing the conversation.

Avivi was critical of the State Department, adding that he wanted to bring awareness "about what is really happening in the US State Department."

"When we meet with a State Department official holding the Israeli-Palestinian portfolio, every word she utters, as far as I am concerned, is an official US position," Avivi argued.

However, in public at least, the State Department says it was unable to confirm reports of sexual abuse by the IDF. In February, a group of UN experts [issued a statement](#), warning of "credible allegations" of "egregious human rights abuses" against Palestinian women and girls in Gaza and the West Bank, including arbitrary executions and "multiple forms of sexual assault," including rape.

State Department spokesman Matt Miller said in a press conference following those accusations that he "cannot independently confirm the reports" and called on Israel to "thoroughly and transparently investigate credible allegations."

When pressed by a journalist on what it would take for the State Department to confirm the accusations, as it did of reports of rape during the October 7 Hamas attack based on the testimony of Israeli medical experts, Miller said the US could only after "a full, independent, credible investigation."

Israel said it "forcefully rejects" the accusation from the UN, calling them "despicable and unfounded." It has not announced an investigation into the allegations.

In December, Josh Paul a former State Department official who resigned over arms transfers to Israel, said the Defense of Children International Palestine told him of credible accusations that a 13-year-old boy was raped by IDF soldiers. Paul said he raised the issue to Israel who then raided the charity's offices, seized their computers and declared it a terrorist organization.

Avivi is also a co-founder of the Israeli Defense and Security Forum (ISDF), at their conference in January, [he predicted](#) "maybe [the war] will never end," and called for Israel to take "full control of the Egyptian-Gaza border" and for the IDF to have "full freedom of operation in Gaza from now and pretty much forever."

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## Judge to Make Critical Pretrial Ruling in Trump Falsified Business Records Case on Monday

Former US President Donald Trump is facing four separate criminal cases, two at the federal level and two brought by the States of New York and Georgia. Trump also leads US President Joe Biden in national polls and most swing states.

Judge Juan Merchan will hold a pre-trial hearing in New York on Monday to determine if there should be further delays in former US President Donald Trump's falsified business documents case, one of four criminal cases he is facing.

The case was initially scheduled to begin on Monday but was delayed to at least April 25 after prosecutors released more than 100,000 pages of documents to Trump's defense team. Prosecutor Alvin Bragg did not oppose the 30-day delay but argued that no further delays should be placed on the trial.

Of the criminal cases Trump is facing, this case was the most likely to conclude before the Presidential election in November, but a significant delay could push it past election day. Trump's legal team is arguing that the prosecution intentionally held the documents back and included exculpatory evidence favorable to the defense. If Merchan agrees, he could throw the case out and possibly sanction Bragg for potential Brady violations, but he could also issue a delay in the case or keep the trial date, scheduled for March 25, as-is.

"The People have engaged in widespread misconduct as part of a desperate effort to improve their position at the potential trial on the false and unsupported charges in the Indictment," Trump's legal team argued in court filings. "[R]eports relating to statements by Cohen that are exculpatory and favorable to the defense."

Most legal experts quoted in US media predicted that a delay could happen but they doubt that the judge will throw out the case.

The documents relate to federal investigations [into Michael Cohen](#), Trump's former fixer who is expected to be the prosecution's star witness. The documents were not in Bragg's office and were instead in different offices around the country. Bragg argues that the Trump team intentionally waited until January to ask for the documents to cause a delay in the trial.

"[T]he belated nature of the recent USAO productions is entirely the result of the defendant's own inexplicable and strategic delay in identifying perceived deficiencies," the prosecution argued.

Prosecutors also claim that less than 300 of the documents are both new to the defense and related to Trump's trial.

Trump has been charged with 34 counts of falsifying business documents related to repayments he made to Cohen for [hush money payments](#) Cohen paid to adult film star Stormy Daniels who claimed she had an affair with then-candidate Trump in 2016. Trump pleaded not guilty but admits to making the payments. He also denies that the affair took place.

Cohen was sentenced to three years in prison in 2018 after being convicted of campaign finance violations related to those payments and for lying to Congress about how long discussions about a potential Trump Tower in Moscow continued.

Americans do not understand how badly the United States' reputation has been damaged across the world, which sees Gaza as "a US genocide" and "not just an Israeli genocide," Mohammad Marandi, a professor of English literature and Orientalism at the University of Tehran told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Thursday.

“It’s revealing the reality of [the US] empire in a way that not even [author of ‘A People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn] could do because it’s being done in front of our eyes, it’s being done in front of a global audience. We’ve never seen such a thing before,” Marandi said, adding that he suspects that is why the US is attempting to ban TikTok.

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“The United States has lost credibility across the world. I don’t think many Americans understand how bad this has become for the United States. People across the world see this as a US genocide, it’s not just an Israeli genocide.”

“I believe that the Israelis have made a fatal mistake and that what they’ve done in Gaza will be the beginning of the end of the Zionist project,” he added. “It’s been carrying out the genocide for almost six months in front of the world and it has demolished the facade that the regime had created for itself... about it being a democracy... All that is gone now and across the board the regime is despised and the image of the United States has been destroyed.”

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The EU has been looking for alternative methods to fund Ukraine with US aid stalled in congress, including using interest from frozen Russian assets to fund Ukraine. However, they will be unable to make up the huge amount the US provides without stealing all of Russia’s frozen assets, which would tank the Euro, or by devoting far more of their national budgets to Ukraine, which would tank the economy, Mark Sleboda, an international relations and security expert told Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Thursday.

“The only way that Europe could possibly make up [for the lack of US aid to Ukraine] that is needed to support the Kiev regime is by stealing all of Russia’s frozen assets, possibly tanking the Euro and crashing the EU’s reputation as a reputable place to store currency reserves for transactions,” Mark Sleboda said. “And they are very loath to do that, particularly Belgium and Switzerland, where most of Russia’s frozen assets, some \$200 billion worth, is stored.”

Outside of that “nuclear option” Sleboda said that the only other path for Europe would put “a much more severe drain” on their national budgets and economies.

“Unless all Europeans are willing to forgo their social benefits and other perks of life in the European Union that they have become accustomed to, to prop up this regime in Kiev, there’s simply no way,” Sleboda explained, noting that the recent €50 billion aid package approved by the EU is spread out over four years.

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The United States' "grand plan" with its drone base in Niger is to "reoccupy" Africa with "its vassal friends" like France, Koffi Kouakou, an African analyst and senior research fellow at the Center for Africa-China Studies at the University of Johannesburg told Sputnik's Fault Lines on Thursday.

"The US ain't going to leave easily. The US is not going to cut and run because there's this big ego at play [in] geopolitics [and] geoeconomics, but also hegemony," Kouakou explained. "Those who haven't been paying attention should pay attention."

"The key issue is [the] US's grand plan to get [Africa] back, with its vassal friends to reoccupy this place."

"[The US] invested a huge amount of money in this place. They're not going to leave easily. However, where the Nigeriens have a point is 'You've been there since 2012, but terrorism is still there. What have you done for us to deal with terrorism, if terrorism was really the reason for your presence on our occupied ground?'" Koukaou said, noting that Mali has done "a fabulous job" with the Africa Corps in combating terrorism. "There was no terrorism in the area until 2011 when the US and, now let's say NATO, bombed Libya to smithereens and destroyed it. Now this whole place is running amok with terrorist groups."

"I think Niger is now winning the information war," Kouakou concluded, "but this is exactly our concern because the US is going to retaliate one way or another."

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The comments were painted by US media as López Obrador's justification for "his refusal to confront" drug cartels in Mexico. However, the comments came after López Obrador was asked about the US Ambassador to Mexico, Ken Salazar, who recently appeared with several Mexican ministers and praised the Mexican judiciary, who is feuding with López Obrador. The reporter asked López Obrador if Salazar was interfering in Mexican affairs.

López Obrador's comments did not downplay the opioid epidemic in the US.

"What we want is peace, tranquility in our country, no murders, no kidnappings. We are not going to act as police for any foreign government. Mexico first, our homes come first," López

Obrador said. "Of course, we do help and cooperate in the fight against drugs. Above all because it has already become a very delicate, sad humanitarian issue because a lot of young people are dying in the United States because of fentanyl."

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However, according to the same poll, far more Americans say they are either unfit for service or would refuse to serve if drafted than those who say they would volunteer or fight if drafted.

Most Americans of all ages, 60%, say they believe the armed services wouldn't want them due to age or disability, and another 13% said they would refuse to go if drafted. By comparison, only 6% of Americans said they would volunteer for military service and just 9% said they would serve if called up.

Unsurprisingly, a large majority of Americans think China and/or Russia are most likely to be the US' opponents, but more than 50% also think Iran, North Korea and Iraq will also oppose the US.

While far more Americans think the US would win against either the individual or combined forces of Russia and China than those who think the US would lose, large percentages of Americans say they are not sure who would win.

