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'Worse & Worse': Abusive US Prison Systems and Assange's Denial of Due Process

The High Court of England and Wales has ruled that WikiLeaks Founder Julian Assange may get a final appeal against extradition to the United States, but only if particular conditions are met: his freedom of speech might be restricted in the US, and there is a possibility he could receive the death penalty.

The US must provide [assurances](#) that neither of these instances will happen, and therefore the trial can move to another phase where Assange's legal team may debate the validity of those assurances. If they do not, then the limited appeal will move forward. One [journalist](#) noted that this will continue to obstruct Assange's due process and therefore his most basic legal rights—which has been going on for more than a decade.

Sputnik's John Kiriakou, a co-host of Political Misfits, is a former CIA counterterrorism officer and a former senior investigator with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He became the sixth whistleblower indicted by the Obama administration under the Espionage Act and served 23 months in prison as a result of his attempt to oppose the Bush administration's torture program.

Kiriakou recently wrote in an article "[Assange and the Sickness of US Prisons](#)", that the US prison medical system is "utterly broke", and described a prisoner he personally knew who was given Tylenol for stage 4 cancer in his spine and who would later die in prison. Kiriakou sat down with The Critical Hour on Thursday to discuss Assange's predicament.

"People forget Julian Assange spent so many years in what amounted to solitary confinement in the Ecuadorian embassy in London. And so, you tend to go crazy, not having access to the outside world. There's almost nothing you can do about it," says Kiriakou. "Now, we know from a multitude of studies that have been done in prison systems here in the United States, both at the federal and state levels that 85% of incarcerated people in the United States have some form of diagnosable mental illness."

"Even if they didn't go into prison with mental illness, they develop it in prison, and it's because of solitary confinement," Kiriakou adds.

"It's because of a lack of mental health care and physical health care. It's because of being heaped into overcrowded, in many cases, dorm rooms or overcrowded cells. Many of us who have been to prison were fortunate in that we essentially escaped unscathed because our sentences were so short," he explains. "But Julian Assange is facing 175 years in prison, and so there's no upside to this."

Kirakou wrote in his piece about a report from the Washington Lawyers Committee on Civil Rights in Urban Affairs which exposed such abuses at the hands of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, which is the same entity that would be responsible for Assange's health.

Sputnik's Wilmer Leon noted that while in prison, a prisoner does not only have to fear harm from their fellow cellmates, but are also subjected to trauma inflicted by prison guards.

"That's right. In many cases, guards are worse," says Kiriakou. "There's a case in [California](#) right now, at the federal level. It's a Federal Bureau of Prisons women's prison, called FCI Dublin in Dublin, California. And, that prison was known as the 'rape club.' So far, six officials at the prison, including the warden, the prison doctor, three guards and the chaplain, if you can imagine this, raped dozens of female prisoners, would beat them if they would not submit to the rape and are just now working their ways through the legal system."

"This kind of thing happens all the time. Because who's going to believe you, it's your word against the guard and you're a criminal. So if the guard says you shoved him and he had to beat you unconscious to protect himself, they're going to believe the guard and you're going to end up in solitary confinement, even though you were the one who was attacked. And it gets worse than that," Kiriakou adds. "This is the kind of system that Julian Assange is going to find himself in."

Sputnik's Wilmer Leon noted that there has been a "dramatic shift" in the philosophy of incarceration in the US, which can most likely be attributed to the mid to late 1970s as well as the "war on drugs"—first inaugurated by President Richard Nixon in the early 1970s—which shifted the philosophy from a rehabilitation model to an incarceration model.

"So true, so true," Kiriakou agreed. "You know, things began to change in the late 1970s. They changed very much in the mid-1980s. But you're exactly right. Before the Reagan presidency, if you were incarcerated, you could learn a skill. You could get your GED. If you didn't have a high school diploma, then you could learn small engine repair, plumbing, electrical work, any number of different things. Now, you can't do any of that."

"You can still get a GED in a class taught by other prisoners, but you can't learn a skill. And then we wonder why our recidivism rate is almost 50%, when the recidivism rates in Western Europe are under 20%," Kiriakou said, referring to the legal term for a person's relapse into criminal behavior.

"Where they do teach you a skill, where they do give you medical care and mental health care. And instead of over-stuffing people in bleak prison cells, put them in what looked like apartments so that they can transition back into normal society when their prison sentences are up. We just don't understand that."

Leon noted that rehabilitating criminals has been "abolished" and that prisons have now come under an aspect of privatization.

"Furniture making is a good example," Kiriakou explained. "At the prison where I was incarcerated, FCI Laredo in central Pennsylvania, there was a Prison Industries factory where they manufactured fiber optic cables for the US Navy. Well, when you're paying people \$0.25 an hour and forcing them to work 40 hours a week for that quarter an hour and putting outside businesses out of business because they can't pay their workers \$0.25 an hour. You know, you're actually doing damage to the community."

"And then, because you're paying your workers \$0.25 an hour and there's no pride in their work because they consider it to be slavery, which I do too, then they produce substandard fiber optic cable. And, as it turns out, 40% of the cable that they're making for the US Navy is not usable. It's just junk. It's scrap. And, again, you've put people in the community outside the prison out of work by undercutting them with the slave labor that you're using. It's just simply not fair. It's not right."

"It just gets worse and worse and worse," said Kiriakou. "And again, we find ourselves just shocked that we have these problems. And so, the idea is, if these prisoners do their sentences and then they become repeat offenders and the recidivism rate is high, that must mean that our sentences aren't long enough, and, in fact, our sentences are the longest of any industrialized country."

"And I wrote a separate piece, not too long ago, saying that in the last 10 years, Congress has created 500 new crimes, not 500 new laws, 500 new crimes, things that were perfectly legal 10 years ago that are now felonies," he added. And so, the bottom line is, if they want to get you, they're going to get you."

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State Department Official Resigns Over Biden's Gaza Policy

The staffer said the Biden administration's Gaza policy has made advocating for human rights in the Middle East "impossible", adding that she chose to speak up for her colleagues who could not quit their jobs for financial reasons.

On Wednesday, Anelle Sheline, 38, resigned from job as a foreign affairs officer in the US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, saying her job had become "impossible" as the Biden administration continues to "send a steady stream of weapons to Israel".

"If they are willing to engage, they mostly want to talk about Gaza rather than the fact that they are also dealing with extreme repression or threats of imprisonment," [Sheline](#) said of activist groups in the region who had stopped talking to American personnel due to the flow of US arms to Israel.

"I wasn't able to really do my job anymore," Sheline added, during an interview. "Trying to advocate for human rights just became impossible."

She said in the interview that she tried to raise concerns internally with dissent cables and at staff forums but came to the conclusion that the Biden administration's Israel policy had made her efforts pointless. The former official also questioned why the Biden administration was prioritizing blank checks for Israel over economic relations with China, human rights, or climate change.

"My question was: Why is this support for Israel seen as more important than all of these other, arguably very significant priorities?" she said. "I still don't feel like I have a great answer as to why."

"Whatever credibility the United States had as an advocate for human rights has almost entirely vanished since the war began. Members of civil society have refused to respond to my efforts to contact them," Sheline wrote in an open [letter](#).

Sheline's resignation follows that of [Josh Paul](#) who was a senior State Department official involved in arms transfers to foreign governments. Paul resigned from his role ten days after Hamas first launched its attack on Israel, citing the allyship between Israel and the US.

"I believe to the core of my soul," Paul wrote at the time, "that the response Israel is taking, and with it the American support for both that response, and for the status quo of the occupation will

only lead to more and deeper suffering for both the Israeli and Palestinian people—and is not in the long-term American interest.”

Paul recently commended Sheline for her decision to resign, and criticized the Biden administration for their disregard of the law.

“When the staff of that bureau feel that there is no more they can do,” [Paul](#) said, “it speaks volumes about the Biden administration’s disregard for the laws, policies and basic humanity of American foreign policy that the bureau exists to advance.”

Despite dissent among their own government employees and protests by US citizens, the Biden Administration has maintained their support for Israel in their war against Hamas. Since the war began, more than 32,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. In response to Sheline’s resignation, State Department spokesman Matt Miller told reporters that Secretary of State Antony Blinken “wants” to hear about the dissent within the department. “He wants to hear them. He reads dissent cables when dissent cables are authored on any issue. He meets with employees who have a broad range of views, he listens to their feedback, and he takes it into account in his decision-making,” Miller said.

On [Monday](#), the Biden administration chose not to veto a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire during the remaining weeks of the holy month of Ramadan. The resolution also called for the release of all hostages. Since then, the US has called the resolution “non-binding”, after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu canceled a planned trip of top aides to Washington.

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'Kill as Many as Possible': Israel Reportedly Devising Plan to Occupy Gaza Following Genocide

Backlash against the Biden Administration’s Israel policy is growing in the US with polls showing that 55% of Americans oppose Israel’s actions in Gaza compared to 36% who approve—a near reversal of what Americans believed in November.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said last week that it is Israel’s policy to allow as much humanitarian aid into Gaza as necessary, which aid agencies have said is false. And yesterday, the prime minister said that he wanted to allow food convoys into Gaza at the Rafah crossing, but that convoys were being raided and taken over by Hamas.

This [week](#), Israel also abandoned talks with Hamas in Qatar in response to the US’ decision to abstain from the UN Security Council’s resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. Just a day later, after the US stated that the resolution was “non-binding”, the US State Department said that Israel had agreed to [reschedule](#) the meeting on military plans for Gaza’s southern city of Rafah.

