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What's Behind Reports China is in 'Advanced' Talks to Build Training Base in Cuba

While China has zero combat troops in the Western Hemisphere, the United States has more than 350,000 deployed across the Pacific region, including more than 100 on Taiwan, an island it formally recognizes as being Chinese territory. Washington says it is safeguarding the "rules-based international order" by doing so.

A Tuesday report in the US media has claimed China is in talks with Cuba to build a joint training base on the north coast of the Caribbean island.

The report is based on information from anonymous "current and former US officials" and claims the talks "are at an advanced stage but not concluded." It also alleges the Biden administration has reached out to Havana to try and delay or block the deal.

According to the paper, the information was contained in "highly classified new US intelligence," described by officials as "convincing but fragmentary." They said US officials have "different levels of alarm" about the reports.

The White House has not commented on the reports, nor the Cuban government; the Chinese embassy in Washington, DC, referred the paper to a previous Chinese government statement about alleged China-Cuba negotiations that called Washington an "expert in chasing shadows" in other countries and meddling in their affairs.

Mao Ning, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told reporters on Tuesday she was "not aware" of the report, adding that "we hope relevant parties will focus their time and efforts on doing things that are conducive to mutual trust and regional peace, stability and development."

Previous 'Inaccurate' Report

The report comes less than two weeks after the media outlet claimedBeijing and Havana had signed a multibillion-dollar deal to build a spy base in Cuba to conduct signals intelligence on the US. China and Cuba both denounced the report as "totally mendacious and unfounded" and even the White House National Security Council called the report "inaccurate."

A few days later, another anonymous Biden administration official told several US media outlets that China had operated a listening post in Cuba since 2019 - a situation US President Joe Biden "inherited" from his predecessor, former US President Donald Trump.

"This is an ongoing issue, and not a new development, and the arrangement as characterized in the reporting does not comport with our understanding," the official was quoted as saying.

A Cold Detente

The reports have come amid a visit to China by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who met with senior Chinese diplomatic leaders, including President Xi Jinping, Foreign Minister Qin Gang, and the Communist Party's foreign policy chief, Wang Yi. The trip was delayed from February after the US shot down a Chinese high altitude balloon that Washington claimed was a spying device, but which Beijing said was a civilian scientific airship that was blown off course.

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The visit was aimed at returning US-China relations to the cold detente established by Xi and Biden at their Bali meeting last November, which followed a nadir in relations caused by then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022.
The island is a Chinese province in rebellion, which has been controlled by a US-backed government since the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949. It is about 100 miles from mainland China - roughly the same distance as Cuba is from the US - and has long been host to US forces, which were recently revealed as having secretly operated there for years.
Washington has recognized the "One China" policy since 1979, when it dropped formal relations with Taipei and opened them with Beijing, and China's protests over US "provocations" by supporting Taiwan are typically rooted in this agreement.
The US has doubled down on this open but informal support amid its strategic move toward "great power competition" with Russia and China, seeing Taiwan as a key stronghold in the "First Island Chain," a string of archipelagos off the Asian coast with which Washington hopes to contain Chinese expansion.
Alienating Cuba
In addition, under Biden the US has maintained the numerous restrictions against Cuba put in place by the prior Trump administration, including 243 coercive measures that had been removed under the Obama administration.
The measures forbid most trade and travel to Cuba by Americans and American companies. The United Nations has voted for years to condemn the US blockade, and the Cuban delegation to the UN has denounced the sanctions and the chronic shortages of basic goods they cause as "an act of genocide and economic warfare" against the Cuban people.

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'Act of Desperation': Possible Ukrainian Attack on Crimea 'Could Rapidly Spin Out of Control'

When London and Washington agreed to supply Kiev with longer-range missiles, they claimed Kiev promised not to attack Russian soil with them. However, with the two sides disagree about what territory is part of Russia. With Kiev's counteroffensive sputtering out, the risk of a "desperation" attack outside the Donbass is growing.
Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu warned that Ukraine may attempt to use Western-supplied Storm Shadow air-launched cruise missiles and longer-range HIMARS ground-based rockets to strike Russian facilities in Crimea.
His warning came at a meeting of the collegium of the Russian Ministry of Defense on Tuesday. Shoigu said that the use of such weapons outside the zone of the special military operation would induce immediate Russian strikes on "decision-making centers in Ukraine" and would "mean the full involvement of the United States and the United Kingdom in the conflict."
Sputnik spoke with two veterans of the US foreign policy apparatus about Shoigu's report, why Kiev might resort to such actions, and what the Western response is likely to be. They said Western approval was implied by having helped Kiev plan its counteroffensive and that NATO

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powers are likely to dismiss Moscow's warnings as bluster, despite evidence to the contrary. In the end, such a strike will only make a full-blown Russia-NATO war more likely.

'Desperate' Kiev Trying to 'Provoke' Moscow

Earl Rasmussen, an international consultant and retired US Army lieutenant colonel, compared such a potential attack to other "actions of desperation" by Ukraine outside the scope of the conventional military conflict in Donbass.

"We had the Kerch Bridge blown up; we had the attempted drone attack on the Kremlin; we've got the assassinations; we have the destruction of the dam. These are terrorist actions. These are actions of desperation, I think."

Rasmussen suggested a threat against Crimea would be aimed at "trying to instill fear of some type in the Russian population" and pressure Moscow to withdraw its forces.

"But also obviously, it's for a public relations perspective as well. I think they're trying to demonstrate some type of success or positive - from their perspective positive - prior to the NATO meetings coming up in a couple of weeks," he noted.

Meanwhile, Larry Johnson, a retired CIA intelligence officer and former US State Department official, similarly described Ukraine's position as "a situation of great desperation" and characterized such a potentially audacious strike as an attempt to bring NATO into the conflict directly.

"Nothing that they have planned from a military standpoint has worked in terms of their counteroffensive. I think what they want to do is try to provoke Russia into taking actions that will then bring NATO into the conflict directly. So they're looking for a pretext to create an avenue," he said.

NATO's Approval Implied by Supplies

Rasmussen said that the United States would "not openly" approve of Ukraine using Western weaponry to attack Crimea, but noted that its "tacit approval" was implied by Washington's position that Crimea is still a part of Ukraine and that the 2014 declaration of independence and subsequent referendum on being rejoined to the Russian Federation were not legitimate.

"I don't know if they actually were supportive of the strikes on Moscow and the assassinations, although there seems to be evidence that there was some type of Western intelligence collaboration there," Rasmussen continued. "But as far as strikes on Crimea, they may not openly announce it, but yes, you know, they're providing targeting information. I'm sure the targeting information is being provided by the West, by NATO, primarily the UK and the US."

He further noted that Ukraine "will need to get closer to hit Crimea directly. Perhaps through two defense lines. [It is] doubtful they will be able to but [they] may try."

Johnson added that "NATO and the United States want to see Russia destroyed and broken up. You should no longer labor under the illusion that the West somehow wants to find a way to peacefully coexist with Russia."

Rasmussen likewise noted that the West should have realized by now that "both Russia and China do not bluff" and that Moscow will follow through on its threat to strike decision-making centers in Ukraine in the event of a Storm Shadow or HIMARS missile strike outside the special operation zone.

"They may be cautious and they're not completely destructive like the NATO countries are when they go into countries unprovoked, like Libya, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Serbia, and Iraq, but

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they are deliberate. And so they should take caution that, yes, those decision-making centers" will be hit, he said.

'Rapidly Spin Out of Control'

"It's interesting that Shoigu said 'in Ukraine'. So he's trying to limit, I think, Putin and Shoigu are trying to not to escalate this to a direct NATO confrontation, but I'll tell you, the NATO countries do seem to be almost trying to provoke that type of an action, indirectly, so they can say that they didn't do it. So I think decision-making centers inside Ukraine are fair game and if they're not realizing this and understanding what this is going to do, I don't know what world they're living in," Rasmussen said.

"I think they're going to be cautious to hit anything outside of Ukraine. But let's face it, no matter what they say, the US and the UK especially, are participants in this. Almost not quite directly, but pretty much, pretty close. And they probably have special operations and intelligence assets that are in Ukraine, that are assisting the Ukrainians command," he added.