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IDF General Says US Accused Israel of ‘Systematic’ Sexual Abuse In Private Meeting

Israeli Defense Force Brigade General Amir Avivi said on an Israeli radio show that in private, a US State Department official accused Israel of “systematically sexually abusing Palestinian women,” which may have revealed an internal stance of the US State Department that contradicts its public comments.

“It was a meeting that shook me. We sat there, talked about the situation, and suddenly [the US State Department official] accused Israel of systematically sexually abusing Palestinian women,” Avivi said.

“This is absolutely disconnected from reality. But without hesitation, she said ‘The UN presented evidence to the Israeli government.’”

Miller said the US could only confirm the reports of sexual assault after “A full, independent, credible investigation.”

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Progressive Democrats to Boycott Netanyahu's Potential Address to Congress - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) – Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will face a boycott from progressive members of the Democratic Party on the Capitol Hill should he accept an invitation to address Congress, Axios reported on Friday.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Thursday that an invitation will be extended to Netanyahu to address Congress. It came soon after US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer called for new elections in Israel and said that Netanyahu’s government no longer fits Israel’s needs. Schumer stated that the United States must bolster its efforts to work actively for peace if Netanyahu remains in power after the conflict.

Democratic Congressman from New York Jamaal Bowman told Axios that his constituents are "pissed" at the Israeli war on Gaza.

"I'm not going," he said, referring to Netanyahu’s possible address.

Another House Democrat, Maxwell Frost from Florida, said that he is going to skip Netanyahu’s speech. He called the Israeli prime minister a "bad person."

Several other congressional Democrats have also confirmed that they plan to boycott the event because of Israel’s "conduct during the war." They expressed concerns that the country now has "the most extreme government" in its history, according to the report.

Last October, Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Almost 32,000 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, local authorities said.

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Russia Will Not Allow Resolutions on Gaza That Do Not Call For Ceasefire - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 22 (Sputnik) - Russia will not tolerate another 'pointless' resolution on Gaza which does not call for real ceasefire, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday ahead of a Security Council vote on a US-drafted resolution on Gaza.

"We have already stated that we will no longer tolerate pointless resolutions which do not contain a call for a ceasefire and which lead us to nowhere," Nebenzia said, adding that US-led negotiations on the draft were aimed at "dragging out the time."

Russia and China vetoed the US-drafted resolution, which stopped short of calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, a Sputnik correspondent reported. Algeria also voted against the draft.

Nebenzia said if the resolution were to be adopted, it would close the door on discussions about the need for a ceasefire in Gaza and free the hands of Israel, forcing the people of Gaza to face destruction, devastation or expulsion.

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Russia, China Veto US-Drafted Resolution That Stops Short of Demanding Ceasefire in Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, March 22 (Sputnik) - Russia and China on Friday blocked a US-drafted UN Security Council resolution that stopped short of calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

Eleven UNSC members voted in favor, three against and one abstained.

The draft "determines the imperative of an immediate and sustained ceasefire" but falls short of demanding it.

It also "unequivocally supports ongoing international diplomatic efforts" to secure a ceasefire in connection with the release of all remaining hostages. In addition, it condemns "all acts of terrorism, including the Hamas-led attacks of October 7, 2023."

Russia criticized the draft for its failure to clearly call for a ceasefire in Gaza. The document contains "all the past distortions and unacceptable one-sided 'condemnations'," representing "standard American deception," the Russian mission to the UN said on Thursday.

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Texas Governor Says State Will Arrest Migrants Involved in El Paso Border Surge Thursday

EL PASO, March 22 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott said in a statement that state authorities will arrest every illegal migrant involved in an illegal breach of the border on Thursday.

"About the surge of illegal immigrants in El Paso: The TX National Guard & Dept. of Public Safety [DPS] quickly regained control & are redoubling the razor wire barriers," Abbott said on Thursday. "DPS is instructed to arrest every illegal immigrant involved for criminal trespass & destruction of property."

Earlier in the day, a New York Post correspondent captured video showing hundreds of illegal migrants breaching a border barrier and pushing past several Texas National Guard troops in the US southern border town of El Paso, Texas.

The migrants broke through concertina fencing state authorities installed along the border and rushed towards the main border wall, which was sealed off and guarded by several other national guardsmen, media footage showed.

Abbott's directive comes amid a controversial court battle between Texas and the Biden administration over a state law known as SB4, which provides the state authority to arrest and prosecute migrants suspected of entering the United States illegally from the US southern border and return them to Mexico regardless of their country of origin.

The US Supreme Court temporarily granted the state of Texas authority to execute SB4 earlier this week but hours later a federal appeals court froze the law.

House Republicans have been advocating for the Biden administration to impose meaningful border policy changes that will deter the record surge of migrants that have overrun the southern border over the last three years under President Joe Biden.

Republicans want Biden to use executive action to deal with the border crisis instead of trying to work something out in Congress, which is currently at an impasse on border policy due to partisan differences.

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IMF Completes Third Ukraine Loan Review, Paving Way For \$880mln For Budget Support

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) -The International Monetary Fund (IMF) Board announced that they finished the Third Review of Ukraine's extended arrangement under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF), enabling the authorities to access approximately US\$880 million for budgetary assistance.

"The IMF Board today completed the Third Review of the extended arrangement under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) for Ukraine, allowing the authorities to draw the equivalent of about US\$880 million (SDR 663.9 million), which will be channeled for budget support," the IMF said on Thursday.

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US Appeals Court Orders Probe Of Potential Jury Bias in Boston Marathon Bomber Case

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) - A district court in the United States must determine whether there was jury bias in a criminal case involving Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev before finalizing his execution, the US First Circuit Court of Appeals said in a ruling. "When Tsarnaev presented the district court with plausible claims of juror bias, the court was obliged to investigate those claims. And we conclude that the district court's investigation fell short of what was constitutionally required... we remand this case to the district court to determine whether either juror should have been stricken for cause on account of bias," the

ruling, filed Thursday, said.

If the district court finds that any juror should have been stricken on account of bias, Tsarnaev will be entitled to a new penalty-phase proceeding in the case against him, the ruling said. The court noted that the only question is whether Tsarnaev will face execution for his crimes, and that he will, regardless of the outcome of the probe, spend the rest of his life in prison.

In April 2013, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and his brother Tamerlan Tsarnaev bombed the Boston Marathon, killing three people and injuring hundreds of others. Tamerlan was killed by police while on the run, while Dzhokhar was arrested the following day and sentenced to death by lethal injection in May 2015.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Nicaragua's Attorney General - Treasury Dept.

(Updates with additional information)

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on Nicaragua's Attorney General Wendy Carolina Morales Urbina, the US Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a statement on Thursday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned Wendy Carolina Morales Urbina, Nicaragua's Attorney General, for being complicit in the Ortega-Murillo regime's oppression," the statement said.

The US authorities stressed that Morales Urbina is responsible for confiscating real property formerly belonging to independent media outlets, international organizations, and political prisoners.

"Morales Urbina has also seized property from thousands of non-governmental organizations under law explicitly to suppress freedom of association. Morales Urbina carried out the dispossession of all properties of the 222 political prisoners who were banished from Nicaragua," the statement added.

The US Treasury pointed out Nicaragua's Attorney General became a key figure who was formulating the strategy to designate Nicaraguan opposition members as terrorists. She used an existing anti-terrorism law to block their financial resources, according to the statement.

"The Attorney General of Nicaragua, in concert with the Ortega-Murillo regime [Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo], has exploited her office to facilitate a coordinated campaign to suppress dissent by seizing property from government political opponents without a legal basis," Under Secretary of the Treasury Brian Nelson said.

The US reminded that anti-government protests erupted in Nicaragua in 2018. However, the authorities suppressed demonstrations and incarcerated political activists, the statement added.

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## Wall Street Extends Record Highs, Looking Beyond Apple Lawsuit

NEW YORK, March 22 (Sputnik) - US stocks hit record highs for a second day in a row as Wall Street looked beyond a sweeping lawsuit against Apple and focused instead on prospective interest rate cuts that could fatten corporate profits.

The New York Stock Exchange's S&P 500 index, which tracks stocks of the top 500 US companies, hit on Thursday an all-time high of 5,261 before closing at 5,241 - up 17 points, or 0.3%, on the day.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest equities indicator that tracks the stocks of 30 large US corporations, touched a record high of 39,889. The Dow settled at 39,781, up 269 points, or 0.7%.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee tech names such as Google, Amazon, Apple, and Netflix, hit an all-time peak of 16,539. It finished at 16,401, up 32 points, or 0.2%.

Tech stocks rallied with the broader market despite the Apple lawsuit, where the US Justice Department accused the iconic iPhone maker of carving a monopoly for itself from an operating system that created "astronomical valuation" at the expense of rival phone makers, consumers and software developers.

Apple vowed to vigorously defend against the court action, which it said was wrong on the facts and the law. A company spokesman added that the lawsuit threatens the principles that set Apple products apart in fiercely competitive markets.