Esteban Carrillo, a Beirut-based Ecuadorian journalist and head of news for The Cradle, spoke to Sputnik’s Political Misfits on Thursday about Israel’s continued fight against Hamas. When asked by Sputnik’s John Kiriakou whether Israel’s war is for public consumption, or if it is to depopulate Gaza and settle it with Israelis, Carrillo suggested that it is “not possible to stomp out ideas with violence”.

"The history of the world tells us that it's impossible to stomp out resistance. You cannot stomp out ideas with violence. So it's really just for foreign consumption," said Carrillo. "It's the same thing as, when, George W. Bush stood in front of the banner with 'mission accomplished'. Like, we defeated terrorism, and then to this day the wars are still raging."

"I think Israeli officials have been very vocal, very open—that their plan is to kill as many Palestinians as possible to resettle Gaza," he continued. "Jared Kushner, the architect of the Abraham Accords, a couple of weeks ago said that Gaza's beachfront property is so valuable and they need to start doing the clean-up work. What does he mean by the clean-up work?" Sputnik's Kiriakou said the Political Misfits team has seen advertisements and fliers across [synagogues](#) in North America telling those in the Jewish community that they can buy land in Israel, which suggests that the Gaza Strip is under the process of being occupied by the Israelis. Where, exactly, the land is being sold was unconfirmed at the time of this article's publication.

"It's happening," Carrillo responded. "It's happening completely. We at The Cradle have seen these reports about these meetings happening in the US, you know, in which land is offered up for sale, like auctions. And what are they selling? They're selling property in Gaza because at the end of the day, this is what the Zionist project is about now. It's a homeland for Jewish people, but in which the homeland is put ahead of the people."

"I would imagine that we're gonna see some sort of a temporary ceasefire like we saw in November. They keep talking about the six weeks. I do not expect Israel to consider accepting a lasting ceasefire because this war needs to continue for this government to remain in power," Carrillo said. "What happened earlier this week, it really was like a temper tantrum."

"They canceled this delegation to Washington. They walk out of Qatar, leaving a small Mossad team. And now they're walking it back. They're walking it back because they know that with no US support these things fall apart in a matter of days. They haven't been able to defeat Hamas, which is a militia with about 35,000 strong in six months, dropping everything on them, killing thousands and thousands of civilians and Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other groups, they're still there, they're still battling."

"And this is with the full support of the US using the weapon cache that exists in Israel, sending over 100 weapons shipments since October under the radar, and they still haven't been able to do it. So, imagine the moment that that stops, it's going to be even more embarrassing than October 7th," said Carrillo.

Kiriakou noted that the Israeli government's stance on rescuing hostages has changed over the course of the war, adding that Netanyahu has been accused of abandoning hostages, as he continues to walk away from hostage swap deals. He also notes that there have been reports of Israeli soldiers killing two unarmed doctors who refused to abandon their patients, while Israel claimed to have killed 200 "terrorists" at [the al-Shifa hospital complex](#) in the last two days.

"Just ask Netanyahu what he is doing to rescue all the captives who remain in Gaza. Nothing," said Carrillo. "He walked away from all the talks. Every time Hamas offers a comprehensive ceasefire—a lasting ceasefire that includes a prisoner exchange, Netanyahu and his entire band of misfits comes out and says, 'this is ridiculous. This is absurd. We cannot accept that this would be a total defeat.' So it's right there, they don't even try to hide it."

"If you believe even a shred of what the Israelis are saying, then there's enough resistance fighters around these hospitals to warrant these actions. But, in reality, this is just an attack on

humanitarian shelters. This is part of the strategy to make the Gaza Strip uninhabitable,” Carrillo continued.

“This is the end goal here, to make it so that, even if there's a lasting ceasefire and even if there's humanitarian aid and attempts for reconstruction, what is there going to be to reconstruct? At this point, these places are like the surface of the moon,” said Carrillo. “There's nothing that anyone can do.”

“We have seen the level of brutality that has been unleashed. And we talk about the invasion of Rafah as if it's something that is going to happen, when in reality Rafah has already been under heavy fire, under heavy airstrikes for weeks at this point,” he added.

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'Absolve Themselves of Genocide': Israel, US Divide Grows Following UN Vote

The US abstained from a UN Security Council vote on a resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza on Monday. The decision has marked the growing rift between US President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with many pundits viewing the decision to abstain as a posturing PR stunt.

On [Monday](#), the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution demanding an immediate “ceasefire”, the “immediate and unconditional release of hostages”, as well as the expansion of aid flow into the Gaza Strip. The US abstained from the vote, and later said that the resolution is “non-binding”. However, according to the UN Charter, all Security Council resolutions are legally binding under international law.

Following the vote, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu canceled his plans to send a delegation to Washington, because the US did not veto the ceasefire proposal. According to a statement from Netanyahu's office, the US' failure to block the proposal was a “clear retreat” from its previous position. However, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant remained in Washington for talks with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin at the Pentagon.

Misty Winston, a political activist, organizer and co-host of the Misty Winston Show and Free Assange Vigils, sat down with Sputnik's Fault Lines on Wednesday and said it was “absurd” that the US thinks they can get away with calling the resolution “non-binding”.

[Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) played a clip in which John Kirby, Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, said the White House was “perplexed” by Israel's response. He maintained that the resolution is “non-binding” adding that there is “no impact at all on Israel” nor their ability to “go after Hamas”. Kirby then said that the resolution is consistent with “everything” the US has been saying and does not represent a change in US policy.

The comments from Kirby were strange as the US has vetoed three previous resolutions with similar language.

“The idea that not just John Kirby, but also Matthew Miller went on national television and said, 'this is a non-binding resolution,'---there's no such thing, that doesn't exist,” said Winston. “That fascinates me, that the idea that they're out here, making those kinds of statements when it's

obviously not true and will be fact checked. I mean, it's absurd to me that that's something they think they can get away with."

"Caitlin Johnstone wrote a great piece not too long ago where she explored the possibility that they [the US] are going to try to lay all of this genocidal activity on Netanyahu's feet and kind of absolve themselves of it. So they're trying to distance themselves from Netanyahu as they kind of move through this," she continued.

"That means that nothing has to change. Policy doesn't have to change. Israel gets to continue doing whatever they want to do, and Netanyahu gets to be the fall guy. So I think that's something people really need to consider here," she added.

Sputnik's Jamarl Thomas noted that the US is disregarding a resolution created by an organizational body they helped to build.

"And [the US is] really openly mocking it, Jamarl. It's not even just that they're ignoring it, they're pretending it doesn't exist. They're openly mocking it," said Winston. "And the press conference with Matthew Miller, they were saying 'it's our interpretation of this resolution, it's non-binding'. So what's the point of the UN?"

"I mean, it's super interesting to watch the approach that they're taking with this. I'm not really sure what the game plan is with this whole 'non-binding' thing," she continued. "It makes no sense and it makes them look foolish, frankly, especially as they prance around doing the whole rules-based order and stuff that they pretend to care about. Very clearly, they do not."

On [Monday](#), a UN-appointed expert released a report in which she found that there are "reasonable grounds" to believe Israel is committing genocide in the Gaza Strip. The report, ["The Anatomy of a Genocide"](#), writes that after "five months of military operations, Israel has destroyed Gaza". It notes that over 30,000 Palestinians have been killed, including more than 13,000 children.

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Crises in Palestine, Haiti Rooted in Legacy of Western Colonialism

Foreign intervention has subverted the social fabric of conquered peoples around the globe, according to one Palestinian author.

Major crises in Haiti and the Gaza Strip have shocked the world in recent months. In Haiti, rival gangs fight for supremacy amidst the collapse of the country's US-backed government. In Gaza, mass famine takes hold as Israel's military campaign wreaks devastation, with more than 32,000 dead.

"The Zionist genocide of the Palestinian people and the political and socio-economic crisis in Haiti both have their origins in their respective episodes of destructive foreign intervention in the first decades of the last century," reads [a recent article](#) by Palestinian activist Robert Fantina. The author argues that colonial efforts set the stage for conflict in each location, causing lasting damage to the social fabric of the subjugated peoples.

Fantina joined [Sputnik's The Critical Hour program](#) on Wednesday to discuss his article, entitled "Genocide, Coup d'Etat and Militarization: Palestine and Haiti."

“This article... does make a very clear connection between the colonial histories of both countries, with Haiti having been invaded and really colonized by the French, and, of course, Palestine being colonized by Israel with the support of the United States,” said Fantina. “We should also mention that it was the United States also who occupied Haiti for over 15 years, 20 years.”

“We’re seeing the same kinds of things: powerful countries, developed countries are attempting to take over, and successfully take over less developed countries,” he continued. “The developing countries are known for either their natural resources or for their geopolitical strategic positions in the world. And the result of both is the suffering of the people.”

Fantina criticized the righteous pretense of the US’ global imperialism, saying the country merely acts in its own self interest.

“The United States government will talk about how it supports freedom and democracy around the world, but that’s only if the democratic process leads to a government that is pleasing to the United States,” he claimed. “If it’s not, the US will go in and overthrow that government and install a puppet government as it’s done in many cases throughout the world in history.”

The US has [taken part](#) in almost 400 military interventions in its short history, with half of them taking place since 1950 and a quarter occurring after the end of the Cold War. Fantina criticized the US role in Israel in particular, blaming it for the decades-long suffering of the Palestinians.

“What we’re seeing is the same thing the United States government has done for decades, supporting Israel no matter what it does – the international laws that it has violated, the war crimes that it’s committed,” he said. “Whenever there’s a resolution condemning those, the United States almost always vetoes it.”