Rasmussen noted that US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland "admitted" in congressional testimony that the US has been actively assisting Ukraine in planning the counteroffensive for several months. That, however, doesn't mean that Russia would strike a NATO country, although it is "definitely an escalation."

"I think primarily the UK and the US are the ones driving this. There's disagreement, I think, within several members on the NATO side and caution. So I don't think they've got full support in the background. But right now they don't need that. They can continue to have Ukraine as the sacrificial lamb, as a proxy there," Rasmussen said.

For his part, Johnson warned that the risk of escalation is "very severe."

"I think the actions in the Biden White House are intent upon going to war. I hope that doesn't happen. But up to this point, the United States over the years has enjoyed the luxury of being safe and secure in its own territory. And I think this thing could rapidly spin out of control."

Johnson predicted Ukraine's Western sponsors would ignore Shoigu's words and "dismiss it as more bombast from Russia."

"They've been using these missiles all along anyway. They've been trying to target Crimea all along over the past at least six-seven months. And I know that Russia's air defense has been effective in defeating the attempted launches," Johnson said, adding that "this may indicate that Shoigu has some intelligence indicating that Ukraine is planning to do something that it has not done in the past."

Johnson reiterated that "Russia has to defend itself," noting that the country "has been under unrelenting attack now for more than nine years, starting in 2014 with the direct intervention of the United States and Great Britain in the Maidan coup."

"And then [came] the ensuing civil war in the Donbass and the continued attacks on civilians that were tolerated and not condemned by the West," the former State Department official explained. "And then on top of that, with the actions that the United States in particular has taken by deploying its troops to Romania and Poland and deploying missile batteries that could potentially carry nuclear weapons."

"I think, if Russia was doing those kinds of things to the United States on the borders of the United States, let's say in Mexico and Canada, the United States would view it as an act of war. So I think Russia's reactions are entirely understandable," he pointed out.

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‘Child of Privilege’: Hunter Biden Dodges Stiffer Charges Despite Admitting to Serious Crimes

The US Department of Justice announced on Tuesday it had filed charges against Hunter Biden, an international businessman and the son of US President Joe Biden, related to refusing to pay income tax and illegal possession of a firearm.

Biden has entered a plea deal on the charges, which could put him in jail for up to 15 years. However, experts told Sputnik that the prodigal son admitted to far worse crimes that those he is being tried for, but that the DoJ is refusing to file them against him.

Marc Little, a conservative political commentator and executive director of CURE America Action, suggested that “perhaps the DoJ is attempting to rehabilitate its ‘zero” credibility before their unprecedented political trial against former President Donald Trump begins.”

“Hunter’s now-alleged involvement in international bribery and corruption will be ignored while the DoJ wages war on the current president’s political opponent,” he said.

“With what appears to be a plea deal and a slap on the wrist to the president’s son, and no indictment for the many crimes committed by Hillary Clinton and numerous FBI brass in the infamous Russia Hoax, it is clear [that] the DoJ has its sights set on anyone who they cannot control. After all, it is clear the Intelligence State in the US exerts more biased power than anyone ever truly realized - until now.”

Tyler Nixon, a political analyst and attorney for Donald Trump’s former campaign adviser Roger Stone compared the situation to that of Al Capone, who was ultimately jailed on tax evasion charges despite his widely known history of ordering hits on rival gangsters.

“Frankly, this is [a] disgrace for the justice system,” Nixon told Sputnik. “It doesn't surprise me at all.”

“The tax charges are used to get someone who was involved in a massive corruption off lightly. I've known Hunter Biden for pretty much since I was a young man, when we were children. It is sad to see that he was then involved in such corruption and frankly, just selling [his] country out to some of the worst actors around the world. This is just kind of a negotiated slap on the wrist. And it leaves off the table all of the most serious crimes involving money laundering, involving influence peddling, involving the sale of his father's office and capitalizing on what I consider borderline treason,” he said.

'They've Softballed This'

Nixon said Hunter Biden escaped much stiffer gun charges that have landed others in prison for many years because “he's a child of privilege.”

“I would be shocked if he saw the inside of a prison cell at any point. They've softballed this, they've got him in a diversion program, early diversion, which [is why] he doesn't have a criminal record as far as we know.”

“I don't think he should be treated differently by the system, either more harshly or less harshly based on what he's done. However, the whole thing is the epitome of hypocrisy. His father is the biggest, probably the most virulent drug warrior still alive, who escalated the penalties for drug

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possession and all sorts of drug offenses in the 1980s and 90s and even into the early 2000s, to a point that thousands, hundreds of thousands, if not even approaching millions of Americans had their lives destroyed for mere possession of different sorts of controlled substances, thanks to Joe Biden."

"And his son has run around filming himself buying, smoking whatever have you, and constantly using crack cocaine, which was an offense that was actually weighted as more as the crack cocaine they gave harsher penalties. There are generations of Black Americans in the inner city who have been decimated as a result of this disparate sentencing. And his son runs around doing this for years, exploiting people."

"I mean, Hunter Biden wrote it in his autobiography about this. I guess, some sort of woman in Washington - we don't know if it's a real person or if it was just sort of a literary device - but basically how he spent all this time with this woman in the depths of cocaine use and crack cocaine use. And yet he walks away scot-free. People are rotting in prison to this day for these offenses, and he gets nothing. It's not even addressed, simply only in the context of a gun charge. And similarly, you can bet that no one would be able to negotiate this type of deal, this type of kid-glove treatment, if they were just an inner-city Black person who was involved in any sort of firearms offense that was related to drugs. They would never receive this type of treatment."

'No Chance' DoJ Will Implicate POTUS

Nixon noted that, when it comes to his business activities, federal prosecutors have had more than half a decade to investigate a "mountain of evidence" brought forth, including by his former business partner, Tony Bobulinski. Instead, the DoJ under Attorney General Merrick Garland "has become a Praetorian guard, a protectorate for the Biden family," he said.

"And there's no chance that any of these serious crimes" Hunter Biden has made a plea deal on "have [anything] to do with his father," Nixon noted.

"We have plenty of evidence that has been uncovered in terms of millions of dollars in wire transfers to Biden family members - inexplicably, no business explanation, no valid explanation other than just raw payoffs by foreign nations and foreign actors. None of this is being pursued in any manner whatsoever by anyone within the Department of Justice or in the FBI. Quite the opposite, in fact: they're actively suppressing it, covering up. And the media similarly doesn't have anything to say about it. The corporate media, I should say, certainly in alternative media," he noted.

"But no, I don't expect anything to come of it. And even if it did, even if there was suddenly a miracle that happened in terms of reversing the personnel decisions and the people involved who have not only covered this up, but in many ways botched the case because to bring the case the chain of custody of evidence and the validity of evidence has to be proven in court. It's been delayed so long, it's been passed through so many hands, who knows? I mean, they could literally botch the case on process even if they did bring it."

"But even if they did bring it, I guarantee you that Joe Biden would issue a blanket pardon to his son. He may still do so, just to cover the bases before whenever he leaves office," Nixon said.

GOP Has 'Limited Options'

That said, when it comes to the Republican lawmakers in Congress, Nixon said they "have limited options" because it would require the impeachment of US President Joe Biden, for which the GOP lacks "the political temerity."

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“The Republicans are uncovering absolutely criminally chargeable levels of corruption and money laundering and all sorts of influence peddling, you name it, racketeering, in the Bidens’ crime syndicate. And yet I don't think they have the political temerity or the courage to do what's right is, which is, frankly, impeach this president and remove him.”
“But here's the thing: ultimately, the Democrats are about abusing process and abusing power and the spectacle. I would think that even the Republicans I disagree with in the House realize that no matter what they bring in terms of if they were to impeach, bring articles of impeachment, they would be voted out of the House. And there was to be a trial in the Senate that requires a two thirds vote to remove a president - it’s never been done before. And it's just going to be an exercise in futility.”
“It's perilous times for people who believe in justice and equal protection of the laws in America,” he concluded.