Analysts said that should Apple be broken up by the government under the suit, it could be the biggest blow against a tech giant since the late 1990s action against Microsoft, which was forced to unbundle the Internet Explorer browser from its Windows operating system.

Even so, many did not seem too perturbed by the threat hanging over Apple, saying it would be years before a judgment was reached.

"We do not expect any business model changes for now, but Apple clearly is going to have to find a way to eventually settle this case, pay a hefty fine, and ultimately find some compromise with developers on the App Store structure down the road," analysts at Wedbush said.

Apple's stock closed down \$7.30, or 4% on the day, at \$171.37.

The broader market focused on the likelihood of three US interest rate cuts this year despite the Federal Reserve not committing to any timing on these.

Policy-makers at the Fed projected on Wednesday a 75-basis point cut for each 2024 and 2025. Typically, the central bank makes 25-basis point revisions at a time, meaning there could be as many three cuts for each year.

The projection on cuts came after the Fed left rates unchanged for March in a range of 5.25%-5.5%. It was the fifth time the central bank had paused on rates since July, citing uncertainties over inflation.

"We're likely to cut rates at some point this year," Fed Chairman Jerome Powell told reporters after the decision. But he also said the central bank needs "greater confidence that inflation is moving sustainably down" and there remains "tremendous uncertainty about that."

The US Consumer Price Index, a key gauge for inflation, grew 3.2% in the year to February, remaining stubbornly above the Fed's long-term annual 2% target that could expedite a cut.

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Voting on Second UNSC Resolution on Gaza May Take Place on Friday - UN Diplomat

UNITED NATIONS, March 22 (Sputnik) - Another vote on a draft resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza by the UN Security Council could happen on Friday, if the American draft is not adopted, French Ambassador to the UN Nicolas de Riviere told reporters.

At the moment, there are two draft resolutions in the UN Security Council - one from the US and one from the ten non-permanent members of the Security Council.

The draft from the non-permanent members of the Security Council "demands an immediate ceasefire for the month of Ramadan, respected by all parties, which would lead to a permanent ceasefire."

Meanwhile, the US document does not contain a direct demand for a ceasefire. It said the Security Council "identifies the urgent need for an immediate and sustainable ceasefire... and unequivocally supports ongoing international diplomatic efforts to achieve such a ceasefire in conjunction with the release of the remaining hostages."

"We will probably vote tomorrow morning on the US draft. And then there are two options - either the American text is adopted. If the text is not adopted, then the draft of elected members will be put to a vote, and I hope it will be adopted," de Riviere said.

Following the French ambassador's remarks, the first deputy permanent representative of the Russian Federation to the UN, Dmitry Polyansky, made it clear to journalists that Russia was not satisfied with the current wording of the American project.

"We will not be satisfied with any language that does not call for an immediate ceasefire. Nobody is satisfied with that. 'Identifies urgent need' is not a call for an immediate ceasefire," he said.

Earlier, Blinken, during a visit to Saudi Arabia, said that the US draft resolution calls for an immediate ceasefire related to the release of the hostages. Polyansky noted that Russia would prefer wording that the Security Council demands a ceasefire, or at least calls for one.

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16 US States File Lawsuit Against Biden Over Ban on LNG Exports - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) - Texas and 15 other US states have have filed a lawsuit against the Biden administration, saying the ban on exporting liquefied natural gas (LNG) goes against the Natural Gas Act and Department of Energy policy, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton said in a statement.

"Texas, along with Louisiana and fourteen other states, has filed a lawsuit to void the unconstitutional LNG export ban, which ignores the Natural Gas Act's presumption in favor of exports, decades of Department of Energy policy, and State and private reliance on exports,"

Paxton said on Thursday.

According to the lawsuit, the states that have filed for the lawsuit are Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

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Resupply Mission to Space Station Successfully Launched From Cape Canaveral - SpaceX

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) - The latest unmanned cargo resupply mission to the International Space Station was successfully launched on schedule from Cape Canaveral in Florida, SpaceX announced in a press release.

The Dragon Spacecraft was successfully launched on a reusable Falcon 9 booster carrying the 30th Commercial Resupply Services (CRS-30) from Space Complex 40 (SLC-40) at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station at Florida at 4:55 p.m. EDT, SpaceX said on Thursday.

CRS-30 marked the sixth flight of the Falcon 9 first stage booster that previously launched the Ax-2, European Space Agency Euclid, Ax-3 and two Starlink multiple communications satellite missions, SpaceX said.

The first stage booster successfully landed back in its landing zone 1 at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, SpaceX said.

The mission is carrying three tons of supplies and equipment to the ISS crew including citrus, apples and cherry tomatoes and two coffee kits, SpaceX added.

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US Wants to Put New Gaza Resolution Up for Vote at UNSC Friday - Source

UNITED NATIONS, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States wants to put its new resolution on Gaza for a vote at the UN Security Council on Friday morning, a United Nations source said on Thursday.

"The US is aiming to put its draft for a vote tomorrow," the source told Sputnik.

The United States Mission has been trying for a while to finalize its final version as many members have voiced objections throughout.

The United States has vetoed several UN Security Council resolutions because it said they lacked statements condemning Hamas for the attack against Israel on October 7, 2023.

On that day, Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip and killed more than 1,100 Israelis - military and civilians - and abducted 240 others. Israel imposed a full blockade on Gaza, launched massive strikes and invaded the Palestinian enclave. Some 32,000 Palestinians have

been killed in Israel's operations and 76,000 have been wounded.

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Pentagon Says Can't Confirm Reports of Russia Using Satellite Images From US Companies

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) – Pentagon deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh said during a press briefing that she cannot corroborate reports about Russia allegedly using satellite images from US private companies to strike targets in Ukraine.

“I have seen those reports. I just can't confirm that at this time. We'll continue to look into that,” Singh said on Thursday.

Earlier this week, The Atlantic reported, citing a Ukrainian source, that Russia is allegedly using satellite imagery from US companies to aim its missiles at Ukrainian targets.

According to the report, the two biggest US companies that provide satellite imaging services are Maxar and Planet. The latter reportedly stated that it “did not find evidence of misuse or abuse” by Russia and Maxar declined to provide any comments.

Ukraine has reportedly used Maxar services on many occasions, including to get detailed satellite images before conducting terrorist attacks on the Crimean Bridge in 2023, damaging the roadway and killing civilians.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Sputnik) -

#### MIDDLE EAST CRISIS

\* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that he agreed with Arab leaders on the need for long-term peace and security in the Middle East.

\* Very good progress has been made over the last month on the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the parties are now getting closer to reaching a deal, Blinken said.

\* Israel's Secret Intelligence Service Director David Barnea will travel to Doha on Friday to meet with US Central Intelligence Agency chief William Burns, Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani and Egypt's intelligence chief Abbas Kamel, the Office of the Prime Minister of Israel said.

\* US House of Representatives Speaker Mike Johnson said that an invitation will be extended to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address Congress.

\* The EU leaders are calling for an immediate humanitarian pause in the Gaza Strip leading to a sustainable ceasefire, European Council President Charles Michel said amid the ongoing

summit in Brussels.

#### CHINA-RUSSIA COOPERATION

\* Russia and China have the necessary potential to overcome all arising difficulties on the path of trade and economic cooperation, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

\* The European Union and the United States continue to exert unprecedented pressure on China, but this cannot become an obstacle to the development of trade and economic relations between Moscow and Beijing, Peskov said.

\* Russia and China have reached an agreement with the Houthis in Yemen that their ships can sail through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden without being attacked, Bloomberg reported.

#### PUTIN-SISI TALKS

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi discussed by telephone the situation in Ukraine and in the zone of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Kremlin said on Thursday.

\* Sisi congratulated Putin on his victory in the presidential election, the Office of the Egyptian President said.

#### CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

\* Russian air defense systems have destroyed three Ukrainian aircraft-type drones over the territory of Crimea, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

\* The dispatch of foreign military personnel to Ukraine is fraught with negative consequences, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

\* The Russian armed forces continue to prevent the penetration of sabotage and reconnaissance groups of Ukraine in the border regions of Ukraine in the Belgorod direction, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

\* The Russian aerospace forces launched a missile strike on the decision-making centers of the Ukrainian troops, including with hypersonic Kinzhal missiles, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

\* The Biden administration blocked Ukraine from entering into any peace talks with Russia several months ago, threatening to stop funding Kiev, Pulitzer Prize-winning US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh said in his new article published and citing a US official in the know.

#### WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

\* The United States is in talks with its allies to support Ukraine using \$50 billion in bonds backed by revenue from frozen Russian assets, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

\* The US House Foreign Affairs Committee advanced legislation to impose sanctions on people connected to work on any bridge or tunnel that is connecting mainland Russia to the Crimean Peninsula.

\* Income from Russian assets does not belong to anyone, so it can be used for military assistance to Ukraine, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said.