Fantina called the latest UN ceasefire resolution, abstained from by the United States, symbolic. “A symbolic gesture doesn’t save the people of Palestine, doesn’t provide them with food, medical care, water or any of the things they need,” he insisted. “As far as Schumer’s statement and the abstention veto, it doesn’t have any meaning as long as the US government keeps sending weapons to Israel to kill innocent Palestinians. So, that has got to stop.”

“Until the United States stops funding Israel with the money it needs to commit genocide, this is going to continue and nothing is going to change.”

Scenes of starvation have emerged from Gaza recently as Israel strictly limits the amount of food and aid allowed to enter the besieged enclave. US President Joe Biden, who often [boasts](#) of “restoring the soul of the nation,” is apparently insufficiently bothered by the mass casualty event to restrict supplies of weapons to the US ally.

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USAID: US Imperialism’s Most Cynical Regime Change Tool - Analyst

Under the guise of foreign assistance the US Agency for International Development has been used to promote US foreign policy and regime change throughout the globe.

A recent Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request surfaced a 97-page “disinformation primer” authored by the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The extensive document

reveals Washington's priorities in instituting online censorship and combating so-called "fake news" in the post-Trump, post-Brexit era.

But "much of the organization's focus appears to be on preventing individuals from finding information online that challenges official narratives and leads to increased questioning of the system more generally," says journalist Alan MacLeod in [an analysis](#) published by [MintPress News](#).

Anthropologist Adrienne Pine joined Sputnik's Political Misfits program Thursday to discuss the article and shed light on one of the United States' most underhanded tools of global subversion. "USAID's focus relates to "misinformation, disinformation and mal-information," notes host Michelle Witte, referring to terms which are employed frequently by so-called experts in the field. "Malinformation" has proven to be perhaps the most controversial among the three, referring to factually true information presented in a way to allegedly harm or manipulate.

Malinformation may lead people towards inconvenient narratives for those in power such as the conclusion that [Israeli ethnic cleansing is bad](#) or the Iraq War wasn't about "spreading democracy."

"Experts have described this phenomenon as an information disorder, a condition in which the truth and facts coexist in a milieu of misinformation and disinformation – like conspiracy theories, lies, propaganda and half-truths," explained Witte. "Which I will stop and say describes [every press briefing](#) by a White House press secretary or John Kirby for the State Department or whoever."

"USAID... also talks about what I consider to be the sinister tactic of 'pre-bunking,' which is to psychologically inoculate populations by discrediting the brand credibility and reputation of those making 'false' accusations," the host added. "This is a smearing by association tactic, right? 'You can't believe anything that this person is writing because their grandmother was Russian or they do business in China one time or whatever.'"

The tactic was recently employed by establishment mouthpiece [The New York Times](#) in an article about the anti-war group Code Pink that was [widely slammed](#) as McCarthyist in its tone. McCarthyism refers to disgraced former US Senator Joseph McCarthy's Cold War tactic of smearing opponents by accusing them of association with communism or Soviet Russia. Pine explained the Cold War origins of USAID as a tool of US "soft power." The organization was created around the same time as other government agencies such as the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress, "a US imperialist program aimed at preventing revolutions in Latin America," she noted.

"You've got these three institutions that are founded by Kennedy in the wake of the Cuban Revolution and in the context of revolutionary anti-imperialist movements around the world so that the US can establish its hegemony post-World War Two," said the analyst. "So USAID has never been a benign institution. It's never really been an aid institution."

USAID operates by funding "civil society" groups purportedly focused on "democracy promotion," labor rights, strengthening "independent media," and other anodyne causes. But covert influence, as well as such groups' desire to maintain US funding, transforms them into tools of US foreign policy.

Such non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can play a role in strengthening opposition to movements and figures perceived to work against US interests. In more extreme cases these groups [promote civil unrest](#) that creates a fertile environment for US-backed regime change.

These efforts are known as “color revolutions” and have taken place in such countries as [Bolivia in 2019](#) and [Ukraine in 2004 and 2014](#).

Witte slammed the “hypocrisy” of the tactic given the US fixation on the conspiracy theory that Russia altered the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. The host called USAID’s efforts “profoundly anti-democratic, because it’s the notion that the United States can fund organizations that are against governments that the United States doesn’t like, in lieu of the democratic processes that those governments and those people would like to set up.”

Pine noted the USAID document, in addition to smearing alternative news outlets like the Ron Paul Institute, Black Agenda Report and Truthout, also attempts to promote US intelligence-linked sources like the Atlantic Council and [Bellingcat](#).

The Atlantic Council is a NATO offshoot created by the US defense department, MacLeod’s article notes, with seven former CIA chiefs on its board. Bellingcat, which presents itself as an independent “open source” intelligence operation, receives grants from the US [National Endowment for Democracy \(NED\)](#) and other Western government agencies.

“People who are going into that work [with USAID]... don’t understand that they are an important part of the propaganda machine that is justifying the existence of this heinous and incredibly [dangerous tool of imperialism](#),” concluded Pine.

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Does ‘Rules Based Order’ Apply to Law of the Sea?

The United States is being slammed for claiming protection under an international agreement it’s not party to. Meanwhile questions remain over who is responsible for last week’s horrific terrorist attack outside Moscow.

The United States often asserts the significance of the “rules-based international order,” but the country’s signature is curiously absent from one important compact on maritime law.

The observation was made by political science professor Nicolai Petro, who joined [Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program](#) Thursday to discuss the controversy created by the US’ [recent unilateral extension](#) of its continental shelf claims in the Arctic.

It is “very hypocritical” of the United States to demand adherence to international law while not following other international regulations when it suits them, former Swedish air defense officer Mikael Valtersson told Sputnik. This is particularly true “when the matter concerns a practical enlargement of US territory,” he added.

“Countries are generally allowed to extend their economic zone of interest from 200 miles to up to 350 miles if the contours of the continental shelf justify it,” noted Petro, author of the book *The Tragedy of Ukraine*. “In this particular case, the risks of conflict over these territories between the United States and other countries would seem to be minimal because the area that they are claiming jurisdiction over overlaps with those of Canada and Japan and is far from the Russian territorial claims or Chinese territorial claims.”

However, a conflict has arisen over the fact the US is not a signatory to the international agreement dictating its expansion.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, adopted in 1982, is signed by over 150 countries including Russia and China. But the United States is not among them.

“There is the issue of the precedent being set and what role international agreements... should play in such matters,” said Petro. “Whereas China and Russia are signatories to these treaties, the United States is not. And so both of those countries are asking the question of whether the United States should benefit from the provisions of the treaty, which it has not signed.”

China and Russia are essentially arguing that it’s unfair for the US to claim protection by virtue of the UN convention while not participating in upholding any of its obligations.

“The bigger issue, of course, is: isn't this a double standard?” the author asked. “Because this is clearly an example of the United States acting in its unilateral interest and thumbing its nose essentially at the obligations [that] it would have to do this under in a specific manner under existing treaties... What role does the United States or the West have claiming that it's upholding a rules-based order?”

“Well, it is because it is imposing its own rules and maintaining its order,” noted host Wilmer Leon wryly.

Discussion then turned towards the fallout of the terrorist attack at Russia’s Crocus City Hall venue last week. The horrific event has raised questions over what Western countries knew about the incident ahead of time and what information intelligence agencies shared with their Russian counterparts. The United States [reportedly refrained](#) from divulging full knowledge of the attack over fear Moscow would expose US intelligence sources and methods, according to The New York Times.

“Who knows?” responded Petro to the report. “This is all sort of things that appear in the press because they are leaked by intelligence sources so that their stories or their spin gets into the news. And then we are debating who is behind the shadowboxing. We have no no idea.”

“Can anybody identify who said what to whom?” he continued. “No. So all of this is pure hearsay. And we could just watch back and wonder in amazement why people can't talk to each other as normal human beings can.”

Suspicious have been raised over the United States’ almost immediate assertions that the Ukraine regime had no involvement in the attack. The White House issued a statement insisting Kiev bore no culpability less than an hour after news broke of the event. Observers have asked why the US felt the need to weigh in so quickly and how they were able to verify the claim. Russian authorities’ revelation that the attackers apparently attempted to seek refuge in Ukraine has raised further questions about Kiev’s guilt and its Western benefactors’ involvement, by extension. The matter remains highly controversial as relations between Russia and the US remain at a nadir, but [Ukraine has previously conducted terrorist attacks](#) against Russian civilians in Crimea, Belgorod, and elsewhere.

“Now there are stories that the leader of ISIS-K*, or the creator of ISIS-K, had actually worked in various positions in Afghanistan with the CIA,” said Leon. “So some could posit that the United States didn't want to reveal its sources because those sources would cut too close to home,” the host added.

“It's a possibility,” responded Petro. “There's also the possibility, which is not to be discarded, that it's not a government per se but organizations that governments at one point set up to do

their bidding in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, [and] Syria, which have since developed their own networks, their own organizations they haven't told their bosses about.”

“There's an interesting article... by a former senior Ukrainian official, now living in Russia, who says, ‘is this a case where the puppets have become the puppet masters?’” he added.

With radical nationalists and neo-Nazis representing [a significant element](#) within Ukraine’s armed forces, Petro suggested a possibility of Ukrainian “puppets” acting on their own.

“I mean, if you believe what the New York Times and Politico report that Washington in no uncertain terms told Ukrainian officials to cease their attacks on Russian oil refineries and certain other types of targets. And the official response of officials of the Ukrainian government is that, no, we won't do that. Well, what conclusions are we to draw from that? How subordinate actually is Ukrainian interests and policies now to America and American funding?” the analyst wondered.