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Biden Critical of China's Xi After Blinken Visit

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken earlier wrapped the latest iteration of diplomatic talks with Chinese officials, marking the first such talks in China since 2018. The visit was initially scheduled for February but was postponed once US-China relations soured after the downing of a commercial Chinese balloon that blew off course.
The comments were made by Biden while speaking to the downed Chinese balloon fallout that unfolded in February and continued to steal headlines as additional balloon-like objects began to emerge near American skies.
"The reason why Xi Jinping got very upset, in terms of when I shot that balloon down with two box cars full of spy equipment in it, was he didn't know it was there," Biden claimed.
Biden's claims do not fully meet the statements made by the Chinese Foreign Ministry: "The situation with the Chinese balloon over the territory of the United States is an incident caused by force majeure, the facts are extremely clear." China also explained that the object was in fact a high-altitude civilian scientific balloon that was blown off course.

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'Slap on the Wrist': GOP Outraged Over 'Sweetheart Deal' Handed to Hunter Biden

Amongst Republican outrage, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) addressed the plea deal on tax charges Hunter Biden has agreed to. The US president’s son has also reached a diversion agreement with the Department of Justice related to unlawful possession of a weapon.

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House and Senate Republicans responded on Tuesday to Hunter Biden's decision to plead guilty to three federal charges, with remarks on the settled plea deal ranging between outrage and vows for investigation to not go impeded.

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said the announced plea deal wouldn't have any effect on the lower chamber's investigation into an alleged bribery scheme between President Joe Biden, his son, and a Ukrainian energy executive.

"Now this does nothing to our investigation," McCarthy told reporters Tuesday morning. "It actually should enhance our investigation because the DOJ should not be able to withhold any information now saying that there's a pending investigation. They should be able to provide [House Oversight Committee] Chairman [James] Comer [R-KY.] with any information that he requires."

On Tuesday, Hunter pleaded guilty to two misdemeanor offenses related to federal income tax filings. He was also charged with a felony firearm offense which he will avoid prosecution for thanks to him agreeing to enter a pretrial diversion agreement. His plea deal agreement follows a nearly six-year investigation.

David Weiss, a US attorney in Delaware, said Hunter did not pay federal income taxes for either 2017 or 2018, even as he owed more than $100,000 in taxes for each year.

His office reportedly adds that Hunter possessed a firearm in 2018 despite being an unlawful user of, and an addict of controlled substances, and knowing the fact.

Republicans and other critics of the White House have hit out at what they see as a double standard for the president's family, as compared to former President Donald Trump's legal troubles.

"It continues to show the two-tier system in America," McCarthy said of Hunter's plea deal with the DOJ. "If you are the president's leading political opponent, the DOJ tries to literally put you in jail and give you prison time. But if you are the president's son, you get a sweetheart deal."

"You have a sitting president today that now has a son that gets a sweetheart deal, that now the president today has [his] top political opponent indicted and has potential jail time. And you have the same problem yourself but there's no movement on that," McCarthy added. "So I think that to all Americans seems as though it's a two-system, and that's what wrong."

Representative James Comer (R-KY), the chair of the House Oversight Committee, referred to the plea deal as a "slap on the wrist" via Twitter.

"Hunter Biden is getting away with a slap on the wrist when growing evidence uncovered by the House Oversight Committee reveals the Bidens engaged in a pattern of corruption, influence peddling, and possibly bribery," alleged Comer in a tweet on Tuesday.

"If Hunter were a Republican, he'd have been in jail years ago," Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who is running for the 2024 US presidential election, in remarks shared on Twitter on Tuesday.

"Wow! The corrupt Biden DOJ just cleared up hundreds of years of criminal liability by giving Hunter Biden a mere 'traffic ticket,'" added Trump, who is also running for president, on Truth Social. "Our system is BROKEN!"

Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), an outspoken critic of her colleagues across the aisle, referred to the plea deal as a "stunt," while referring to the DOJ as "pathetic and weaponized."

"Hunter Biden pleading guilty to a gun charge and misdemeanor tax charges with no jail time is a stunt to make him look like he is just cooperating with the DOJ," wrote Greene via Twitter.

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“Meanwhile the pathetic and weaponized DOJ who protects their puppet President and refuses to prosecute Joe Biden and Hunter for taking bribes from Ukrainian oligarchs and raking in tens of millions of dollars from foreign countries bc the Big Guy makes policy decisions to be help his customers are the real crimes the Biden’s should be charged with!” added the Georgia Representative.
“Oh but hey, look at Jack Smith trying to throw President Trump in jail for 100 years for legally possessing documents he’s allowed to posses under the Presidential Records Act. We are controlled by COMMUNISTS!!”
Hunter's charges come days after Trump was hit with a second indictment over classified documents he mishandled and stored at his Mar-a-Lago residence.
Trump, who has repeatedly stated his innocence, has blasted the latest legal filing as being part of a politically motivated scheme to block his 2024 reelection bid.

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Himalayan Glaciers on Track to Lose 80% of Their Volume Over Climate Change

The recently-published report also found that glaciers in the Hindu Kush and Himalaya mountain range region melted 65% faster in the 2010s compared to the previous decade.
Glaciers in Asia’s Hindu Kush Himalaya could lose up to 80% of their volume by the end of the century, a development expected to cause dire effects on the freshwater millions of people rely on, a new report has revealed.
A report published by Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) on Tuesday revealed the melting glaciers could result in an increase of flash floods and avalanches in the region.
It outlined that the great melt would also cause fresh water shortages for 240 million people, as well as the 1.65 billion people who rely on the 12 downstream rivers that come from those mountains.
“The people living in these mountains who have contributed next to nothing to global warming are at high risk due to climate change,” said Amina Maharjan, a migration specialist and one of the authors of the study.
“Current adaptation efforts are wholly insufficient, and we are extremely concerned that without greater support, these communities will be unable to cope.”
“For them, this is home, and their livelihoods are mostly dependent on agriculture, livestock, tourism, and medicinal and aromatic plants,” Maharjan adds.
Regions on Earth covered in ice and snow—referred to as the cryosphere—take the brunt of climate change, with recent research finding that Mount Everest’s glaciers have lost 2,000 years' worth of ice in the last 30 years, according to one report.
Those living in the Himalayan communities have already felt the adverse effect of climate change as well, as India’s holy town of Joshimath began sinking in February of this year due to a combination of climate change and new construction projects in an attempt to attract and accommodate tourists.

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The report adds that the Himalayan communities are being affected by climate change more so than in any other part of the world, and the melting of its glaciers, snow and permafrost are "unprecedented and largely irreversible."

"Once ice melts in these regions, it's very difficult to put it back to its frozen form," said Pam Pearson, director of the International Cryosphere Climate Initiative.

"It's like a big ship in the ocean. Once the ice starts going, it's very hard to stop. So, with glaciers, especially the big glaciers in the Himalayas, once they start losing mass, that's going to continue for a really long time before it can stabilize," added Pearson, who was not involved in the report.

Despite the US rejoining the Paris Agreement in 2021, the nation, as well as China, continue to be Earth's worst polluters and have continued to bulldoze ahead with new fossil fuel projects, according to one report. Just last year, China approved permits for 168 coal-fired power plants and in early March of this year, the Biden administration approved a large scale oil drilling project in Willow, Alaska.

Experts warn that if the ongoing fossil fuel projects are not halted, they will produce enough carbon dioxide to warm the planet about 2 degrees Celsius this century.

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Texas Power Grid Tested by Scorching Heat Wave as Thousand Left Without Power

The Texas power grid called for customers to cut back on their electricity use amid a heat wave that rolled through the area and other southern US states and sent temperatures into the triple digits.

Texas' power grid was put to the test this week after a sweltering heat wave consumed the US south and left thousands of people in the dark for hours.

On Tuesday, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) was able to meet the demands of their customers after they called for a voluntary cut back on power use, including air conditioning and other appliances as a heat wave rolled into the state following a weekend of severe weather in the southern US.

Tornadoes that ripped through the South over the weekend, with the majority of the storms centered in Mississippi, have caused widespread power outages due to the damage. By 11:10 p.m. EDT, at least 41,818 Texans were still without power, according to PowerOutage.us.