\* Russia will use all judicial mechanisms and will choose other methods to respond to the European Union to prevent the bloc from using Russian frozen assets to help Ukraine, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

#### PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN RUSSIA

\* Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC) adopted a resolution on the results of the 2024 presidential election and pronounced Vladimir Putin to be the country's elected president, CEC chief Ella Pamfilova said on Thursday.

\* Putin said the campaign in the Russian presidential election was intense and extremely important.

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#### US House Minority Leader Says Lawmakers Must Vote on Ukraine Aid Before Break

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives must vote on a supplemental funding bill with aid for Ukraine before leaving for a break at the end of the week, lest they face a more dire situation upon their return, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries said on Thursday.

"Either Speaker [Mike] Johnson puts the bipartisan Senate bill on the House floor tomorrow, or we're going to have to explore all available opportunities immediately upon our return," Jeffries said during a press conference.

The supplemental bill is the only viable path forward, Jeffries said.

House lawmakers should not leave town without addressing the needs of allies, particularly Ukraine, Jeffries said.

There is a possibility that the situation in Ukraine could dramatically change for the worse by the time lawmakers return after a two-and-a half-week break, Jeffries said.

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#### US Imposes Sanctions on Nicaragua's Attorney General - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on Nicaragua's Attorney General Wendy Carolina Morales Urbina, the US Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a statement on Thursday.

"The following individual has been added to OFAC's SDN [Specially Designated Nationals] List: Morales Urbina, Wendy Carolina," the statement said.

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## Yellen Says US 'Strict' On Iran Oil, While Dozens of Tankers Reportedly Escape Sanctions

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States remains "strict" with sanctions on Iran, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Thursday, dismissing any knowledge of the Islamic republic exporting its oil freely despite reports that billions of dollars worth of crude was being carried out of the country by dozens of tankers.

"We have very strict sanctions on Iran and I'm not aware of anything that we do that is compromising in terms of Iranian oil exports," Yellen told US senators hearing her testimony on the nation's 2025 budget.

The Times reported last month that at least 27 tankers have transported oil from Iran over the past year and used liability insurance obtained from the New York-based American Club.

US authorities could have disrupted the shipments by advising the insurer to revoke coverage for the tankers, the Times noted.

Yet, the tankers were allowed to proceed, making at least 59 trips since 2023, said the paper, which even published publicly available satellite images of the vessels and their timelines of travel.

The revelations, if true, would be particularly embarrassing for the Biden administration, which for months hailed its efforts to restrict Iran's oil revenue and ability to fund proxy militias while rebels sympathetic to Tehran's cause attacked US forces and allies in the Middle East.

Since last year, Yellen has been telling Congress that her Treasury teams were "doing everything that they possibly can to crack down" on illegal Iranian oil.

The Treasury secretary looked annoyed on Thursday when a Republican senator questioned her about the Times story.

"I'd be happy to look at it," she replied, maintaining, however, that Biden was "very focused on trying to impose the strictest possible enforcement" against Iran.

She also refuted suggestions that Iran had been given a pass to export oil in a similar way to Venezuela.

Since October, Biden officials have allowed Venezuela to bypass sanctions on its energy after the government in Caracas signed with the opposition the Barbados Accord, which included a roadmap toward holding competitive elections. That accord is supposed to expire in April.

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## Hundreds of Migrants Rush Border Barrier in Texas Border Town - Reports

EL PASO, March 21 (Sputnik) - Hundreds of illegal migrants broke through a border barrier and pushed past several Texas National Guard troops in the US southern border town of El Paso, Texas, on Thursday, according to media footage from a New York Post correspondent.

The migrants broke through concertina fencing state authorities installed along the border and rushed towards the main border wall, which was sealed off and guarded by several other national guardsmen, media footage showed.

The footage shows migrants desperately pushing past some four national guard troops who

were trying to block their path before being overrun.

According to the New York Post, the Texas National Guard has pushed the migrants back to Mexico following the breach.

House Republicans have been advocating for the Biden administration to impose meaningful border policy changes that will deter the record surge of migrants that have overrun the southern border over the last three years under President Joe Biden.

Republicans want Biden to use executive action to deal with the border crisis instead of trying to work something out in Congress, which is currently at an impasse on border policy due to partisan differences.

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Kiev Now Has to Make Decisions to Leave Some Areas to Fortify Defensive Lines - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Kiev is currently having to make strategic decisions about pulling out of some areas in order to strengthen their defensive lines in the conflict with Russia, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"We know Ukraine right now is having to make strategic decisions about having to withdraw from certain areas in order to fortify their defensive lines," Singh said in a press briefing.

Singh stated that Ukraine was facing such decisions because Washington is not providing it with the necessary capabilities amid stalemate in Congress.

In early February, Ukraine's new Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces Oleksandr Syrskiy said that Ukrainian troops had switched from offensive to defensive actions. The Pentagon said that the Ukrainian military would have to decide which towns they are able to hold until Kiev receives new US aid.

Ukraine has already surrendered a number of settlements recently, including the Avdiivka (also known as Avdeyevka) stronghold near Donetsk.

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Pentagon Says Loan for Military Aid to Kiev Something Being Worked Out Through Congress

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The possibility of providing military aid to Ukraine through a loan is something that is being looked into by Congress, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"That's still something that's being worked out through Congress," Singh said in a press briefing when asked whether the Pentagon is considering such an option.

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2001 Memo From US Embassy in Moscow Details Reasons for Putin's Popularity - Archive

The US concluded that Russian President Vladimir Putin's popularity in the early days of his presidency was due to his ability to maintain economic stability and renew respect for the Kremlin, according to a January 2001 memo from the US Embassy in Moscow to the Secretary of State.

"While many of our contacts question just how much Putin's popularity rests on substance, they agree that he has adroitly focused on the bread-and-butter issue of paying pensions and salaries, as well as restoring the strength of and respect for Russia's leadership," the memo said.

The memo was published in The George Washington University National Security Archive. Putin's popularity was in part based on his direct rapport with average Russians, the memo said, citing embassy contacts. Russian public opinion experts told US officials that Putin's popularity also reflected a "very weak" crop of contenders on the national political scene in Russia, the memo said.

Putin's poll numbers tended to be weakest in the major urban centers of Russia, such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg, the memo said. However, support for Putin was strong enough overall to withstand possible economic problems, the memo said.

"It is clear, both from polling data and anecdotal evidence, that many Russians want a break after 15 years of turmoil... In that light, they understandably place a high premium on political stability and economic security. On that count, Putin and Co. are ready and willing to deliver," the memo said.

The 2024 Russian presidential election was held from March 15-17. Putin won the election as the incumbent candidate with 87.28% of the vote.

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Progress Made on Israel-Saudi Normalization, Sides Getting Close to Deal - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Very good progress has been made over the last month on the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and the sides are now getting closer to reaching a deal, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"We were working on this [the normalization plan] intensively before October 7, and in fact I was scheduled to come to the region - to Saudi Arabia and to Israel - on October 10 precisely for that reason, to actually focus on the Palestinian component of the normalization plan. But in terms of where we are at now, what I can say is this - we've made very good progress especially over the last month or so," Blinken said during a joint press conference with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry in Cairo. "We are, I think, getting close to a point where we'll have agreement."

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Antony Blinken Says Hamas Can be 'Dealt With' Without Ground Operation in Rafah

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken said after his meeting with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry on Thursday that Hamas can be handled without a ground operation in Rafah.

"Hamas can be effectively dealt with without a major ground operation in Rafah," said Blinken during a joint press briefing.

The statement comes on the same day that the Egyptian Foreign Ministry announced that the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, as well as the UAE secretary of state for international cooperation and the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) executive chief, called for the opening of all border crossings between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

Cairo hosted Blinken, as well as five Arab diplomats, earlier in the day.

Blinken arrived in Egypt on Thursday for his ongoing Middle East trip. While in Cairo, he is also scheduled to meet with the foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.

Last October, the Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 31,900 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, local authorities said.

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Hersh Says US Again Blocked Peace Talks Between Russia, Ukraine Several Months Ago

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration blocked Ukraine from entering into any peace talks with Russia several months ago, threatening to stop funding Kiev, Pulitzer Prize-winning US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh said in his new article published on Thursday and citing a US official in the know.

"We were on the verge of a reasonable negotiation several months ago before Putin's re-election and Zelensky's military degradation. The US leaders got wind of the possibility and gave Zelensky the ultimatum - 'No negotiations or settlement or we won't support your government with the \$45 billion in non-military funds,'" Hersh cited the US official as saying.

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US Ship With Materials for Temporary Pier for Gaza Aid Departs Homeport - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - A US ship with essential materials for constructing a temporary pier to support the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip departed from its homeport in the US state of Virginia, the Defense Department said on Thursday.

"The Bob Hope-class MV Roy P. Benavidez (T-AKR 306), a large, medium speed roll-on, roll-off ship, departed its pier in Newport News, Virginia, March 21, carrying heavy equipment and material needed to construct a temporary pier to support the flow of multinational humanitarian aid into Gaza," the Defense Department said in a statement.