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Crises in Palestine, Haiti rooted in legacy of Western colonialism

Major crises in Haiti and the Gaza Strip have shocked the world in recent months.

“The Zionist genocide of the Palestinian people and the political and socio-economic crisis in Haiti both have their origins in their respective episodes of destructive foreign intervention in the first decades of the last century,” reads a recent article by Palestinian activist Robert Fantina. Fantina joined Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program to discuss his article, entitled “Genocide, Coup d’Etat and Militarization: Palestine and Haiti.”

“This article... does make a very clear connection between the colonial histories of both countries, with Haiti having been invaded and really colonized by the French, and, of course, Palestine being colonized by Israel with the support of the United States,” said Fantina. “We should also mention that it was the United States also who occupied Haiti for over 15 years, 20 years... the result of both is the suffering of the people.”

The US has taken part in almost 400 military interventions in its short history, with half of them taking place since 1950 and a quarter occurring after the end of the Cold War. Fantina criticized the legacy of such foreign interference, claiming, “The United States government will talk about how it supports freedom and democracy around the world, but that's only if the democratic process leads to a government that is pleasing to the United States.”

Scenes of starvation have emerged from Gaza recently as Israel strictly limits the amount of food and aid allowed to enter the besieged enclave. US President Joe Biden, who often boasts of “restoring the soul of the nation,” is apparently insufficiently bothered by the mass casualty event to restrict supplies of weapons to the US ally.

USAID: US imperialism's most cynical regime change tool

"USAID has never been a benign institution. It's never really been an aid institution," anthropologist Adrienne Pine told Sputnik's Political Misfits program. The analyst discussed an article on MintPress News by researcher Alan MacLeod breaking down Washington's priorities in instituting online censorship.

Pine explained the Cold War origins of USAID as a tool of US "soft power... so that the US can establish its hegemony post-World War Two."

A recent Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request surfaced a 97-page "disinformation primer" authored by the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

USAID's article relates to "misinformation, disinformation and mal-information," notes host Michelle Witte. "Malinformation" is the most controversial among the terms, referring to true information presented in a way to allegedly harm or manipulate.

Malinformation may lead people towards inconvenient narratives for those in power, such as the conclusion that the Iraq War wasn't about "spreading democracy."

USAID operates by funding "civil society" groups purportedly focused on "democracy promotion," labor rights, and other anodyne causes. Such non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can play a role in strengthening opposition to movements and figures perceived to work against US interests. In more extreme cases these groups promote civil unrest that creates an environment for US-backed regime change. These efforts are known as "color revolutions" and have taken place in such countries as Bolivia in 2019 and Ukraine in 2004 and 2014.

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Does the 'rules based order' apply to the law of the sea?

The United States often asserts the significance of the "rules-based international order," but Washington's signature is curiously absent from one important compact on maritime law. The observation was made by political science professor Nicolai Petro, who joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program to discuss the controversy created by the US' recent unilateral extension of its continental shelf claims in the Arctic.

"There is the issue of the precedent being set and what role international agreements... should play in such matters," said Petro. "Whereas China and Russia are signatories to these treaties, the United States is not. And so both of those countries are asking the question of whether the United States should benefit from the provisions of the treaty, which it has not signed."

The US is claiming the right to extend its territorial claims in the Arctic under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which it has not signed. China and Russia argue it's unfair for the US to claim protection by virtue of the agreement while not participating in upholding any of its obligations.

"What role does the United States or the West have claiming that it's upholding a rules-based order?" asked Petro.

"Well, it is because it is imposing its own rules and maintaining its order," noted host Wilmer Leon wryly.

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UPDATE - Key US Inflation Gauge PCE In Mid-2% Territory For February, Boosting Rate Cut Hopes

(Adds details, comments and context, paragraphs 3-12)

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - An inflation gauge closely watched by the Federal Reserve showed US price growth steady in the mid-2% territory in February, displaying a stability analysts said the central bank would desire for interest rate cuts planned later in the year.

The Commerce Department's Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index, often known simply as the PCE, grew 2.5% year-on-year last month, as forecast by Wall Street economists polled by US media, data released on Friday showed.

The Fed wants to see inflation slow to at least 2% per annum to carry out rate cuts planned in June and beyond.

To be fair, the PCE growth in February was slightly higher than the January rate of 2.4% per year.

But that did not ruffle analysts who remember the index being at a 40-year high less than two years ago, when a pandemic-induced supply chain breakdown and business slowdown drove the PCE up as much 7% per annum in June 2022.

"The revisions to the January data are a touch higher but it didn't bump up the Feb y/y numbers," economist Adam Button said in a reaction posted on the ForexLive forum, which examined the changes in the PCE over the past two months.

Aside from the PCE, another widely watched inflation gauge called the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, grew 3.2% in the year to February. That was stubbornly above the Fed's 2% per annum target.

Like the PCE, the CPI hit a four-decade high in June 2022, reaching an annual growth of 9.1%, from the trillions of dollars of federal spending to fight the COVID-19 outbreak and disruption of global supply chains after business lockdowns forced by the pandemic.

Responding to the runaway inflation, the Fed hiked rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023, bringing them to a range of between 5.25% and 5.5% — versus the zero to 0.25% observed soon after the start of the pandemic.

That 5.25% to 5.5% range has not been changed since July of last year.

Now, policymakers at the central bank see a 75-basis point rate cut each for 2024 and 2025, according to the Fed's Summary of Economic Projections, or SEP, released earlier this month. The Fed's next decision on rates is on May 2.

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State Dept Unveils Film, Music, Television Projects to Help Africa Boost Creative Economy

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – The United States is launching educational and cultural platforms for film, music, and television professionals from Africa to help boost the continent's creative economy, the State Department said on Friday.

"Last week while in Lagos, Nigeria, Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs Lee Satterfield announced that the United States will elevate educational and cultural platforms to strengthen creative economies between the United States and Africa," the statement said.

Satterfield announced a film-focused pilot program for Nigerian students as part of the Community College Initiative Program (CCI). Under this initiative, the first group of Nigerian participants will spend the 2024-2025 academic year at a US community college to receive technical training in the film industry.

Mid-level music industry professionals from Nigeria, Egypt, Kenya, Ghana, and Morocco will get an opportunity to participate in the first-ever American Music Mentorship Program (AMMP).

Finally, the African Creative TV (ACTV) initiative will bring television professionals from across Africa to Los Angeles this summer for a four-week residence at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts. There, they will be mentored by American television writers, producers, and industry experts, the statement said.

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Key US Inflation Gauge PCE in Mid-2% Territory for February, Boosting Rate Cut Hopes

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The Commerce Department's Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index, often known simply as the PCE, grew 2.5% year-on-year last month, as forecast by Wall Street economists

polled by US media, data released on Friday showed. The Fed wants to keep inflation closer to 2% or lower per annum to institute rate cuts planned for June and beyond.

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Biden on One Year of Gershkovich's Detention: US to Keep Working to Bring Americans Home

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will never stop working to bring Evan Gershkovich and other Americans "wrongfully detained" abroad home, US President Joe Biden said on the one-year anniversary of the WSJ reporter's detention in Russia.

"As I have told Evan's parents, I will never give up hope either. We will continue working every day to secure his release," Biden said on Friday in a statement.

He also accused Russia of seeking to use Americans as bargaining chips.

"To Evan, to Paul Whelan, and to all Americans held hostage or wrongfully detained abroad: We are with you. And we will never stop working to bring you home" Biden added.

A year ago, Gershkovich was arrested in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg on suspicion of trying to collect classified defense information for the United States. Earlier this week, the Moscow City Court extended his pre-trial detention.

Gershkovich was caught red-handed when he was receiving classified information and did it covertly, President Vladimir Putin reiterated in an interview with Tucker Carlson in February.

Russia, however, is willing to reach an agreement on a potential release of Gershkovich, and its terms are being discussed via special services channels, Putin said.

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Texas Governor Says Hosted House Speaker Johnson to Discuss Need to Secure Southern Border

EL PASO, March 29 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott said in a statement that he hosted House Speaker Mike Johnson to discuss the crisis on the US southern border.

"This morning, I met with @SpeakerJohnson at the Governor's Mansion in Austin," Abbott said via X on Thursday. "We discussed the disastrous impact President Biden's border crisis has had on Texas—and America—and the need for action by the federal government to secure the border."

In a separate statement, Abbott said Biden must be held accountable for his "disastrous policies," but until then Texas will continue to "hold the line" on the border.

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.

Senate Republicans blocked a supplemental bill earlier this year that included border policy

changes. Republicans argued that the bill did not do enough to address the border crisis.

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.

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data shows that the Biden administration has experienced three consecutive record-breaking years of illegal immigration on the US southern border. More than 7.2 million migrants have illegally entered the United States via the southern border since President Joe Biden came into office in 2021, according to CBP.

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US Army Orders \$754Mln Worth of More Armored Vehicles For Future Wars - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The US Army has ordered more than three-quarters of a billion dollars worth of more armored combat vehicles from BAE Systems, the company announced in a press release.

"BAE Systems received a \$754 million contract award to continue production of the Armored Multi-Purpose Vehicle (AMPV) family of vehicles for the US Army," the release stated on Thursday. "This contract begins the second phase of full-rate production of AMPVs between March 2026 and February 2027."

The multi-mission AMPV vehicles are to replace vehicles from the Army's Vietnam War-era M113 models, modernizing the force and providing more survivability, mobility, and interoperability upgrades to the Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT), the Defense Department explained.