In Mississippi, 10,783 people were also without power, while another 111,955 people in Oklahoma and 51,708 customers in Louisiana were left in the dark.

The call by ERCOT to conserve energy lasted from 4 p.m. until 8 p.m. on Tuesday evening, but the heat wave consuming the south has yet to yield.

ERCOT serves about 30 million residents and its call to cut energy use was the first of its kind made this year, but cautioned it was "not experiencing emergency conditions."

However, the council added the state did set an unofficial record for the month on Monday for energy demand, per one report. The record for the highest energy use in the state was set in

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July of last year at 80,148 megawatts. On Tuesday, at 4 p.m. demand rose above 79,000 megawatts, nearly breaching last summer's goal.
ERCOT has forecasted that power use will reach 81,191 megawatts on Wednesday.
In 2021, an ice storm in Texas managed to knock out power to millions of Texans for days, bringing to light serious tech issues and growing skepticism of the power grid's capabilities to take on severe weather.
Texas Governor Greg Abbott said improvements have been made to the grid since the devastating storm; however, state lawmakers are continuing to push for changes to be made regarding how Texans get their power, including building more on-demand power solutions as opposed to wind and solar power.

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Trump the Peacekeeper -Cartoon
By - Ted Rall

Trump is currently battling multiple legal cases, with a second indictment against the former president being filed on June 8 for his mishandling of classified documents after he left the White House at the end of his term.
In an interview with Fox News' Bret Baier that aired on Monday night, former US President Donald Trump voiced his frustration at being seen as "combative," going on to blame the media for its coverage of him.
"I would like to be less controversial," Trump told Baierduring an interview that at times became hostile. "I find the press is extremely dishonest, and if I'm not combative, I don't get my word across. I don't think you could win."
It's worth noting that the remark is a consistent complaint made by the former president about the media, especially during his years in office.
Earlier in the interview, of which a second part will be released on Tuesday evening, Baier derailed Trump's 2020 election claim that his successor had not won fairly. Trump made a quip later in the interview, by saying Fox News is now watched by "a lot" fewer viewers than it once maintained.
At one point, Baier, who has been hailed for his handling of the interview by talk show hosts on The View as well as MSNBC news anchors, began listing former associates and aides turned their backs on Trump after he left office. That clip has since gone viral.
The interview proved damning for Trump, as the former president appeared to essentially confessed to mishandling classified documents, legal experts have said. The remarks came days after he pleaded not guilty to 37 federal counts in the Mar-a-Lago case.

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Record-High 28% of Americans Say Will Vote for Candidates Who Share Their Abortion Views

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – A record-high number of Americans, 28%, said they are ready to vote only for those candidates who share their views on abortion, a new Gallup poll revealed on Wednesday.

"Currently, 28% of registered voters say they will only vote for candidates for major offices who share their position on abortion, one percentage point higher than the previous high of 27% recorded in 2022 and 2019," the pollster said.

A record low 14% said abortion is not a major issue they would take into account, down from 16% last year and 23% in 2007.

Another 56% consider abortion just one factor among many for their vote.

"Seventeen percent of all voters in 2022 and 2023 have said they are pro-choice on abortion and will only vote for candidates for major offices who share their views on the issue," the survey said.

Ten percent of voters in both years have said they are pro-life on abortion and will only support candidates who share their views.

The survey also showed that abortion is most important to pro-choice Democrats, younger women and black adults.

"Women are more likely to be committed pro-choice than pro-life voters, whereas men are more equally divided. And while both younger and older women are more likely than men to be pro-choice voters, the rate is particularly high, at 28%, among younger women (those aged 18 to 49)," the poll said.

In contrast, only 18% of women who are 50 or older consider themselves pro-choice. Among men, 11% in both age groups share the position.

Only 2% of Democrats consider themselves pro-life, and 37% said they are pro-choice. The ratio among Republicans is 21% vs 2%.

The poll was conducted from May 1-24 among 1,011 adults in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

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RPT - NGOs Hope New Research Helps US Congress Fight Serious Cancer Drug Shortages

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - Data gathered on the significant drug shortages oncology patients are facing in the United States hopefully can help the Biden administration and lawmakers in developing solutions to address the crisis, advocacy group leaders told Sputnik.

"Yes, there are major drug shortages happening in the US. In particular, cisplatin and carboplatin are in short supply," American Childhood Cancer Organization (ACCO) CEO Ruth Hoffman said.

She also noted that these drugs are used to treat adult cancer patients, who have alternate treatment protocols designed to try to accommodate the drug shortage.

Hoffman emphasized that the ACCO, along with its partners from the Alliance for Childhood

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Cancer (ACC) and other organizations, are holding a survey to highlight the impact of the shortage on pediatric patients.

Out of 170 families that responded to the questions so far, almost half indicated that a drug required for treating their child's cancer experienced a shortage or was unavailable during the course of treatment, she said.

"Some families indicated that they experienced a shortage of vincristine. Approximately 27% of respondents indicated that their child experienced a treatment delay due to the unavailability of a drug during the course of treatment," Hoffman added.

Co-chair of the Alliance for Childhood Cancer Sarah Milberg told Sputnik that the survey's organizers plan to bring its results to the US authorities.

"Our hope is to use this information to work with policymakers in Congress and the Administration on solutions to address cancer drug shortages," Milberg said.

American Cancer Society (ACS) and American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN) CEO Karen Knudsen said in a statement provided to Sputnik that chemotherapy drugs used to treat cancer have returned to the list of top-five drug classes affected by the shortage.

"The shortage of certain cancer drugs has become a serious and life-threatening issue for cancer patients across the country," Knudsen said, adding that some medications do not have an effective alternative.

This situation could lead to delays in treatment and worse outcomes in curing a number of cancers, including triple-negative breast cancer, ovarian cancer and leukemia, she warned.

Knudsen called on US Congress to find out long-term solutions of the issue. She also urged the industry to cooperate with medical practitioners in identifying possible alternatives to ensure that cancer patients' treatments are not delayed.

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US Encounters Record 125 People on Southern Border This Year on Terror Watchlist - CBP

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - US Border Patrol agents have apprehended a record all-time high 125 individuals along the US-Mexico border so far this year who are on the terrorist watchlist, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data revealed.

The CBP data released on Tuesday showed that so far in fiscal year 2023, which started in October, 125 individuals caught crossing illegally into the United States along the southern border are on the US terrorist watchlist.

The previous record was set last year when 98 individuals on the US terrorist watchlist were apprehended on the southern border.

The numbers over the last two years dwarf the number of individuals the Trump administration identified to be on the terrorist watch list who were encountered on the southern border.

Between 2017 to 2020, Border Patrol agents caught 11 people on the southern border who were on the US government's terrorist watchlist.

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Comer Says Expects US Attorney for Delaware to Testify to Lawmakers on Biden Plea Deal

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer told CBS News in an interview that he expects US Attorney for the District of Delaware David Weiss to provide testimony to lawmakers, following the announcement of a plea deal between the Justice Department and Hunter Biden on tax and firearms charges.

On Tuesday, Weiss' office announced that Hunter Biden, son of US President Joe Biden, agreed to plead guilty to two misdemeanor tax offenses and enter into a pre-trial diversion agreement on a felony firearms offense.

"I think that the US Attorney in Delaware will either testify before the House Oversight Committee or the Judiciary Committee," Comer said on Tuesday.

Specifically, Weiss needs to clarify whether the Justice Department's investigation into Hunter Biden continues, Comer said. The statement released by Weiss' office said that the probe is ongoing, while attorneys for Hunter Biden have said that they believe the plea deal resolves the case.

The plea deal, which Comer characterized as a "slap on the wrist," will not halt the Oversight Committee's own probe into alleged corruption by the Biden family, Comer said earlier on Tuesday.

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US House Panel Chair Says Durham Probe Revealed Need for Reforms, Misconduct by FBI

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - An investigation conducted by special counsel John Durham on the FBI's probe into allegations of collusion between former US President Donald Trump and Russia revealed misconduct at the agency and the need for reforms, US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner said after a hearing with Durham.