The ship is transporting components for a floating modular pier system, which will be delivered to the US Army's 7th Transportation Brigade, who is tasked to construct the temporary pier in the Mediterranean, the statement added.

"MV Roy P. Benavidez is crewed by contracted merchant mariners and is dry cargo surge sealift carrier capable of transporting up to 380,000 square feet of containerized cargo and rolling stock between developed ports," the statement also said.

The United States started humanitarian airdrops into Gaza in early March amid Israel's efforts to effectively slow down or block the supply of food, water and other necessities to the Palestinians in the enclave. A significant number of Palestinians are experiencing famine and starvation in Gaza, according to international organizations.

US President Joe Biden, however, said the volume of humanitarian supplies to Gaza was insufficient and vowed to build a temporary port to deliver more aid.

Aid will be first supplied to a floating pier and then delivered to shore by small vessels, according to the Defense Department.

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UPDATE - Russia to Hold UNSC Meeting About Sanctions Impact on Fight Against Terrorism - Nebenzia

(Corrects typo in headline, adds details in lede and edits throughout)

UNITED NATIONS, March 21 (Sputnik) - Russia will organize early next week an informal UN Security Council meeting to discuss the impact that unilateral sanctions have on the ability of countries to combat terrorism, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

"On Monday, the 25th of March, we will be holding an informal Security Council Arrria formula meeting on the subject of their [sanctions] impact on the ability of states to combat terrorism and we invite all members of the Security Council and other interested countries to participate," Nebenzia said.

The Russian ambassador made the comment during a UN Security Council meeting on Syria. Nebenzia reiterated Russia's long-held position that it disagrees with sanctions being imposed

on Syria.

Syria has been under sanctions from the United States, the European Union and a number of other states since the start of the conflict in that country in 2011. In 2020, the Caesar Act expanded US sanctions against Syria.

The Caesar Act is designed to deter support for reconstruction efforts by the Syrian government. It imposes sanctions on anyone who provides funding or assistance to the Syrian government and the country's central bank. The legislation imposes sanctions on those providing aircraft or spare parts to Syrian airlines or who are involved with government-controlled construction and engineering projects.

In February 2024, the US House passed the Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act. If passed by the Senate and signed into law by the president, the bill would extend the existing authorities under the Caesar Act through December 31, 2032, and expand sanctions on those providing financial and technological support to Syrian groups and enterprises.

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Blinken Says Agreed With Arab Leaders on Need for Long-Term Peace, Security in Mideast

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that he agreed with Arab leaders on the need for long-term peace and security in the Middle East. "We discussed and agreed on the need for long term peace and security," Blinken during a joint press conference with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry in Cairo.

Blinken is on a trip to the Middle East for talks on a potential ceasefire and hostage release agreement between Israel and Hamas. On Friday, the secretary is set to visit Israel.

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Raytheon to Supply Germany With \$1.2Bln in Patriot Air Defense Missiles - Release

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Raytheon has received a new \$1.2 billion contract to supply Germany with advanced Patriot anti-missile and anti-aircraft interceptors and back-up systems, the US defense contracting giant announced in a press release on Thursday. "Raytheon was awarded a \$1.2 billion contract to supply Germany with Patriot® air and missile defense systems," the release said. "These systems will augment Germany's existing air defense infrastructure with additional Patriot equipment. The scope of the contract includes the most current Patriot Configuration 3+ radars, launchers, command and control stations, associated spares, and support."

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All NASA Science Discovery Missions to Bust \$500M In Spending Caps - US Congressman

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - All of NASA's currently approved and developing science discovery missions are going to be far more expensive than the agency promised when they were approved and all of them will break through the \$500 million per project spending cap that Congress has mandated, US House Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee Chairman Brian Babin said.

"None of the Discovery class missions are under the \$500 million spending cap," Babin said in a congressional hearing on Thursday.

Congress has a responsibility to weigh the cost of a mission with its scientific value and cannot simply rationalize cost overruns and schedule delays by stating the end result of these missions will be worthwhile, he said.

"That is unacceptable to our constituents and should be unacceptable to us all," Babin said.

Former Goddard Space Flight Center Director and former Martin Marietta President and CEO A. Thomas Young confirmed Babin's statement. "That will happen," Babin added.

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Idaho Police Say Searching for 'Armed and Dangerous' Men Involved in Attack on Officers

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Law enforcement authorities in the state of Idaho are searching for two men involved in an attack on corrections officers as part of an effort to free one of the men from custody, the Boise Police Department (BPD) said in a statement.

"Boise Police detectives have identified the man suspected of being involved in the overnight shooting of IDOC [Idaho Department of Correction] officers as Nicholas Umphenour," the statement said on Wednesday. "Officers continue to warn that the suspect, Nicholas Umphenour, and the escaped inmate, Skylar Meade, are considered armed and dangerous, so if you come in contact with them, do not approach."

Earlier on Wednesday, Umphenour allegedly struck two IDOC officers with gunfire when they were transporting Meade from medical treatment back to custody, after which the duo fled the scene.

Three IDOC officers were injured in the incident: one shot by the suspect who is in critical but stable condition, another shot by the suspect who has serious but non-life-threatening injuries and a third who received non-life-threatening injuries during gunfire from a responding BPD officer, the statement said.

Umphenour and Meade fled in a gray 2020 Honda Civic with license plate 2TDF43U, the statement said.

Police continue to investigate the case, the statement added.

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NASA 'Culture of Optimism' Causes Huge Delays, Costs in Science Programs - Congressman

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - NASA's science discovery missions are repeatedly many years behind schedule and cost vastly more than their originally projected and promised costs because the US space agency suffers from an excessively unrealistic can-do mindset and culture of optimism, US House Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee Chairman Brian Babin said on Thursday.

"We cannot ignore this now-familiar pattern of schedule and cost overruns for many NASA programs," Babin said in a statement. "When missions are delayed, costs increase as a result."

Ripple effects then reverberate throughout NASA for many years as timelines shift and unrelated programs are delayed or canceled to accommodate the troubled project, Babin said.

"Just three weeks ago, NASA's Office of Inspector General released an audit of the Mars Sample Return mission - commonly known as MSR - that NASA hopes to launch in partnership with the European Space Agency before the end of the decade. Anyone who has read prior reports on NASA's science missions from the Inspector General, GAO, or other independent review bodies will see familiar themes in this audit," Babin said.

Project management challenges, including over-optimism on technology development, evolving architectural requirements, and underestimating costs, were all familiar themes from previously long-delayed and enormously expensive NASA projects that were once again identified in the new report, Babin also said.

Even the eventually successful James Webb Space Telescope now operating a million miles from Earth had been plagued by years of delays and billions of dollars in cost overruns, Babin added.

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Chinese President to Meet With US Executives in Beijing to Woo American Firms - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Chinese President Xi Jinping plans to meet with a group of US business executives in Beijing on Wednesday in a bid to attract US firms back to China, The Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday, without citing its sources.

While the list of participants has not been confirmed yet, Chubb CEO Evan Greenberg, National Committee on US-China Relations President Stephen Orlins and US-China Business Council President Craig Allen are expected to meet with Xi.

The meeting would follow the annual China Development Forum, whose agenda will include economic growth, artificial intelligence (AI) and climate change, according to a draft copy viewed by the newspaper.

The report said Americans will comprise the largest delegation at the forum with 34 of the more than 85 executives on the draft guest list. The guests include chief executive officers or other senior executives from Apple; Blackstone; Citadel; HSBC; Micron Technology; AMD; Exxon Mobil; Starbucks; Cargill; Bristol-Myers Squibb; Pfizer; Mondelez International; and HP.

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US Hails UNGA's Adoption of Resolution That Puts 'Guardrails' on Artificial Intelligence

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States hailed the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of a US-drafted resolution on artificial intelligence (AI) that is designed to encourage guardrails to keep people safe, a senior Biden administration official told reporters.

"This resolution also reflects perspectives from civil society cooperation to manage the risks of AI, because we know that unless AI is developed responsibly and used responsibly, it can lead to accidents and it can compound threats from malicious actors, so this resolution encourages guardrails to keep people safe," the official said.

The US held "was actively engaged with" countries including Russia, China and Cuba while drafting the resolution, the official said.

The resolution encourages protecting personal data, strengthening privacy policies, monitoring AI for risks and compliance with international human rights laws, the official said.

Another US official added that the resolution would jump-start progress on sustainable development goals such as poverty eradication, health, energy and education.

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US Concerned About Tanker Emergency Capacity in Indo-Pacific - Commander

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The US Indo-Pacific Command expressed concern on Thursday about its ability to deliver enough KC-46 tankers to the Indo-Pacific theater if there was a crisis.

"I'm confident it's the right tanker to fill our holes, but I am concerned about the magnitude and our ability to deliver enough tankers in this theater in time of crisis," Admiral John Aquilino, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, testified at a US Senate Armed Services Committee hearing.