"It's crucial that we continue to replace the M113s, and that we do it at a pace that ensures soldiers are unmatched on the modern battlefield. We are fully committed to continue our swift work with the Army to produce high-quality AMPVs at an increased and sustained rate for soldiers," BAE Systems AMPV Program Director Bill Sheehy said in the release.

The AMPV is currently produced in five variants including the General Purpose, Mortar Carrier, Medical Evacuation, Medical Treatment, and Mission Command models, BAE Systems said.

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Biden Says Horrified to Learn About Stabbing Attack in Illinois Killing 4 People

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said in a statement that he was horrified to learn about a stabbing attack that took place in Rockford, Illinois leaving four people dead and seven more injured as a result.

"Jill and I were horrified to learn of the brutal attack carried out in Rockford last night, which took the lives of four people, including one fifteen-year-old. Seven others were tragically

wounded as a result of this senseless violence. We are praying for the families of those who lost loved ones, and hoping that all those injured make a full recovery," the statement said on Thursday.

The attack took place around 1:15 p.m. (18:15 GMT) on Wednesday when Soto began stabbing his childhood friend Jacob and his relative Ramona. He proceeded then to kill a mailman by running over him with his pickup, CBC reported on Thursday.

Earlier on Thursday, police charged 22-year-old Christian Ivan Soto with four counts of first-degree murder, seven counts of attempted first-degree murder, and three counts of home invasion, the report said.

During his 20-minute killing spree, Soto also broke into several homes and killed a teenage girl with a bat and was arrested while stabbing two other victims, according to the report.

Soto has already admitted to killing the four people, claiming that it was marijuana with an unknown drug in it that made him act aggressively, the report said.

The defendant is currently being held in the Winnebago County Jail without bond, the report added.

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Trump Speaks at Wake of Fallen NYPD Officer, Calls for Return to 'Law and Order'

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump attended the wake of fallen NYPD officer Jonathan Diller on Thursday and called for a return to 'law and order' before claiming that the current justice system 'isn't working'.

"We have to stop it. We have to get back to law and order. We have to do a lot of things differently. Because this is not working. This is happening too often," said Trump at Diller's wake, which was held on Long Island.

The former president added that there needed to be tougher measures in place to prevent such deaths from happening as often.

Diller, who was 31, was shot and killed on Monday during a routine traffic stop in Queens, a borough of New York City.

Trump's remarks come on the same day that President Joe Biden is also in New York for a campaign event featuring former President Barack Obama and former President Bill Clinton.

The campaign event is expected to be star-studded and hopes to raise over \$25 million.

Trump's next campaign event is next week in Palm Beach, Florida, and is expected to raise over \$33 million.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) –

CROCUS CITY HALL TERRORIST ATTACK

* US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday that the warning provided by Washington to Moscow about a terror threat was clear and detailed.

* The warning that the United States passed to Russia in early March regarding a planned terrorist attack was not the first alert that Washington gave to Moscow, Miller said.

* Isroil Islomov, who is eight defendants in the case of the terrorist attack in Crocus City Hall, on Thursday appealed his arrest, the Moscow Basmany Court told Sputnik.

* Russia has added four Tajik citizens who attacked the Crocus City Hall concert venue near Moscow last week to the list of terrorists and extremists, the Russian Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) said.

* Moscow is not aware of the information provided by The New York Times that Washington has failed to share all information about the terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall with the Russian side, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

MIDDLE EAST

* Israel should ensure that its military does not commit violations of the rights of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) said on Thursday.

* Israel must ensure the unhindered access of humanitarian aid and all necessary services to the Gaza Strip, the ICJ said.

* The announcement on the formation of a new government in Palestine headed by Mohammad Mustafa is expected to be made on Thursday, a source in the Palestinian Authority told Sputnik.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Berlin has supplied to Kiev, among other things, a total of 18,000 artillery ammunition of 155 mm caliber and ammunition for German Leopard 2A6 tanks, according to an updated list of the German Government, published on Thursday.

* Ukraine has lost more than 370 soldiers in the Donetsk direction and up to 145 soldiers in the South Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* The latest report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on tortures of Russian prisoners of war in Ukraine did not reveal anything new to Moscow, all war crimes of Kiev are documented, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* Peskov said, commenting on German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's about a possibility of peace talks on Ukraine, that Moscow is monitoring such details, but this does not change the whole picture.

TERRORISTS IN AFGHANISTAN

* The Islamic State (ISIS, IS, banned in Russia) group has moved its training and recruitment centers outside Afghanistan, Suhail Shaheen, the head of the political office of Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) in Qatar, told Sputnik on Thursday.

* Members of the Islamic State (IS, ISIS, banned in Russia) Khorasan Province terrorist group are hiding mainly outside Afghanistan, in a number of Asian countries, Shaheen told Sputnik.

* The Taliban movement (under UN sanctions for terrorism) is doing its "part" in a fight against the Islamic State (ISIS, IS banned in Russia) - Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), Shaheen told Sputnik.

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State Department Failing to Track \$44Bln in US Economic Aid to Ukraine - GAO Report

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State is not fulfilling its mandate of coordinating and monitoring more than \$44 billion in US economic and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Thursday.

"State doesn't have a systematic, comprehensive approach to specifically track this funding," the GAO said. "We recommended that State better track funding related to the Ukraine crisis."

The GAO found that the State Department was not using a systematic approach to categorize and separately track the status of foreign assistance specifically in response to the crisis in Ukraine, the report said. Consequently, the department faced challenges in providing the status of this foreign assistance, it noted.

"Without such separate tracking, State cannot provide timely information on the status of foreign assistance related to the Ukraine crisis that can be used to understand the status of assistance and to inform decisions about future funding," the GAO said

Over the past two years, four US agencies have allocated \$44.1 billion from supplemental funding and other funds to address the economic and humanitarian needs of people affected by the Ukraine crisis, the GAO noted.

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US House Panel Invites Biden to Testify on Family's 'Pay-For-Influence Schemes' - Chairman

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US House Committee on Oversight and Accountability has invited President Joe Biden to testify on his family's "pay-for-influence" schemes as part of its ongoing impeachment probe, Chairman James Comer announced on Thursday.

"In light of the yawning gap between your public statements and the evidence assembled by the Committee, as well as the White House's obstruction, it is in the best interest of the American people for you to answer questions from Members of Congress directly, and I hereby invite you to do so," Comer said in a letter addressed to Biden.

Comer said the Committee has documented more than \$24 million that came from foreign sources to Biden, his family and their business associates, however, it has not identified any "legitimate services to merit such lucrative payments."

"You have repeatedly denied playing any role in your family's business activities, but the Committee has amassed evidence — including bank records and witness testimony — that wholly contradicts your position on these matters," he said. "Additionally, the White House has taken a position hostile to the Committee's investigation and refuses to release certain

information or make available witnesses to testify regarding issues relevant to the ongoing impeachment inquiry currently authorized by the full House of Representatives."

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State Dept. Refutes Reports That Victoria Nuland's Retirement Linked to Investigation

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller called false reports about Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland's retirement being linked to an investigation into US operations in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022.

"That is absolutely false," Miller said during a press briefing.

Earlier this month, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that Nuland would leave her diplomatic role in the coming weeks. Nuland's departure is due to the failure of her anti-Russian foreign policy efforts, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

Following the announcement, some X users have been circulating reports that Nuland had to leave her post amid an ongoing investigation by the Justice Department into the billions of dollars spent by the United States in Ukraine since 2013.

Then-Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Nuland played a key role in the coup d'etat in Ukraine in 2013-2014 in Kiev. She took an active part in supporting protesters against the legally elected government. Over the past years, the image of Nuland distributing food to Ukrainian protesters has become one of the symbols of the tragic events of the 2013-2014 coup.

It would be naive to expect the US to replace Nuland with a "peace dove," Russian Deputy Envoy to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik.

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Trafigura Pleads Guilty to Bribery, Agrees to \$126M Settlement with US - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Switzerland-based global trading company Trafigura has admitted to bribery in Brazil and agreed to pay more than \$126 million to resolve a criminal probe in the United States, the Justice Department said in a statement on Thursday.

"Trafigura Beheer B.V (Trafigura), an international commodities trading company with its primary operations in Switzerland, pleaded guilty today and will pay over \$126 million to resolve an investigation by the US Justice Department into violations of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), stemming from the company's corrupt scheme to pay bribes to Brazilian government officials to secure business with Brazil's state-owned and state-controlled oil company, Petroleo Brasileiro SA – Petrobras," the statement said.

According to the statement, Trafigura has agreed to pay a \$80,488,040 criminal fine and

\$46,510,257 in forfeiture. The department will credit up to \$26,829,346 of the fine towards resolving related investigations in Brazil.

The statement said that from 2003 to 2014, Trafigura and accomplices paid bribes to Petrobras executives to gain and maintain business, resulting in approximately \$61 million in profits from these corrupt activities.

The Justice Department's resolution with Trafigura was influenced by the case's severity and the company's level of cooperation, including the provision of updates and documents and the facilitation of interviews, despite early challenges in document preservation and full cooperation, the statement said.

Trafigura also agreed to implement various remedial actions, such as improving anti-corruption policies and enhancing transaction controls, though the company was slow to discipline employees who violated such policies, the statement added.

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Pentagon Says No Decision Made Yet on Withdrawal of US Forces From Niger

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Defense Department has not made any decisions yet on whether to withdrawal US forces from Niger, Pentagon Press Secretary Patrick Ryder said on Thursday.

On Wednesday, Niger's Interior Ministry said the United States had promised to submit a plan for the "disengagement" of troops from the West African country after Niamey ended its military pact with Washington. The statement was published on social media after Nigerien Interior Minister Mohamed Toumba hosted US Ambassador Kathleen FitzGibbon for talks earlier in the day.