"Our committee today received testimony from John Durham concerning his report on misconduct at the FBI and the Crossfire Hurricane investigation," Turner said during a press conference on Tuesday. "It was interesting to hear from Mr. Durham that he has concerns that there are reforms that need to go into place and that there are still issues that need to be addressed."

Durham opted not to provide recommendations as part of his final report, but agreed to discuss issues and take questions on the matter from lawmakers, Turner said.

The panel's discussion with Durham on Tuesday was held in a closed session, although he will appear for a public hearing on Wednesday.

Durham's investigation found that the FBI never should have launched its Trump-Russia probe, which it based on "raw, unanalyzed and uncorroborated" intelligence.

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The report also found that the FBI handled the matter differently than it did allegations involving a possible plan by the campaign of Hillary Clinton to vilify Trump by tying him to Russia.
Following the public release of Durham's report, the FBI said that missteps identified by the special counsel could have been prevented with reforms since implemented.
Durham concluded that some of the FBI misconduct occurred at an individualized level, while others were systemic issues, Turner said.
The hearings with Durham come alongside a separate probe by the House Oversight Committee into the alleged weaponization of the federal government, including law enforcement, for political purposes.

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US Awards Raytheon Nearly $1.2Bln for Advanced Mid-Range Missile Production - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - The US awarded defense contractor Raytheon a contract worth nearly $1.2 billion for production of advanced medium range air-to-air missile systems, the Pentagon said in a press release.
"Raytheon Missiles and Defense, Tucson, Arizona, was awarded a $1,151,111,454 firm-fixed-price contract for Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missile (AMRAAM) Production Lot 37. This contract provides for the production of AMRAAM missiles, AMRAAM Telemetry System, initial and field spares, and other production engineering support activities," the release said on Tuesday.
This contract, the release added, involves unclassified Foreign Military Sales to Bahrain, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom, accounting for almost 40% of the total award.

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UN Sanctions Against South Sudan Complicate Deployment of Armed Forces - UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, June 21 (Sputnik) - The sanctions against South Sudan imposed by the UN Security Council have complicated the deployment of armed forces, the Deputy Permanent Representative of the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the UN Anna Evstigneeva said on Tuesday.
"The sanctions regime on South Sudan, the sanctions by the Security Council has noticeably complicated the deployment of unified Armed Forces units and complicated the straightening of governments to security entities," Evstigneeva told the Security Council members.
The parameters of the arms embargo are being eased but that's not enough, she added.
Russia's position at the UN is usually advocating for fewer restrictions and careful monitoring of

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the situation on the ground.

Clashes between Sudan's regular army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces broke out on April 15 after a long period of rising tensions within the military. The United Nations estimates that more than 400 people have died and thousands have been displaced by the ongoing power struggle. Countries have been evacuating their nationals and diplomats from Sudan since Sunday.

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Gannett Sues Google for Deceptive Advertising Practices - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - Gannett, the largest newspaper company in the United States, has filed a federal lawsuit against Google for monopolizing advertisement technology markets by using "unlawful bid-rigging practices," Gannett's President and CEO Mike Reed said in a statement.

"Our lawsuit details more than a dozen significantly anticompetitive and deceptive acts by Google, starting as early as 2009 and persisting to present day," Reed said in the statement on Tuesday. "The core of the case and our position is that Google abuses its control over the ad server monopoly to make it increasingly difficult for rival exchanges to run competitive auctions. Further, Google's exchange rigs its own auctions so Google's advertisers can buy ad space at bargain prices."

Reed noted that digital advertising is a $200 billion business in the United States and Google made about $30 billion in revenue from the sale of advertisement space on publishers' websites in 2022.

"That was six times the digital advertising revenue of all US news publications, combined. In a functioning market, no one would expect the middleman to make more than the content creator," he said.

As a result, there is less investment in online content and fewer ad slots for publishers to sell and advertisers to buy, Reed said.

Google always wins because it takes a growing share of that shrinking pie and available data indicates a fundamental mismatch in the online marketplace, Reed said.

"Content providers, including hundreds of our local news outlets, create enormous value but see none of the financial upside advertisers use because Google, as middleman, has monopolized the markets for important software and technology products that publishers and advertisers use to buy and sell ad space," Reed said.

Google controls 90% of the market for "publisher ad services," which publishers use to offer ad space for sale. Google also controls more than 60% of the market for "ad exchanges," which run auctions among advertisers bidding for ad space on publishers' websites.

In addition, Google controls the largest source of advertisers bidding on exchanges, Reed said.

"For Gannett, 60% of all buyers come through Google. The obviously painful result is that Google unfairly controls and manipulates all sides of each online advertising transaction," Reed

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US Among States Proposing Increase of Organization of American States' Budget by 9% -Envoy

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) – The United States and other member states of the Organization of American States (OAS) are negotiating a 9% increase of its budget to about $91 million per year amid financial challenges and a changing international environment, US Representative to the organization Francisco O. Mora said on Tuesday.

"We [the United States] propose, along with other states, to increase the budget of the OAS for the first time in over a decade," Mora said during a press briefing. "The budget is going from about $83 million to about $91 million, so it's about an eight or nine percent increase that will allow to sustain the organization at its current operating level."

According to Mora, the budget of the OAS in 1984 was $94 million dollars, while the budget in 2023 amounts to only $83 million.

The OAS had to make some "bad cuts" of its programs because there have been no budget increases in more than a decade, Mora added.

The 53rd General Assembly of the Organization of American States will take place between June 21 and 23, 2023, in Washington, D.C.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) -

US-CHINA RELATIONS

* The United States remains confident military-to-military communications with China will resume at some point, Defense department spokesperson Sabrina Singh said on Tuesday.
* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he used his recent visit to Beijing to deliver the United States' "deep concerns" over China's military and intelligence activities in Cuba.
* Blinken's visit to Beijing is an issue that concerns exclusively the US-China relationship, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

HUNTER BIDEN COURT CASE

* President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, has agreed to plead guilty to two federal tax charges and has reached a deal with the US Justice Department to settle a separate firearms charge, a court document revealed on Tuesday.

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* The US Justice Department is continuing its investigation into Hunter Biden's activities despite reaching a plea agreement on charges of tax evasion and a separate deal to settle a firearms charge, the US Attorney for the District of Delaware said on Tuesday.

ENERGY MARKETS

* Russian energy company Novatek expects its gas production to remain at the level of 82 billion cubic meters in 2023, CEO Leonid Mikhelson said on Tuesday.
* The production of liquefied natural gas (LNG) at Russia's Yamal LNG plant is expected to be less than 20 million tonnes in 2023, with two lines being in service, Mikhelson said.
* Novatek expects its gas production to remain at the level of 82 billion cubic meters in 2023, Mikhelson said.
* The Kazakh oil and gas company KazMunayGas (KMG) and Rosneft Deutschland have signed a deal on monthly supply of 100,000 tonnes of oil to the PCK Raffinerie refinery in German town Schwedt until the end of 2023, KMG said.

TITANIC TOURIST SUBMERSIBLE SEARCH

* The US Coast Guard said on Tuesday that the efforts to locate the submersible that went missing on a dive to the wreck of the Titanic have not yielded any results.
* The French National Institute for Ocean Science has sent its robot scout to search for the missing submersible, French media reported.

BLACK SEA GRAIN AGREEMENT

* The United Nations has admitted that it can do nothing with regard to three of the five key issues Russia wants resolved to extend the grain exports agreement, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said on Tuesday.
* Russia believes that July 18 will be the day of the grain agreement's termination, Vershinin said.
* The United States hopes the grain exports agreement will be extended despite Russia's signals to the contrary, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The United States will announce a new "robust" package of military aid for Ukraine tomorrow, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.
* The European Union is currently lacking critical material to produce ammunition for Ukraine and therefore needs to address constraints outside the bloc, if it wants to keep providing Kiev with military aid, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.
* Ukraine has lost nearly 500 military as a result of offensive attempts in the South Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk directions over the past day, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* Ukrainian troops have launched a total of 263 attacks on the positions of the Russian armed forces in the Donetsk, South Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia directions since June 4, but all of them have been successfully repelled, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

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

Zelenskyy to Address OAS General Assembly in Washington This Week - US Envoy

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will address the upcoming General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS), Francisco Mora, US Permanent Representative to the OAS told reporters on Tuesday.