Aquilino also said that he was "absolutely concerned" about the increasing gap in fighter capacity with China, with the US Air Force planning to divest twenty-six F-15 Strike Eagle jets and buying fewer than expected F-35, F-15EX and other fighter jets in its fiscal year 2025 budget.

Additionally, Aquilino said the \$3.3 billion budget request for military construction in the

Indo-Pacific was “absolutely” key to deterring China. It covers 212 projects across the region for infrastructure projects such as runways, seaports, and munitions storage.

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UPDATE - US Justice Department Sues iPhone Maker Apple for Creating 'Smartphone Monopoly'

(Adds comments, details and context in paragraphs 3, 5-6, 11-16)

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice filed a lawsuit on Thursday against Apple, accusing the iconic iPhone maker of carving a monopoly from its operating system that created “astronomical valuation” for itself at the expense of rivals, consumers and software developers.

“Each step in Apple’s course of conduct built and reinforced the moat around its smartphone monopoly,” one of the Justice Department’s contentions in the suit said.

The iPhone has created a stranglehold for Apple both in terms of competition and fortune. The company captured the top seven positions in the global list of best-selling smartphones in 2023, with a 64% US market share alone in the final quarter of last year versus 18% for Samsung, data from Counterpoint Research showed.

On the New York Stock Exchange, Apple’s market capitalization of \$2.679 trillion makes it the world’s second most valuable company.

The Justice Department’s suit took aim at this dominance, with Attorney General Merrick Garland saying the free and fair markets the American economy was built on were being threatened by Apple and other giants violating US antitrust laws. “They stifle innovation, hurt producers & workers & increase costs for consumers,” Garland said in a press conference. “If left unchallenged, Apple will only continue to strengthen its smartphone monopoly.”

Apple isn’t the only technology giant facing government scrutiny. The Justice Department has also been fighting an antitrust case against Google since 2020 over that company’s dominance in web search and advertising business. The US government’s most famous battle against the tech sector remains its suit against Microsoft in the 1990s, when it forced the firm to unbundle its Internet Explorer browser from the Windows operating system.

The suit against Apple, filed in the District of New Jersey, was supported by 16 attorneys general who said the company’s anti-competitive practices extended beyond the iPhone and Apple Watch, into its advertising, browser, FaceTime and news offerings.

The Justice Department alleged that in order to keep consumers buying its iPhones, Apple blocked cross-platform messaging apps, limited third-party wallet and smartwatch compatibility and disrupted non-App Store programs and cloud-streaming services.

“For years, Apple responded to competitive threats by imposing a series of 'Whac-A-Mole' contractual rules and restrictions that have allowed Apple to extract higher prices from consumers, impose higher fees on developers and creators, and to throttle competitive alternatives from rival technologies,” Assistant Attorney General Jonathan Kanter said in a statement illuminating the government’s case.

Users say Apple has made messaging from Android to iPhones difficult and shut down applications created by developers to circumvent such complications.

The Justice Department suit highlighted comments from Apple CEO Tim Cook that mocked people who tried to get around the iPhone using other devices.

“Not to make it personal but I can’t send my mom certain videos,” one user told Cook, referring to a 2022 interview at a media event.

“Buy your mom an iPhone,” the CEO responded.

The sweeping action against Apple, the biggest in its near five-decade history since being co-founded in 1976 by technology revolutionary Steve Jobs, could shake up the IT industry as a whole, analysts say.

Aside from being a significant risk to its walled-garden business model, the company fears that complying with regulations would not just cost it money but also prevent it from introducing new products or services, ultimately hurting customer demand.

Apple is facing action in Europe too. It was fined \$2 billion in the EU over a dispute with music service Spotify. It is also being probed by the European Commission over whether it is complying with a new Digital Markets Act that forces Apple to open up the iPhone app store to rivals such as Microsoft or Epic Games. Apple plans to charge major rivals that eschew its app store 50 cents per download.

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State Department Says US May Double LNG Capacity By 2030

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – The US may more than double its liquid natural gas (LNG) capacity by 2030, Under Secretary of State Jose Fernandez said on Thursday.

“We have right now projects that will increase our capacity to 26 billion cubic feet per day by 2030,” Fernandez said during a hearing at the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

He pointed out that LNG accounts for almost one-third of US gas exports. “Today, we export 12 billion cubic feet per day,” he said, adding that this level may grow up to 14 billion cubic feet per day.

Fernandez also expressed confidence that LNG projects are not being affected by the decision of the Biden administration to stop permitting the exports of LNG to other countries.

In January, the Biden administration paused the approval of new LNG exports, pending an Energy Department review of the underlying analyses used for authorizations. US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said later that this will not impact the United States’ relationships with allies.

However, US Senator Dan Sullivan said this week that American allies in Europe expressed major concerns over the matter on the margins of the Munich Security Conference last month.

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CENTCOM Commander Says 5 US Citizens Left Alive in Hamas' Captivity

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Hamas still holds hostage five US citizens following the announcement last week of the death of a US and Israeli citizen, Central Command chief Gen. Michael Kurilla said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"It's five Americans that are left alive right now with the death of one announced two weeks ago," Kurilla told the US House Armed Services Committee hearing.

On March 12, Israel announced that US and Israeli citizen Itay Chen, who was thought to have been held hostage by Hamas, was killed during the Palestinian organization's attack on Israel on October 7.

On that day, Hamas attacked Israel from Gaza and killed more than 1,100 Israelis - military personnel and civilians - and abducted 240 others. Israel imposed a complete blockage of Gaza, launched massive strikes and then a ground invasion of the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas and rescuing the hostages.

Some 32,000 Palestinians have been killed during Israel's operations and more than 76,000 have been wounded. Nearly 1.9 million residents of Gaza out of the 2.3 million have been displaced and a significant number are facing hunger and starvation, according to the local authorities and international organizations.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the prisoners and hostages, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The ceasefire was extended several times and expired on December 1. More than 100 hostages are still believed to be held by Hamas in Gaza.

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UN General Assembly Unanimously Adopts Resolution on Artificial Intelligence

UNITED NATIONS, March 21 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly unanimously adopted a US-drafted resolution to encourage developing safeguards for artificial intelligence (AI), US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday.

"The UN General Assembly just unanimously adopted the first-ever resolution aimed at mobilizing artificial intelligence for good," Thomas-Greenfield said in a statement. "This is a historic step toward fostering safe, secure, and trustworthy AI systems."

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US Senators Introduce Bill to Stop Oil Sales to China, Russia, 'Adversaries' - Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Two US senators have introduced legislation to ban oil sales from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to China, Russia, Iran and other "adversaries," Senator John Fetterman said in a statement on Thursday.

"US Senators John Fetterman (D-PA) and Joni Ernst (R-IA) introduced the Banning Oil Exports to Foreign Adversaries Act, which would prohibit the export or sale of oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) to foreign adversaries. Specifically, the bill will ban sales to China, Russia, Iran, Venezuela, Syria, and Cuba, as well as any entity owned, controlled, or influenced by the Chinese Communist Party," Fetterman said in a statement.

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CENTCOM Commander Says He Does Not Recommend US Troop Withdrawal From Iraq

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – US Central Command chief Gen. Michael Kurilla said in congressional testimony on Thursday that he would not recommend to US President Joe Biden to withdraw American troops from Iraq until it can handle the existing regional threats by itself. "I would not until the conditions are met that Iraq can handle that fight by themselves," Kurilla told a House Armed Services Committee hearing.

US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander agreed with Kurilla's statement on the issue during the hearing.

In January, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced that the United States and Iraq had agreed to launch working group meetings to discuss the future of the US-led international coalition and its military presence in the country. The Department of Defense, however, said that launching the commission did not mean the start of negotiations between the two countries about the eventual withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.

The Iraqi prime minister told the Wall Street Journal in mid-January there was no need for the presence of the US-led coalition in Iraq anymore to fight the Islamic State (ISIS, a terrorist group banned in Russia), adding he was no longer worried that the departure of the coalition forces would undermine Iraq's military capabilities.

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US Gaza Resolution 'Standard American Deception,' No Call for Ceasefire - Russian Mission

UNITED NATIONS, March 21 (Sputnik) - A new US draft UN Security Council resolution contains no call for a ceasefire in Gaza and represents "standard American deception," Russian deputy ambassador to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday.

"I want to clarify: this is standard American deception. First, the draft is still the same, with all the past distortions and unacceptable one-sided 'condemnations,' of which there are many. Second, it did not and does not contain any call for a ceasefire. Only a philosophical phrase

about its importance has appeared, and even then in connection with the release of the hostages," Polyanskiy wrote on Telegram.

The draft resolution actually gives a green light to Israel's military operation in Rafah, Polyanskiy said.

The new US draft resolution "determines the imperative of an immediate and sustained ceasefire to protect civilians on all sides, allow for the delivery of essential humanitarian assistance and alleviate humanitarian suffering, and towards that end unequivocally supports ongoing international diplomatic efforts to secure such a ceasefire in connection with the release of all remaining hostages," according to the text seen by Sputnik.