"There continue to be ongoing discussions at this time," Ryder said during a press briefing. "There's been no decisions made at this stage on the movement of US forces, and we're still working to get clarification from the CNSP [National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland] in that regard."

Ryder said he had nothing specific to provide related to the ministry's statement.

The transitional government in Niger said the US diplomat also confirmed that Washington had taken note of its decision to denounce the 2012 pact that allowed US military personnel and civilian Pentagon employees to operate on Niger's soil.

Earlier this month, a spokesperson for the Nigerien military said that the country's transitional government, which took power in a coup last July, ended the military agreement with immediate effect, citing the interests of the Nigerien people.

A Nigerien government source told Sputnik last week that the US was expected to share its plans for military pullout because Niger was unaware of the actual size of US military presence in the country.

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

Top US General 'Senses' Risk of Escalation of Ukraine Conflict Lower Than Two Years Ago

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Q. Brown, Jr. said on Thursday that an escalation of the Ukraine conflict is less likely than it was during the onset of Russia's special military operation.

"I do sense that the risk of escalation is not as high as it was in the beginning," Brown, Jr. told journalists, as quoted by a Foreign Policy reporter.

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

Russia's special military operation has achieved its objective of demilitarization of Ukraine as Kiev is currently exclusively surviving off weapon deliveries from NATO member states, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said earlier in March.

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Nearly 2,000 US Navy Personnel Arrive in Australia for 6 Month-Long Exercise – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – Nearly 2,000 US marines and sailors have arrived in the Northern Territory of Australia to participate in the six-month-long iteration of Marine Rotational Force (MRF) – Darwin, a series of joint exercises to increase interoperability between the two forces, Pentagon spokesperson Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"Nearly 2,000 marines and sailors arrived in Australia's Northern Territory this week to begin the 13th annual iteration of marine rotational force in Darwin, which strengthens the Australia-US Alliance and our combined capabilities. Over the next six months, MRF Darwin will conduct a series of exercises and training events with the Australian Defense Force," Ryder said during a press briefing.

The exercise will enable the United States and Australia as well as other regional allies and partners to establish a forward-postured crisis response force, enhance interoperability, and contribute to a more stable and secure Indo-Pacific, Ryder said.

The exercise is part of a 25-year agreement made in 2011 by then-President Barack Obama and then-Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

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US Arrests Latvian Broker for Allegedly Smuggling Advanced Aircraft Technology To Russia

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – The United States arrested a Latvian citizen, Oleg Chistyakov, for allegedly trying to smuggle advanced US aircraft technology to Russia with the help of two Americans, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

“According to the superseding indictment, Oleg Chistyakov, also known as Olegs Čitsjakovs, 55, conspired with US citizens Cyril Gregory Buyanovsky and Douglas Edward Robertson, of Kansas, to facilitate the sale, repair and shipment of US avionics equipment to customers in Russia and in other countries that operate Russian-built aircraft, including the Federal Security Service of Russia (FSB),” the statement said.

Chistyakov was arrested on March 19 in Latvia and remains detained pending extradition proceedings. Buyanovsky, in turn, pleaded guilty last December to criminal conspiracy and conspiracy to commit money laundering and consented to the forfeiture of over \$450,000 worth of avionics equipment and a \$50,000 personal forfeiture judgment, the statement added.

Assistant Attorney General Matthew Olsen said Chistyakov facilitated hundreds of thousands of dollars in illicit transactions to funnel sophisticated US aerospace technology to companies in Russia.

“As further alleged, Chistyakov, while operating from Latvia, worked with Buyanovsky and Robertson through their US company, KanRus Trading Company Inc. (KanRus), to circumvent US export laws by purchasing avionics equipment from US companies for customers in Russia,” the statement said.

Chistyakov is charged with one count of conspiracy, two counts of violation of the Export Control Reform Act, multiple counts of smuggling goods from the United States, conspiracy to commit international money laundering, and two counts of international money laundering.

If convicted, he faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison for conspiracy, 20 years in prison for each Export Control count, 10 years in prison for each smuggling count, and 20 years in prison for each money laundering count, according to the statement.

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West Again Blocks UNSC Meeting on NATO Aggression Against Yugoslavia - Correspondent

UNITED NATIONS, March 28 (Sputnik) - Western countries at the UN Security Council have once again blocked Russia's request for a meeting to mark the 25th anniversary of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, a Sputnik correspondent reported Thursday.

Like on Monday, France again requested a procedural vote on the provisional agenda.

Russia, China, Algeria, Sierra Leone, Guyana and Mozambique voted in favor, while nine other UNSC members abstained. Procedural votes require a minimum of nine votes in favor to be adopted and cannot be vetoed by a permanent member.

Western countries are afraid to expose NATO's real history to the world and therefore object to a UN Security Council meeting on their bombings of Yugoslavia, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday.

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US, Mexico to Partner on Efforts to Expand Semiconductor Supply Chain - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The United States and Mexico will collaborate on efforts to diversify the supply chain of semiconductor chips, the State Department said on Thursday. "The US Department of State will partner with the Government of Mexico to explore opportunities to grow and diversify the global semiconductor ecosystem ... This partnership will help create a more resilient, secure, and sustainable global semiconductor value chain," the State Department said in a press release.

Early stages of this work will begin with a comprehensive US assessment of Mexico's existing semiconductor ecosystem and regulatory framework, as well as workforce and infrastructure needs, the release added.

Key stakeholders in Mexico ranging from the government, educational institutions, research centers and companies, will provide insight on work to strengthen the microchip sector in the country, according to the release.

The State Department said this initiative will benefit both nations and the region.

The United States currently produces less than 10% of the world's chips and none of the most advanced ones, according to the Commerce Department.

The Biden administration aims to have US facilities produce 20% of the world's high-end chips by 2030. The effort began after a semiconductor shortage during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic that disrupted the production of goods including computers, cars, appliances, smartphones and video games.

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ULA Delays Last Launch of Delta IV Heavy Rocket on Thursday - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - United Launch Alliance (ULA) called off the launch of its Delta IV Heavy rocket that was initially scheduled for Thursday afternoon, the US aerospace company said in a statement.

This launch will be significant because ULA will retire its Delta rocket program after this mission and replace it with its new Vulcan rocket for future launches.

"Launch Director Ton Heter has announced that we will not continue with the #DeltaIVHeavy rocket countdown operations today for #NROL70. Another launch attempt will be possible in 24 hours," ULA said via X.

The Delta IV Heavy rocket is set to launch from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in the state of Florida carrying a US satellite that will service the US National Reconnaissance Office and support the US Space Force's Space Systems Command, according to the ULA.

The satellite, ULA added, is designed to provide intelligence data to US senior policy makers,

the US Intelligence Community and Department of Defense.

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US Warned Russia in Writing Before Concert Hall Attack - White House's Kirby

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US issued a written warning to Russian security services ahead of a concert hall attack, utilizing established channels and following standard procedures, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Thursday.

"Following normal procedures and through established channels that have been employed many times previously, the United States government passed a warning in writing to Russian security services," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby added that the United States remains committed to maintaining vigilance and will continue to alert governments worldwide about any terror plots discovered, irrespective of the diplomatic relations with those countries.

Earlier in the day, The New York Times reported, citing European and US security officials, that the US intelligence agencies did not provide the Russian side with all the information they had about the threat of a terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall in the Moscow Region out of fear that Russian authorities might learn about their intelligence sources or methods of work.

On Tuesday, Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov said that the information transmitted by the United States on the preparation of a terrorist attack was of a general nature, and the Russian special services responded to it.

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Kirby Directs Sharp Remarks at Russian Officials When Commenting Crocus Terrorist Attack

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) -White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby made some disparaging remarks about Russian authorities when commenting on the Moscow terrorist attack.

"ISIS (banned in Russia) bears full responsibility for this attack. The United States will continue to stay vigilant and alert governments around the world whenever we learn terrorist plots regardless of our relationship," Kirby said. "Reminds me of something my uncle used to say... that the best manure salesmen often carry their samples in their mouths. Russian officials seem to be pretty good manure salesmen."

At least 143 people were killed and 360 others were injured after a terrorist attack was carried out at the Crocus City Hall concert venue in the city of Krasnogorsk, just outside Moscow, on March 22 and was followed by a massive fire outbreak. A Sputnik correspondent who witnessed the attack reported that a number of gunmen in camouflage broke into the music hall, shooting

people point-blank and throwing incendiary bombs.

On Tuesday, Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov said the first information received from suspects in the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack proves a Ukrainian trace. He added that, while radical Islamists had prepared the terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall, Ukrainian special forces were involved. He noted that primary data from the detainees confirms the Ukrainian trail, and Russian intelligence services think that the United States, Britain and Ukraine are behind the terrorist attack.

The Moscow suburb concert hall terrorist attack is the deadliest in Russia in nearly 20 years.

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US GDP Rose For All of 2023 Despite Slowing In Final Quarter - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US economy expanded 3.4% in the final quarter of 2023, slowing from the previous quarter, although growth for all of last year was still higher than in 2022, the Commerce Department's latest reading on gross domestic product showed Thursday.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 3.4 percent in the fourth quarter of 2023," the Bureau of Economic Analysis, a division of the Commerce Department, said in its third and final GDP reading for the fourth quarter. The bureau issues three GDP readings per quarter.

Economists on Wall Street forecast on the average a 3.2% reading for GDP in the fourth quarter, the same as estimated by the bureau in its second reading for the quarter. In that sense, what was reported Thursday was above expectations.