"We expect President Zelenskyy to speak before the General Assembly," Mora said, adding that there is no date for it yet.

The 53rd General Assembly of the OAS will be held on June 21 and 23 in Washington, DC.

The event will be attended by the Ministers of Foreigners Affairs of Canada, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru among others.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is also expected to attend.

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China In Talks With Cuba on Creating New Joint Military Base on Island - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - China and Cuba are negotiating the potential establishment of a joint military base on the island, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday citing US officials and intelligence documents.

The report said the talks between the two sides are at an advanced stage but have not ended.

Beijing wants to establish a joint military base on Cuba's northern coast which concerns Washington because it would place Chinese troops and its military operations about 100 miles away from Florida's coast, the report said.

The United States has reached out to Cuba in an effort to interrupt the potential deal, according to the report.

Earlier on Tuesday, Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh declined to comment on this specific development but added that China continues to express interest in expanding its military presence in the Western Hemisphere and the United States will continue to monitor those plans.

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Elon Musk to Meet With Indian Prime Minister Modi on Tuesday - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - US billionaire entrepreneur and Tesla CEO Elon Musk is scheduled to meet with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New York City, CNBC reported on Tuesday.

Modi and Musk are slated to discuss Tesla's plans to set up a manufacturing base in India in

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addition to possible incentives for battery production, the report said.

Musk has previously sought opportunities to set up operations for Tesla in India, but any plans have so far not materialized.

Musk's meeting with Modi comes as US manufacturers and multinationals face pressure to broaden their supply chain footprint and expand beyond China. It also dovetails nicely with India's plans to bring more electric vehicles into the country as it tries to keep up with Europe and China, the report said.

Modi is set to visit the United States from June 20-23, including stops in New York City and Washington, where he will meet with President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

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Biden Says He's 'Very Proud' of His Son When Asked About Hunter Biden's Plea Deal

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he is “very proud” of his son when he was asked about Hunter Biden’s plea deal.

“I am very proud of my son,” Biden told reporters during a meeting on Artificial Intelligence with civil society leaders.

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US to Send Extra $172Mln in Aid to Sudan, Neighbors in Refugee Crisis - Blinken

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - The US government will be sending an additional $172 million in humanitarian aid to Sudan and neighboring East African nations to further help them deal with their worsening refugee crisis, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The United States announced nearly $172 million in additional humanitarian assistance for the people of Sudan and neighboring countries experiencing the impacts of the ongoing humanitarian crisis," the statement said

The new humanitarian assistance boosts the total US aid for the region to more than $550 million this fiscal year for Sudan and neighboring countries, including Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic, Blinken said.

"For this humanitarian assistance to have the greatest possible impact and save countless lives, Sudanese authorities must remove the onerous bureaucratic and security restrictions that are hindering shipments of lifesaving aid," Blinken insisted.

Life-saving supplies were being held at customs and routed through long, dangerous roads in order to reach communities most in need and aid workers were unable to get the visas required to enter the country and to deliver assistance, he said.

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Letter Dated 2018 Warned of 'Negative Outcomes' of Titanic Submarine's Approach - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - A letter sent to OceanGate CEO Stockton Rush in March 2018 by the Marine Technology Society (MTS) warned of the potential for "negative outcomes" based on the approach adopted for the company's submarine expedition to the Titanic shipwreck, The New York Times reported on Tuesday, citing a copy of the letter.

The report comes following the disappearance of OceanGate's TITAN submarine during an expedition to the Titanic shipwreck site on Sunday.

"This letter is sent on behalf of our industry members who have collectively expressed unanimous concern regarding the development of TITAN and the planned Titanic Expedition. Our apprehension is that the current experimental approach adopted by OceanGate could result in negative outcomes (from minor to catastrophic) that would have serious consequences for everyone in the industry," the letter said.

OceanGate's representation that the TITAN design will meet DNV-GL safety accreditation standards was, at a minimum, misleading to the public and breaches industry-wide professional codes of conduct, the letter said.

MTS Manned Underwater Vehicles Committee Chairman Will Kohnen reportedly said that Rusk called him after receiving the letter to say that industry regulations were stifling innovation.

A search and rescue operation for the missing submarine is currently underway, featuring support from the US and Canadian militaries.

The Titanic wreck is located about 370 miles off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada, at a depth of approximately 2.5 miles.

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Navy Sending Experts, Deep Ocean Salvage System to Search For Titanic Submersible-Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - The United States Navy is deploying its subject matter experts and the appropriate assets to assists in the search and rescue operation for the submersible that went missing on a dive to the wreck of the Titanic in the Atlantic, Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Tuesday.

"In addition to that, the Navy has been in touch with the Coast Guard and is working to provide personnel such as subject matter experts and assets as quickly as possible," Singh said.

The US Navy is also deploying a "Flyaway Deep Ocean Salvage System (FADOSS)," which can lift up to 60,000 pounds, CNN reported, citing a spokesperson.

The equipment and personnel are expected to arrive at St. John's by Tuesday night to support

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the US Coast Guard, according to the media outlet.

The US Coast Guard said on Tuesday that efforts to locate the submersible have not yielded any results as the remaining oxygen suspected available on board the vessel is set to dwindle down in 40 hours.

On Sunday, the submarine of the OceanGate Expeditions company went missing during an expedition to the Titanic wreckage in an area about 900 miles east of Cape Cod in the North Atlantic, at a depth of approximately 13,000 feet. The submarine has a capacity for five people. A search and rescue operation has been underway since Monday morning.

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US House Oversight Leaders Will View Additional Biden Bribery Allegation Docs - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer and Ranking Member Jamie Raskin will view two additional FBI documents related to allegations of bribery against US President Joe Biden and his family, Fox News reported on Tuesday.

The House Oversight Committee is conducting a probe into allegations of corruption and influence peddling by the Biden family, including claims by an FBI informant that then-Vice President Biden and his son Hunter Biden received millions of dollars from a Ukrainian businessman to help end a probe into his energy company.

The allegations stem from a FBI FD-1023 form, which details the confidential informant's claims about the Biden family's corruption. Lawmakers on the panel have previously been granted access to information from the FD-1023 form.

The two new documents the panel heads will view were referenced in footnotes of the FD-1023, the report said, adding that there is no additional information on what they may contain.

Earlier on Tuesday, the US Justice Department said its own probe into Hunter Biden continues despite a tentative deal to avoid prison time in exchange for pleading guilty to two misdemeanor tax offenses, as well as entering into a pre-trial diversion agreement on a felony firearm offense.

The plea deal will not impact the House Oversight Committee's probe into the Biden family's alleged criminal activity, Comer said in a statement.

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Fox News Says Will Host First Republican 2024 Presidential Debate on August 23

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - Fox News will host the first Republican Party primary debate for the 2024 presidential election on August 23, the news network said on Tuesday.

Anchors Bret Baier and Martha MacCallum will moderate the debate, which will be held in

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Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the network said.

The primary debate will be the first held by Republicans as part of the 2024 presidential election cycle.

The field of candidates is led by former US President Donald Trump, followed by contenders including Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, former Vice President Mike Pence and former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie.

If Republicans were to nominate Trump in 2024, it would mark the first time the party had nominated the same candidate for president three elections in a row.

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Pentagon Says Ukraine Valuation Error Totaled $6.2Bln, Unused Funds Now Free to Use

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - A series of valuation errors by the United States has made available more than $6 billion in additional military aid to provide Ukraine through presidential drawdown authority (PDA) packages, Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Tuesday.

“During the department’s regular oversight of our execution of presidential drawdown authority for Ukraine, we discovered inconsistencies in equipment valuation for Ukraine. In a significant number of cases, services used replacement costs rather than net book value, thereby overestimating the value of the equipment drawn down from US stocks and provided to Ukraine,” Singh said during a press briefing. “We have confirmed that for FY23 the final calculation is $3.6 billion, and for FY22 it is $2.6 billion, for a combined total of $6.2 billion.”