Since the onset of the Israel-Hamas conflict last October, the United States has blocked several resolutions calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

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Russia Seeking Port Facility in Sudan Goes Against US Global Plans – AFRICOM Commander

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – Russia is seeking to have a port facility in Sudan and that goes against US global campaign plans and is a concern for Washington, African Command (AFRICOM) Commander Gen. Michael Langley said in congressional testimony on Thursday.

"I'm talking about the Russian Federation. They would love a warm water port. They'd love to have the port. They are in Sudan as their own. That's against our global campaign plans. I can talk with a higher level of specificity in closed session, but that is a concern," Langley told a House Armed Services Committee hearing.

In 2020, Russia and Sudan signed an agreement that will allow Moscow to locate its naval base in Port Sudan for 25 years. However, to date, Sudan has not ratified the agreement amid a political and security crisis in the country that started in 2023.

In April 2023, clashes broke out between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group. The parties to the conflict have since introduced several temporary nationwide ceasefires, but none has helped settle the conflict. In late October, the parties to the conflict resumed negotiations, mediated by Saudi Arabia in Jeddah, but the hostilities have continued.

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Niger Did Not Ask US Forces to Leave, Provided Assurances for Their Protection - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The government of Niger has not ask the United States to leave, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"At this point, the CNSP self-identified government of Niger has not asked or demanded that the United States military depart. There is actually quite a mixed message. We are following up and seeking clarification," Wallender told the US House Armed Services Committee. "They have assured us that American military forces are protected and they will take no action that would endanger them."

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US Senator Says Requesting More Time for Lawmakers to Consider \$1.2 Trillion Funding Bill

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - US Senator Mike Lee said on Thursday that he is requesting more time for members of Congress to consider and amend a \$1.2 trillion government funding bill.

Earlier on Thursday, the US Congress unveiled the legislation, which provides fiscal year 2024 funding to six unfunded federal government appropriations areas. Lawmakers must pass legislation to fund the six portions by March 22 or face a partial government shutdown.

"I'm about to speak about the 1,000-page omnibus spending bill in the Senate and propose a measure [to] give members of Congress more time (until April 12th) to review, amend, and debate the bill," Lee said in a statement via social media platform X.

Numerous other Republican members of Congress have also come out in opposition to the legislation, including members of the US House Freedom Caucus.

Lawmakers would have to maintain a reading rate of 112 words per minute to finish reading, let alone analyzing, the legislation before it is brought to a vote, the House Freedom Caucus said in a statement on X.

The bill provides \$5.5 million for every word it includes, the statement added.

US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has said that senators will act swiftly on the legislation as soon as it passes the House of Representatives.

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UN Special Envoy Urges Syrian Government to Engage in Political Dialogue

UNITED NATIONS, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations calls on parties to engage in dialogue on Syria, as otherwise the situation will continue to develop in a negative direction, the UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen said on Thursday.

"In Damascus, I urged the Syrian Government to engage in a deepened and concrete dialogue, which would be essential to developing joint reciprocal and parallel steps from different parties. It is more urgent than ever that this starts - otherwise the trend lines that I have outlined will only continue to move in the wrong direction, rather than towards a safe, calm, neutral environment," Pedersen told the UN Security Council members during a meeting on Syria.

Pedersen also said that there are concrete ideas on the table which can be worked on. Earlier this week, US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf said the United States would not normalize relations with Syria without progress made toward a political solution to the ongoing conflict.

Syria has been under sanctions from the United States and the European Union since the start of the conflict in that country in 2011. US sanctions imposed on Syria include an embargo and they affect third parties. US secondary sanctions were restricted until 2020 when the Caesar Act, signed by then-US President Donald Trump in 2019, went into effect.

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Europe, Mideast Concerned About Way Forward for US Aid Amid Congress Deadlock - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Countries in Europe and the Middle East are concerned about the future of US assistance amid stalemate in Congress regarding the national security supplemental bill, Celeste Wallander, assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, said on Thursday.

"There is concern in Europe and in the Middle East about the way forward for American support," Wallander said during a House Armed Services Committee hearing. "We have done our best to reassure them with words but they are waiting to see our actions."

The Congress has been deadlocked for months over a foreign aid supplemental bill that would provide funding for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan.

While the Senate approved a \$95 billion version of the bill last month, House Speaker Mike Johnson has refused to bring it to the House floor for a vote.

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US Justice Department Sues iPhone Maker Apple for Creating 'Smartphone Monopoly'

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice filed a lawsuit on Thursday against Apple, accusing the iconic iPhone maker of carving a monopoly from its operating system that created "astronomical valuation" for itself at the expense of rivals, consumers and software developers.

"Each step in Apple's course of conduct built and reinforced the moat around its smartphone monopoly," one of the Justice Department's contentions in the suit said.

Equity analysts on Wall Street estimate Apple's market capitalization at \$2.679 trillion, making it the world's second most valuable company.

The suit, filed in the District of New Jersey, was supported by 16 attorneys general who said Apple's anti-competitive practices extended beyond the iPhone and Apple Watch, into its

advertising, browser, FaceTime and news offerings.

The Justice Department alleges that in order to keep consumers buying its iPhones, Apple blocked cross-platform messaging apps, limited third-party wallet and smartwatch compatibility and disrupted non-App Store programs and cloud-streaming services.

"For years, Apple responded to competitive threats by imposing a series of 'Whac-A-Mole' contractual rules and restrictions that have allowed Apple to extract higher prices from consumers, impose higher fees on developers and creators, and to throttle competitive alternatives from rival technologies," Assistant Attorney General Jonathan Kanter said in a statement distributed with the documents filed in court. "Today's lawsuit seeks to hold Apple accountable and ensure it cannot deploy the same, unlawful playbook in other vital markets."

The sweeping action against Apple, the biggest in its near five-decade history since being co-founded in 1976 by technology revolutionary Steve Jobs, could shake up the IT industry as a whole, analysts say.

Aside from being a significant risk to its walled-garden business model, the company fears that complying with regulations would not just cost it money but also prevent it from introducing new products or services, ultimately hurting customer demand.

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Russian to Hold UN Security Council Meeting on Combating Terrorism March 25 - Ambassador

UNITED NATIONS, March 21 (Sputnik) - Russia will organize early next week an informal UN Security Council meeting on the ability of states to combat terrorism, the Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

"On Monday, the 25th of March, we will be holding an informal Security Council Arria formula meeting on the subject of their impact on the ability of states to combat terrorism and we invite all members of the Security Council and other interested countries to participate," Nebenzia said.

The Russian ambassador made the comment during a UN Security Council meeting on Syria. Nebenzia reiterated Russia's long-held position that it disagrees with sanctions being imposed on Syria.

Syria has been under sanctions from the United States, the European Union and a number of states since the start of the conflict in that country in 2011. The US sanctions include an embargo and affect third parties. US secondary sanctions were restricted until 2020 when the Caesar Act, signed by then-US President Donald Trump in 2019, went into effect.

The Caesar Act is designed to deter support for reconstruction efforts by the Syrian government. It imposes sanctions on anyone who provides funding or assistance to the Syrian government and the country's central bank. The legislation imposes sanctions on those providing aircraft or spare parts to Syrian airlines or who are involved with government-controlled construction and engineering projects.

In May 2023, US lawmakers also submitted the Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act to the parliament to amend the Caesar Act and further expand sanctions on those providing financial

and technological support to Syrian groups and enterprises. The US government now has the authority to introduce sanctions until the end of 2025, while the new legislation, if adopted, would extend this power through 2032.

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US Should Be 'Extremely Concerned' by Growing Role of Russia, China in Africa - AFRICOM

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States should be extremely concerned about the increasing presence of Russia and China in Africa, the US Africa Command commander said during a House Armed Services Committee hearing on Thursday.

"We should be extremely concerned," Gen. Michael Langley said, when asked how concerned Washington should be about Russia's and China's growing footprint in Africa.

Langley argued that Russia and China are trying to replace the West, and particularly the United States on the continent.

US President Joe Biden's Fiscal Year 2025 budget proposal requests \$25 million for a new fund to suppress Russia's influence in Africa.

Western countries on multiple occasions have expressed their concerns over Russia's expanding diplomatic and military ties with Africa.

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

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Risk of Attack Emanating From Afghanistan 'Increasing' - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The risk of an attack coming from Afghanistan is increasing, US Central Command chief Gen. Michael Kurilla said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"ISIS [Islamic States terror group, banned in Russia] surged their attacks in Iraq and Syria earlier this year, and the risk of an attack emanating from Afghanistan is increasing," Kurilla told the US House Armed Services Committee.

The ISIS-Khorasan branch of the Islamic State retains the capability and the will to attack US and Western interests abroad in as little as six months with little to no warning, Kurilla said.

The Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in the fall of 2021 amid the withdrawal of US troops from the country and the collapse of the US-backed government there.

The Taliban takeover has heightened fears in some Central Asian nations and elsewhere concerning the spread of radical Islamic fundamentalism as it happened in 1996 when the

Taliban first came to power in Afghanistan for five years.

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US, Allies Plan to Back \$50Bln in Bonds With Frozen Russian Funds to Aid Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is in talks with allies to support Ukraine using \$50 billion in bonds backed by revenue from frozen Russian assets, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

The plan suggested by the US involves creating a special purpose vehicle to issue at least \$50 billion in bonds supported by frozen Russian assets and using the funds to support Ukraine, the report said, citing sources familiar with the matter.

The plan also involves pooling \$280 billion in Russian central bank assets frozen in Group of Seven and European Union countries in the special purpose vehicle, from which profits would be put towards backing "freedom bonds," the report said. EU leaders will discuss how to utilize revenue from the frozen Russian assets to benefit Ukraine during a meeting in Brussels on Thursday, the report added.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said earlier on Thursday that Russia will use all available judicial mechanisms and other means to prevent the EU from using frozen Russian assets to aid Ukraine.

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US House Speaker Johnson Says Will Invite Israel's Netanyahu to Address Congress

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - Us House of Representatives Speaker Mike Johnson said on Thursday that an invitation will be extended to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address Congress.

"We'll certainly extend that invitation," Johnson said in an appearance on the CNBC news channel.

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US Lawmaker Says Would Be 'Incredibly Unwise' to Try to Push Russia, China Out of Africa

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Adam Smith said on Thursday that the United States should not try to push out Russia and China from Africa as it would be "incredibly unwise" and advocated instead the maintenance of US presence on the continent.

"I do want to dispel the notion that somehow the US should just come in by force and push out China and Russia from having influence in Africa. A - that's not going to happen, B - would be incredibly unwise to do it. Russia and China are global powers, they are going to be present but we have to make sure is that we maintain our presence," Smith said during a House Armed Services Committee hearing.

Smith urged the United States not to view Africa as some sort of a chip in a broader geopolitical game, but rather to try to balance its interests with the national interests of the African countries to reduce the allegedly malign influence of Russia and China there.

In September 2023, the leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger signed a charter establishing the Alliance of Sahel States to create "a collective defense architecture" following coups in Mali in 2020, Burkina Faso in 2022 and Niger in 2023.

In the aftermath of the coups, Russia declared its readiness to develop constructive bilateral relations with each of the countries and also expressed support for their territorial integrity and sovereignty amid Western threats to impose sanctions and send troops to restore regimes friendly to Europe and the United States.

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#### US Congress Unveils \$1.2Trln Funding Package for Fiscal Year 2024

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – US Congress has unveiled a \$1.2 trillion package to fund the six remaining departments in the federal government in the fiscal year 2024, including national defense.

The House and Senate Appropriations Committees published the document overnight or less than 48 hours before a looming partial shutdown as soon as this weekend if Congress fails to pass the package.

Commenting on chances to avoid a partial government shutdown this weekend, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that it would be a "tight squeeze" to pass the package before the deadline.

At the same time, Schumer pledged on Thursday to act swiftly and put the package on the Senate floor as soon as House lawmakers pass the funding measure.

Schumer thus shifted responsibility for the delay in passing the bill onto the shoulders of the House of Representatives and their Speaker Mike Johnson, continuing the confrontation between the Democratic-controlled Senate and the Republican majority in the House.

On Tuesday, the White House and congressional leaders agreed on the remaining six appropriations bills for the Departments of Defense, Financial Services, Homeland Security, Labor, Health, and Education, the Legislative Branch, and the State and Foreign operations.

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## US Doubles Security Funding for Taiwan, Increases Spending to Counter China - Bill

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Appropriation Act for fiscal year (FY) 2024 provides additional funding for security cooperation with Taiwan and increases spending to counter China, the US House Appropriations Committee said on Thursday.

"Defense Appropriation Act, 2024, provides a \$27 billion increase over the FY23 enacted level, and directs that funding to critical national defense efforts, including countering the PRC," the House Appropriations Committee said in a summary of the package.

The Act doubles security cooperation funding for Taiwan, the committee said.

"The Act also rejects tens of billions of dollars in waste included in the President's Budget Request and redirects those resources to activities that counter the People's Republic of China (PRC) and other near-peer adversaries," the committee added.

The United States would counter China by maximizing its production of critical munitions and by spending more than \$66 billion for the US Indo-Pacific Command capabilities, including \$42 million to bolster its military capabilities in the region, according to the committee.

In addition, the bill prohibits funding for China's Wuhan Institute of Virology - the laboratory at the center of investigations into the COVID-19 origins - and the EcoHealth Alliance, the committee said.

"[The bill] counters the People's Republic of China by ... rejecting the Biden administration's inadequate shipbuilding plan by denying the request to divest four ships prematurely and funding the construction of eight battle ships," the committee said.

The document also increases investments in 5th and 6th-generation aircraft, like the F-35 jet, and next generation air dominance, the committee added.

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## US House Panel Advances Bill to Sanction Chinese Communist Party Members

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The US House Foreign Affairs Committee advanced a bill on Thursday to impose sanctions on members of the National Communist Party Congress of the People's Republic of China.

The panel advanced the bill, dubbed the Sanctioning Tyrannical and Oppressive People within the Chinese Communist Party Act (STOP CCP Act), in a vote of 28 in favor and 22 opposed.

The legislation expresses the sense of the US Congress that the CCP has committed numerous human rights violations against people in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

The bill directs the US president to impose sanctions on members of the CCP Central Committee or any successor organization.

The legislation provides an exception for some sanctions if it is necessary to comply with the United States' obligations as the home of the United Nations headquarters.

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UPDATE - US FY2024 Spending Package Provides \$3.3Bln for Israel, Prohibits UNRWA Funds

(Clarifies which funds are allocated as part of State, Defense budgets, swaps quote, minor edits throughout)

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – The newly released US spending package for fiscal year 2024 includes \$3.3 billion in aid to Israel while excluding funding for UNRWA, among various new restrictions on assistance for Palestinians, according to a summary released by the House appropriations committee early Thursday.

"The Act [State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Act] also continues our commitment to Israel, fully funding our annual security commitment of \$3.3 billion, prohibiting any taxpayer funding from going to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and eliminating funding for the United Nations Commission of Inquiry against Israel," the summary said.

The bill also includes new conditions on any assistance to Gaza, including mechanisms for coordination with Israel, prevention of diversion to Hamas or other terrorist entities, and a requirement for third-party monitoring.

It also requires unprecedented conditionality on funds to the UN, including new requirements on anti-Israel bias, transparency, and terrorism vetting for every UN entity and international organization funded in the bill. The UNRWA exclusion will be in effect for FY2024.

Funding for the Defense Department will fully cover Israel's Cooperative Missile Defense Programs, which include Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow. It also includes \$300 million for research, testing, and evaluation, and \$200 million for procurement.

The Senate and House appropriations committees agreed on the \$1.2 trillion package early Thursday. The bill is expected to be passed by Friday midnight in order to avoid a shutdown of several government agencies. The legislation provides funds for the departments of State, Defense, Homeland Security, Labor and Health and Human Services.

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US House Panel Advances Bill to Sanction People Tied to Russia-Crimea Tunnel, Bridge

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) - The US House Foreign Affairs Committee advanced legislation on Thursday to impose sanctions on people connected to work on any bridge or tunnel that is connecting the mainland Russia to the Crimean Peninsula.

The House panel advanced the bill, dubbed the No Russian Tunnel to Crimea Act, in a vote of 49 in favor and 1 opposed.

The legislation is sponsored by the panel's top Democrat, US Congressman Gregory Meeks. The bill is cosponsored by Congressmen Joe Wilson, William Keating and Michael Lawler.

The bill requires the imposition of sanctions with respect to any foreign person who knowingly participates in the construction, maintenance or repair of any tunnel or bridge connecting Russia's mainland with the Crimean Peninsula.

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US FY2024 Spending Package Boosts Baltic Security Initiative by \$20Mln to \$228Mln – Senate

WASHINGTON, March 21 (Sputnik) – US Congressional negotiators agreed to increase funding for the Baltic Security Initiative by \$20 million to \$228 million as part of its spending package for fiscal year 2024, according to a release published early Thursday.

“The bill provides \$92 million above the budget request to improve US Indo-Pacific Command’s deterrence. It adds \$20 million for the Baltic Security Initiative, for a total of \$228 million,” the Senate Appropriations Committee said in a summary of the bill text.

The Baltic Security Initiative provides military aid to the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The Senate and House appropriations committees released the text of the bill early Thursday ahead of a Friday deadline to fund the government.

Lawmakers must pass the legislation — which provides budgets for the departments of State, Defense, Homeland Security, Labor and Health and Human Services — before the end of the day on Friday to avoid a partial government shutdown.