Yet, the growth was slower than the final third quarter reading of 4.9%.

But if compared with GDP for all of the previous year, the 2023 reading of 2.5% was higher than the 1.9% noted for 2022.

"It's ... another tick in the box showing a resilient economy," economist Adam Button wrote in a reaction posted on the ForexLive forum.

The latest GDP reading also suggested a continued moderation in inflation. The Federal Reserve's favored reading on inflation — the Personal Consumption Expenditures, or PCE, Index — grew 1.8% in the final quarter of last year. That was down from 2.6% in Q3 2023, representing the smallest rise since 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a recession and sent prices falling.

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US Warning on March 7 About Terror Threat Was Not First Alert to Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The warning that the United States passed to Russia in early March regarding a planned terrorist attack was not the first alert that Washington gave to Moscow, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

"That was not the first warning that we've given to Russia," Miller said in a press briefing.

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Over \$20 Billion in Crypto Transactions Reviewed by US, UK at Russian Exchange - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Russian-based virtual exchange, Garantex, is currently under the scrutiny of the US and UK for handling over \$20 billion in cryptocurrency transactions, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

According to the report, the scrutinized payments, conducted through Moscow-based crypto exchange Garantex using the dollar-pegged cryptocurrency Tether, occurred after Garantex faced sanctions from the US and UK for allegedly facilitating financial crimes and illicit activities in Russia.

Since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Biden administration has been closely monitoring cryptocurrency exchanges like Garantex. The \$20 billion in transactions could potentially mark a significant breach of sanctions against Russia, the report said.

However, due to the complex and obscure nature of cryptocurrency transactions, it is still too early to say what the outcomes of these ongoing inquiries will be, the report added.

After the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Western countries significantly expanded their list of sanctions against Moscow.

The US Treasury has imposed sanctions against the Garantex cryptocurrency exchange from Estonia, as Washington believes that it is controlled from Moscow and St. Petersburg. Russian officials have said despite Western attempts to contain and weaken the country's economy the sanctions regime has failed.

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Two Injured After Helicopter Crash During Army Exercises at Fort Carson, Colorado -Reports

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Two people have been transported to a local hospital after a US Army helicopter crashed during routine exercises, Fox News reported on Thursday.

"At approximately 6:30 p.m. a single AH-64 Apache helicopter from the 4th Combat Aviation Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, crashed while conducting routine training on Fort Carson," a Fort Carson official is quoted as saying in the report.

According to the report, the incident occurred on Wednesday evening at Fort Carson, a 28-square-mile military facility in Colorado.

The official said in the report that emergency personnel were on the scene and the two

patients, who have minor injuries, were transported to Evans Army Community Hospital. An investigation into the accident is currently ongoing, the report said.

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US House to Send Articles of Impeachment Against Mayorkas to Senate on April 10 - Speaker

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will send articles of impeachment against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas to the Senate on April 10, House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Thursday.

"Together with the 11 House impeachment managers, I sent a letter to Senator [Chuck] Schumer telling him we'll deliver the articles of Secretary Mayorkas' impeachment to the Senate on April 10th and that he must hold a full trial," Johnson said in a statement on X, formerly Twitter.

House Republicans passed a resolution to impeach Mayorkas for allegedly failing to secure the United States' borders from illegal immigration.

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Georgia Judge Wraps Hearing Without Ruling on Trump's Motion to Dismiss Case Against Him

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Georgia Judge Scott McAfee concluded a court hearing without ruling whether the election meddling case against former US President Donald Trump should be dismissed based on the First Amendment that protects free speech in the United States, according to a web broadcast of the hearing.

Judge McAfee adjourned the hearing on dismissing the case against Trump without any ruling and did not say when he might rule on the matter.

In late 2023, Trump filed a motion to dismiss the Georgia case against him claiming that when he was accusing the state election officials of voter fraud, he was merely executing his free speech right granted by the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

Earlier in March, McAfee refused to remove Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis from the case after Trump motioned to do so arguing that she had an "improper relationship" with the prosecutor handling the case.

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

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

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US Supply Chain Task Force Assesses Disruptions After Key Bridge Collapse - White House

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's Supply Chain Disruption Task Force has held a meeting to discuss the potential national problems caused by the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore and the ensuing chaos in the city, which is one of the largest ports in the United States, the White House announced in a readout on Thursday.

"[On Wednesday] the National Economic Council convened a meeting of the Biden-Harris Administration Supply Chain Disruptions Task Force to discuss potential impacts on regional and national supply chains from the collapse of the Frederick (sic) Scott Key Bridge and partial closure of the port of Baltimore," the release said.

The White House apparently intended to refer to the Francis Scott Key bridge, which collapsed early Tuesday after it was rammed by a cargo ship.

The port of Baltimore is one of the nation's largest shipping hubs and the Francis Scott Key Bridge is critical to travel in the Northeast Corridor, the White House acknowledged.

"Since the collapse of the Frederick (sic) Scott Key Bridge, the White House and federal agencies have engaged extensively with industry, ocean carriers, ports and labor unions to minimize disruptions as shipments are rerouted while the port of Baltimore is closed to ship traffic," the readout said, again using the name "Fredrick" instead of Francis.

At the meeting, members of the task force shared real-time analysis of sectors with significant activity through the Port of Baltimore, including automobiles, farm machinery and agricultural products. The task force will coordinate federal outreach and efforts to assist impacted industries and will continue to monitor shipping activity at alternative ports, the White House said.

Opened in 1977, the Francis Scott Key Bridge was named for poet Francis Scott Key, the author of the US national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

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Unclear If Crocus Attack Alters Ukraine Aid in US, Motion to Vacate Serious Threat -Source

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - It's unclear if the terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall concert venue near Moscow will impact US lawmakers' consideration of further funding for Ukraine aid, but a motion to remove House Speaker Mike Johnson is a more serious threat that can derail efforts to pass foreign aid legislation soon, a congressional source told Sputnik.

Last week, US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene filed a motion to vacate Johnson from his leadership post, but she stopped short of requesting a vote.

"Hard to say, to be honest," the source said when asked about the impact of the Crocus attack on efforts to approve more Ukraine aid in the House. "Rep. Greene has threatened to move the

motion to vacate should a Ukraine funding bill be brought up for a vote."

The source emphasized that Greene's motion to vacate is the bigger issue at play than anything else.

On Friday, Greene said that she filed a motion to remove Johnson after he backed a \$1.2 trillion spending bill despite objections from House Republicans on certain provisions in the legislation. The Congresswoman added that her motion was "basically a warning" and that she would not immediately request a vote on her resolution.

Greene's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the potential impact of the Crocus attack on Ukraine's aid following Russian accusations of Kiev's alleged role.

On Tuesday, Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov said the first information received from suspects in the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack proves a Ukrainian trace. He added that, while radical Islamists had prepared the terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall, Ukrainian special forces were involved. Western intelligence and Ukraine needed the attack to create panic in Russian society, Bortnikov also said, adding that the mastermind behind the terrorist attack has not been identified yet.

The United States claims the attack was carried out by Islamic State terrorists (IS, banned in Russia), and denies that Ukraine had any involvement.

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White House Dismisses Reports About Second Secret Meeting Between US, Iran

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby dismissed media reports that the United States and Iran held another secret meeting in March to decrease tensions between the countries.

"I am not aware of any such meeting, and, frankly, I don't believe there was one," Kirby said during a press briefing when asked by a reporter to comment on reports about a secret meeting between US and Iranian officials in March.

The reporter referred to an expert's remarks during a think tank event on Wednesday, according to which US officials met with Iranian counterparts earlier in March.

Earlier in the month, The Financial Times reported that the United States had secret talks with Iran in January to press Tehran to use its leverage to convince Yemen's Houthi movement to stop their attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea. Kirby also refuted the report but confirmed that Washington has many channels of communication with Tehran.

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US, Israel Finalizing Date for Delegation's Visit to Washington to Discuss Rafah - Kirby

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is working with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office to finalize a date for an Israeli delegation's visit to Washington for talks on a possible military operation in Gaza, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby on Thursday.

"We are currently discussing rescheduling that meeting on Rafah with with the prime minister's office and our Israeli counterparts," Kirby said. "We're working right now to kind of finalize a date circling something on the calendar. And as soon as we get that, and we're confident in it, we'll keep you posted."

Kirby added that Washington hopes that the meeting can be scheduled and take place in-person in Washington, as initially planned.

Netanyahu canceled the visit of the high-level delegation on Monday after the United States did not veto a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. On Wednesday, however, the White House announced that the prime minister had agreed to reschedule the Rafah operation talks.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel and breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. Nearly 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted during the attack. 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 32,500 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, according to local authorities.

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US Court Sentences FTX Founder Sam Bankman-Fried to 25 Years in Prison – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – The United States District Court for the Southern District of New York on Thursday has sentenced the founder and former CEO of failed crypto exchange FTX to 25 years in federal prison for defrauding investors and customers, CNN reported on Thursday.

Prosecutors initially requested for Bankman-Fried to receive 50 years in prison while his defense asked for 6.5 years.

FTX, the Bahamas-based cryptocurrency exchange co-founded by Bankman-Fried and Gary Wang in 2019, had become one of the largest cryptocurrency exchanges in the world. The company boasted over one million customers and was valued at \$32 billion in January 2022.

In November, Bankman-Fried was convicted on seven counts, including two counts of fraud and five counts of conspiracy. US prosecutors argued in court that the FTX co-founder committed "one of the biggest financial frauds in American history" by lying to the cryptocurrency exchange's investors and customers.