The funds have become a “pot of money” accessible for reallocation into future PDA packages, Singh said. The errors have not impacted the packages or flow of weapons to Ukraine, Singh said.

In May, Singh confirmed to Sputnik that the Pentagon discovered equipment valuation inconsistencies in aid provided to Ukraine, which at that time was reported to total just $3 billion in overvaluation.

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NGOs Hope New Research Helps US Congress Fight Serious Cancer Drug Shortages

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - Data gathered on the significant drug shortages oncology patients are facing in the United States hopefully can help the Biden administration and lawmakers in developing solutions to address the crisis, advocacy group leaders told Sputnik.

"Yes, there are major drug shortages happening in the US. In particular, cisplatin and carboplatin are in short supply," American Childhood Cancer Organization (ACCO) CEO Ruth Hoffman said.

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She also noted that these drugs are used to treat adult cancer patients, who have alternate treatment protocols designed to try to accommodate the drug shortage.

Hoffman emphasized that the ACCO, along with its partners from the Alliance for Childhood Cancer (ACC) and other organizations, are holding a survey to highlight the impact of the shortage on pediatric patients.

Out of 170 families that responded to the questions so far, almost half indicated that a drug required for treating their child's cancer experienced a shortage or was unavailable during the course of treatment, she said.

"Some families indicated that they experienced a shortage of vincristine. Approximately 27% of respondents indicated that their child experienced a treatment delay due to the unavailability of a drug during the course of treatment," Hoffman added.

Co-chair of the Alliance for Childhood Cancer Sarah Milberg told Sputnik that the survey's organizers plan to bring its results to the US authorities.

"Our hope is to use this information to work with policymakers in Congress and the Administration on solutions to address cancer drug shortages," Milberg said.

American Cancer Society (ACS) and American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN) CEO Karen Knudsen said in a statement provided to Sputnik that chemotherapy drugs used to treat cancer have returned to the list of top-five drug classes affected by the shortage.

"The shortage of certain cancer drugs has become a serious and life-threatening issue for cancer patients across the country," Knudsen said, adding that some medications do not have an effective alternative.

This situation could lead to delays in treatment and worse outcomes in curing a number of cancers, including triple-negative breast cancer, ovarian cancer and leukemia, she warned.

Knudsen called on US Congress to find out long-term solutions of the issue. She also urged the industry to cooperate with medical practitioners in identifying possible alternatives to ensure that cancer patients' treatments are not delayed.

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Guterres Urges Grain Deal Parties to Accelerate Operations, Salvage Agreement

UNITED NATIONS, June 20 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres calls on parties to the Black Sea grain deal to adhere to the agreement and ease the flow of ships from Ukrainian ports, spokesperson Stephan Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"The Secretary-General calls on the parties to accelerate operations and urges them to do their utmost to ensure the continuation of this vital agreement, which is up for renewal on 17 July," the statement said.

Guterres is disappointed by the slowing pace of inspections and the exclusion of the port of Yuzhny/Pivdennyi from the grain deal, which led to a drop in foodstuff supply to world markets, it added.

In mid-May, the grain deal was extended until July 17 without any changes. The Russian Foreign Ministry warned that Moscow would block the extension of the deal if its concerns about

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the implementation of clauses on Russian agricultural exports were not addressed.

On Tuesday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said Moscow believes that the deal will be terminated on July 18. At the same time, Russia does not exclude new face-to-face contacts with the UN on the grain deal, the diplomat added.

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Swedbank Latvia Agrees to Pay $3.4Mln to Settle Russia Sanctions Violations - Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - Swedbank Latvia has agreed to pay $3.43 million to settle violations related to sanctions imposed on Russia, the US Treasury Department said on Tuesday.

"Swedbank Latvia has agreed to remit $3,430,900 to settle its potential civil liability for 386 apparent violations of OFAC's [Office of Foreign Assets Control] Crimea sanctions," the statement said.

In 2015 and 2016, a customer of Swedbank Latvia, which is a subsidiary of Stockholm-based Swedbank AB, used its e-banking platform from an internet protocol address in Crimea. This customer sent payments to persons in Crimea though US correspondent banks, the statement said.

The OFAC noted that Swedbank Latvia's violations were not voluntarily self-disclosed and were non-egregious, the statement said.

Crimea rejoined Russia after holding a referendum in March 2014, which came after a Western-supported coup d'etat took place in Ukraine. The United States and other Western countries imposed sanctions against those doing business with Crimea.

Moscow has repeatedly said that the residents of Crimea voted democratically and in full compliance with international law and the UN Charter to reunite with Russia. According to Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Crimean issue is closed.

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US Convicts 3 for Stalking Chinese Nationals on Behalf of Beijing - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - A federal jury in New York City has convicted three individuals of stalking Chinese citizens in the United States and conspiring to act as illegal agents of the Chinese government, the US Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"(A) federal jury in Brooklyn, New York, convicted three defendants on multiple counts of a superseding indictment charging them with acting and conspiring to act in the United States as illegal agents of the People's Republic of China (PRC), without prior notification to the Attorney General," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Michael McMahon, 55, of Mahwah, New Jersey, was convicted of acting as an illegal agent of

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China and of participating in a conspiracy to commit interstate stalking and interstate stalking, the release said.

Congying Zheng, 27, of Brooklyn, New York, was convicted of conspiracy to commit interstate stalking and interstate stalking, the release said.

Zhu Yong, 66, of Queens, New York, was convicted of conspiracy to act and acting as an illegal agent of China, conspiracy to commit interstate stalking and interstate stalking, the release said.

According to court documents, McMahon - a retired New York Police Department sergeant working as a private investigator - and Zhu knowingly acted at the direction of Chinese government officials to conduct surveillance and engage in a campaign to harass and stalk residents of the United States to return to China, the release added.

McMahon faces up to 20 years in prison; Zhu faces up to 25 years in prison; and Zheng faces up to 10 years in prison, according to the release.

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US DoJ Says Examining Bank Merger Policy to Protect Consumers After Industry Turmoil

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's top antitrust official has put US banks on notice that laws for mergers in the industry are being scrutinized to ensure consumers have freedom of choice versus the market power wielded by financial institutions.

"We are in the process of reorienting the Antitrust Division's role to focus on providing our advisory opinion as required by the statute and not remedies agreements with parties," Jonathan Kanter, assistant attorney general for antitrust, said in a speech at the Brookings Institution, a Washington-based think tank, on Tuesday. "The goal is for this revised procedure to faithfully effectuate the Department's limited — but essential — statutory role in bank antitrust enforcement and facilitate the banking agencies' analysis of competition and other factors."

Quoting President Joe Biden's own thoughts on the matter, Kanter said the president has instructed the Department of Justice and federal banking agencies to revitalize bank merger oversight to "ensure Americans have choices among financial institutions and to guard against excessive market power."

The antitrust official added: "Against this backdrop, it is appropriate for us to reassess whether the prevailing approach to bank merger enforcement is fit for purpose given current market realities."

Those realities include the worst banking crisis to hit the United States in years after the collapse of a couple of regional banks in March following a sudden mass withdrawal of money by depositors fearing a loss of confidence in those institutions.

"The time is indeed ripe for us to re-examine how we assess bank mergers," Kanter said. "Of course, I would be remiss if I did not address the elephant in the room. We are examining bank merger policy against the backdrop of an industry that has experienced some recent turmoil."

Since beginning his term of office in 2021, Biden has made competition a focus of his administration, paying special attention to the banking industry, which the president says needs enhanced competition to protect consumers. To achieve this, the Federal Reserve, the Federal

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Deposit Insurance Corporation and Office of the Comptroller of the Currency have been mandated to update existing bank merger guidelines.

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Pentagon Says Confident That Military-to-Military Communications With China to Resume

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) – Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Tuesday that the United States remains confident that military-to-military communications with China will resume at some point.

"We remain confident that military-to-military communications will resume at some point and, hopefully, with [US] Secretary [of State Antony] Blinken's visit just this week, that helps sort of unlock some of these communications. But again, this is something we encourage, we want to speak to our PRC [the People's Republic of China] counterparts," Singh said during a press briefing.