A year before the conviction, several newspapers alleged that FTX was a financial bubble, triggering an outbreak of withdrawals. Amid the company's liquidity crisis, the media reports also drew the attention of US regulators to FTX. Investigators have since asserted that

Bankman-Fried and his subordinates misled investors for years, using billions of clients' dollars to make risky bets at the Alameda hedge fund, along with sinking them into personal expenses.

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Lawmaker Urges Austin to Share Information On Coups in Africa Held By US-Trained Officers

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – US House Republican Matt Gaetz from Florida sent a letter to the Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on Thursday, requesting information about coups in Africa conducted by African officers trained in the United States.

“Given the DoD [Department of Defense] has failed to meet the congressionally mandated deadline, I am formally requesting the briefing or report on security cooperation with African military units who received DoD training and equipping and subsequently overthrew their governments within the AFRICOM AOR [US Africa Command area of responsibility],” Gaetz said in the letter.

The lawmaker pointed out that the FY 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) requires the Pentagon to brief Congress on the matter within 90 days after its enactment. He stressed that AFRICOM’s commander, General Michael Langley, on March 21 promised to provide the information but has not yet done so.

Gaetz also urged the Pentagon to contact him to set up a briefing date not later than April 5, according to the letter.

At least 15 African officers who received US training and security assistance were involved in 12 coups in the western part of the continent and the greater Sahel region in recent years, the Intercept said. This list included military personnel from Burkina Faso, Chad, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, the report added.

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Trudeau to Host French Prime Minister for Talks Focused on Climate Change - Office

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will host his French counterpart, Gabriel Attal, to advance work on common economic and climate priorities among other topics, Trudeau’s office said on Thursday.

The French leader is set to travel to Ottawa, Montreal and Quebec City from April 10-12.

"On April 10 and 11, Prime Minister Attal will be in Ottawa, where he will meet with Prime Minister Trudeau to strengthen bilateral co-operation, with a focus on climate action," Trudeau's office said in a statement.

The two will also discuss such shared priorities as growing trade; common "unwavering commitment to promote the French language and francophone cultures;" and "protecting democracy and human rights around the world," including in support of Ukraine amid its ongoing

conflict with Russia, the statement said.

Attal will also meet with Canadian Governor General Mary Simon.

This will be Attal's first official visit to Canada and first travel outside of the European Union since he took office.

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US Government, Biden Administration Won't Let Sinking Boeing Aerospace Giant Collapse

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - No US government is likely to allow the gigantic Boeing-McDonnell-Douglas defense contractor and aerospace giant to collapse or disintegrate, despite the current turmoil sweeping the corporation, American financial analysts told Sputnik.

PROFIT MARGINS SLASHED

"It is difficult to imagine that the US government would allow Boeing to fail, particularly amidst soaring geopolitical tension," financial analyst and former hedge fund manager Charles Ortel told Sputnik on Monday.

"Failure is not an option when it comes to assuring safety and quality control."

Boeing's new leaders would have very clear-cut priorities and goals that needed to be achieved even at the expense of previously lavish stock market values and benefits to shareholders, Ortel predicted.

Earlier this week, Boeing's top two executives and the head of its enormous commercial aviation division all announced they would be stepping down before the end of this year, relinquishing their positions.

Board Chairman Larry Kellner will not run for reelection at the company's annual meeting scheduled for May, Boeing announced. In the meantime, Kellner will be replaced by Steve Mollenkopf, a director since 2020 and the former CEO of Qualcomm, and he will also spearhead the process of selecting a new CEO to succeed departing incumbent Dave Calhoun, the company said in a press release.

In addition, Stan Deal, president and chief executive of Boeing's much-criticized commercial airplanes unit, is out immediately and being replaced, at least for the moment, by current Boeing Chief Operating Officer (COO) Stephanie Pope, the company said.

The moves come almost three months after a door plug blew out of an almost new Boeing 737 MAX operated by Alaska Airlines on January 5.

CHANGES OVERDUE

Ortel said the top management changes were long overdue, but Boeing's woes were rooted in far deeper systematic issues that have plagued US big business and corporate management.

"Pay and wealth-building opportunities at many of the large American multinational companies seem to me to offer connected insiders skewed incentives. When executives (and board members) meet performance targets they tend to earn rewards that are gigantic compared to the average annual earnings of American wage earners in the private sector. However, when these business icons destroy value for shareholders, they are not punished harshly enough," he said.

MISMANAGED GIANT

Boeing is not the first unwieldy, disorganized, and mismanaged giant US corporation to face such a reckoning and it would not be the last., Ortel warned.

"Like the troubled trajectory of General Electric since Jack Welch's departure days before September 11, 2001, Boeing's record calls into question both the effectiveness of the regulatory process and the wisdom of complicated supply chains and complex operating structures," he said.

However, Boeing's new leaders would only be able to scratch the surface of the company's problems and make no real difference in the way it was being run into the ground, Levy Research Institute at Bard College Research Associate Marshall Auerback warned.

The company needs to be fundamentally restructured, reversing the catastrophic fashionable streamlining and divesting of capital, resources, factories, and tens of thousands of experienced staff that has occurred over the previous two generations, Auerback insisted.

"Decades of outsourcing must be reversed; a centralized manufacturing 'ecosystem' needs to be revived," he said.

The interests of the company's crucial cadre of long-term, experienced workers, mechanics, and engineers also needed to be formally integrated into the policymaking structures, Auerback stressed.

Trends Journal Publisher and former hedge fund manager Gerald Celente agreed that Calhoun's successor would be a similar figure incapable of making the enormous structural transformations the company needed to survive and recover.

Boeing's shares rose on Wall Street on Monday following news of the coming changes. However, some analysts cautioned this could simply be the result of the company spending its own cash reserves to buy back significant quantities of its sinking stock.

LOSING TO AIRBUS

University of Pittsburgh Professor of International Affairs Michael Brenner pointed out that while Boeing will not be totally destroyed, it looked likely to be relegated to an inferior position in the global commercial aircraft market to its arch-rival Airbus in Europe.

The Boeing story is only the most glaring example of how the strategy of cutting costs through outsourcing and related practices has been carried out at the expense of manufacturing standards, Brenner recalled.

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US Warned Russia in Writing Before Concert Hall Attack - White House's Kirby

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UPDATE - Russia Blocks US-Drafted UNSC Resolution to Extend Work of North Korea Sanctions Panel

(Updates with comments from Russian ambassador ahead of the vote in paras 4-6)

UNITED NATIONS, March 28 (Sputnik) - Russia vetoed a US-drafted UN Security Council resolution to extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts overseeing sanctions on North Korea for one year, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Thursday.

The resolution states that the Security Council decided "to extend the mandate of the group of experts until April 30, 2025."

China abstained from voting on the draft, while 13 members voted in favor of the resolution.

Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said Moscow could not support the resolution because sanctions on North Korea have proven ineffective and have only harmed ordinary people.

"It is clear that in recent years, sanctions have not been able to achieve the international community's stated aims and have not led to a normalization of the situation surrounding the peninsula," Nebenzia said, adding that the sanctions have badly affected the quality of life for the people of North Korea.

Nebenzia said Russia has proposed a thorough review of the panel, but Western countries did not agree to this.

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Four Ontario School Boards Suing Meta, Snapchat, TikTok for Disrupting Student Learning

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – The Toronto District School Board said on Thursday that alongside three other districts in Canada's province of Ontario, it has launched legal

proceedings against Meta (banned in Russia as an extremist organization), Snapchat and TikTok platforms for disruptions to student learning.

"On March 28, 2024, Toronto District School Board, together with the Toronto Catholic District School Board, Peel District School Board and Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, announced a lawsuit against tech giants Meta Platforms Inc. (Facebook and Instagram), Snap Inc. (SnapChat), and ByteDance Ltd. (TikTok) for disruption to the education system," the board said in a statement.

The four districts' school boards allege that the social media giants have "negligently designed" and marketed addictive products that have undermined the boards' mandate to enhance student achievement and well-being.

Educators have to spend more classroom time monitoring issues caused by social media but are also forced to rework the curriculum to better address significant attention, focus, and mental health concerns, as well as the changing behavioral dynamics of the student population, the statement said.

"The fall-out of compulsive use of social media amongst students is causing huge strains on the Board's finite resources," the statement continued.

The litigation calls on the social media platforms to make their products safer, compensate the boards for disrupting their mandate and their students' fundamental right to education.

The school boards are reportedly seeking close to C\$4.5 billion (\$3.3 billion) in damages from the social media giants.

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Use of US Nuclear Potential in Drills Near North Korea Affects Russian Security – Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, March 28 (Sputnik) – The use of US nuclear potential in military drills around North Korea affects Russia's national security interests, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said during a Security Council meeting on Thursday.

"The situation is being brought to an even more dangerous brink by the active militarization of the peninsula with the direct involvement of Washington and other NATO members ... What is particularly worrying is the increasingly brazen invocation in the allies military maneuvers of Washington's nuclear potential. Such a dangerous turn of events in the region affects the fundamental interests of the Russian Federation in the area of national security," Nebenzia said.

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Russia Blocks US-Drafted UNSC Resolution to Extend Work of North Korea Sanctions Panel

UNITED NATIONS, March 28 (Sputnik) - Russia vetoed a US-drafted UN Security Council resolution to extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts overseeing sanctions on North Korea

for one year, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Thursday.

The resolution states that the Security Council decided "to extend the mandate of the group of experts until April 30, 2025."

China abstained from voting on the draft, while 13 members voted in favor of the resolution.