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US Designates 2 Islamic State Leaders, 2 South Sudanese Officials - Blinken

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned two leaders of the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) - Arkan Ahmad Abbas al-Matuti and Nawaf Ahmad Alwan al-Rashidi - and has designated them as global terrorists who have also committed sexual violence against Yezidi women, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"Today, the Department of State is designating two ISIS [Islamic State] leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists, under Executive Order 13224. Both individuals have committed sexual violence against Yezidis and were responsible for the abduction and enslavement of Yezidi women and girls. More than 2,700 women and children, mainly Yezidis, remain unaccounted for," Blinken said in a press release.

Al-Matuti is a senior field military commander in Wilayat al-Jazirah who sold Yezidi women and girls and took several Yezidi captives as sexual slaves, the release said.

Al-Rashidi manages financial payments to Islamic State members and widows. He is alleged to have been involved in planning, coordinating and conducting several attacks in Syria between 2018-2019 and was responsible for the sexual slavery and rape of Yezidi women in Sinjar, Iraq, the release added.

The State Department has designated concurrently with the Treasury Department two South Sudanese officials - James Nando and Alfred Futuyo - for their alleged involvement in conflict-related sexual violence.

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US Air Travel Hits 2019 High, Passenger Count Shows

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - US air travel has shot back to pre-pandemic highs with the passenger count at the country's airports hitting close to three million a day, data from the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) showed.

A total of 2.785 million passengers were screened through US airports on June 16, the highest in a day since 2019, TSA data from Friday showed.

"Air travel is certainly back as consumers return to the skies after years of COVID-related curbs," economist Adam Button wrote on the ForexLive forum.

Button also noted that lower airfares for the summer versus earlier in the year could result in further highs in air travel, possibly reaching a peak of 2.8 million in the run-up to the July 4th US Independence Day holiday.

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Conflict in Ukraine Causing Shortfall of 11Mln Tons of Wheat Exports - USAID

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - The conflict in Ukraine has caused a shortfall of nearly 11 million tons of wheat exports, which traditionally go to the poorest countries in the world, US Agency for International Development (USAID) Deputy Administrator Isobel Coleman said on Tuesday.

"Today, we are missing around 11 million tons of wheat exports that traditionally have gone to the poorest countries," Coleman said in an online conversation hosted by the Washington Post.

In response, producers such as the United States and Australia have begun to produce more wheat to close the existing gap, but the poorest countries are unable to buy it because of very high prices, Coleman said.

"So, losing that wheat that comes out of the Black Sea, shipped through the Suez Canal, directly to, say, the Horn of Africa at a lower price point - it is a really big hit for food insecure people in these parts of the world," Coleman said.

Coleman pointed out the importance of the United Nations-brokered grain exports agreement - formally known as the Black Sea Initiative - that allows for feeding the populations in countries in need.

However, she accused Russia of creating obstacles to implementing the agreement and threatening not to extend it.

Moscow has repeatedly criticized the implementation of the agreement, saying provisions pertaining to Russian grain and fertilizer exports have not been implemented as agreed due to Western sanctions and that a significant portion of the grain was ending up in developed nations.

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The agreement was concluded in July 2022 to facilitate safe export of agricultural products from ports in the Black Sea during the hostilities in Ukraine. It includes a memorandum of understanding between Russia and the United Nations to unblock Russian grain and fertilizer exports via the Black Sea.

In mid-May, the grain deal was extended until July 17 without any changes. However, Russia warned it would not extend the agreement if its concerns about the implementation of clauses on Russian agricultural exports were not addressed.

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US Coast Guard Says 'No Results' Yet in Search for Titanic Tourist Submersible

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - The US Coast Guard said on Tuesday that efforts to locate the submersible that went missing on a dive to the wreck of the Titanic have not yielded any results as the remaining oxygen suspected available on board the vessel is set to dwindle down in 40 hours.

"Today, [our] search efforts have not yielded any results," a US Coast Guard official said during a press conference.

The USCG currently estimates the available breathable air on the vessel to be somewhere around 40 hours.

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Trump Says Will Restore Impoundment Power of US President to Unilaterally Cut Spending

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said on Tuesday that he will restore the power of impoundment to the presidency and use the authority to unilaterally cut spending if re-elected in 2024.

"For 200 years under our system of government, it was undisputed that the President had the Constitutional power to stop unnecessary spending through what is known as impoundment," Trump said in a statement. "When I return to the White House, I will do everything I can to challenge the Impoundment Control Act in court, and if necessary, get Congress to overturn it."

Trump said the impoundment authorities were "wrongfully curtailed" by the Impoundment Control Act of 1974 in a violation of the principle of the separation of powers.

Trump also said he will challenge the act's constitutionality and work with Congress to overturn the legislation.

In preparation for restoring the impoundment power, Trump said he will direct every federal agency on day one in office to identify portions of their budgets that can be saved through "efficiencies and waste reduction."

However, cuts will not impact Medicare or Social Security, Trump also said.

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Reasserting the impoundment authority restores "critical negotiating leverage" with Congress to keep spending under control, Trump said.

"We are going to get the Warmongers and the Globalists out of our government. With impoundment, we can simply choke off the money," Trump added.

In 2020, the Government Accountability Office found that the Trump administration violated the Impoundment Control Act by withholding congressionally-approved military aid to Ukraine.

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ANALYSIS - Pressure on US Dollar, Debt Likely Drove Blinken Effort to Mend Ties With China

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken likely sought to stabilize relations with Beijing because Washington has begun to feel pressure from China's withdrawal of support for the dollar and the enormous US government deficit, analysts told Sputnik.

From June 18-19, Blinken visited China for talks with President Xi Jinping, Director of the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Office Wang Yi and other senior officials. During the trip, the secretary highlighted the importance of maintaining open channels of communication and made clear that the United States will responsibly manage the competition so that the relationship does not veer into conflict.

"The United States is feeling itself squeezed and probably needs to make nice with China," Krainer Analytics founder Alex Krainer told Sputnik. "The United States has painted itself into a corner with China: they want to do their usual destabilization/regime change thing, except China is still the second largest creditor the United States has, and it has been getting rid of the US debt quite aggressively over the last two years."

Now China and Russia are increasingly shifting to national currencies in their trade and that could lead to many other nations abandoning the dollar and triggering a huge financial crisis in the United States, Krainer warned.

"If they [the Chinese] continue to dump US treasuries, they could depress its price, push interest rates higher and trigger a selling stampede by other nations as well. This is one of the biggest risks that the United States is facing," he said.

Independent Institute Center for Peace & Liberty President Ivan Eland believes that Blinken's trip was meant to stop the relationship between Washington and Beijing from deteriorating even further.

"The Biden administration was concerned that US relations with China were sinking to dangerous levels. His meeting with Xi, itself noteworthy, did not produce many tangible breakthroughs but did seem to stop the free fall in bilateral ties," he said.

A mild thaw in relations could set in, but there are still no indications of any major progress on defusing potential sources of serious hostilities, Eland cautioned.

"It is likely now that US-Chinese economic relations will get better. However, [there is] still no Chinese agreement for military-to-military ties improving - including deconfliction of military operations," he said.

BLINKEN 'BOWS' TO CHINA ON TAIWAN

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Blinken's trip comes as tensions between the US and China reached new heights over Washington continuing to approve military aid packages for Taiwan. Beijing opposes any official contacts of foreign states with Taipei and considers Chinese sovereignty over the island indisputable.

Blinken at a briefing said the US does not support Taiwanese independence, a public display that enraged hawkish members of Congress, despite the fact the US top diplomat was basically reiterating Washington's long-held official position.

US Senator Marsha Blackburn in a tweet said the Biden administration failed to "stand up" to China, while congressman Ben Cline called Blinken's statement "a dangerous display of weakness" on the world stage.

Trend Research Journal publisher and former Wall Street hedge fund manager Gerald Celente said the United States "bowed" to Chinese pressure because business is more important than "ramping up conflict."

In terms of the future, University of Pittsburgh Professor of International Affairs Michael Brenner believes no serious dialogue is possible if the US continues its economic war against China.

Despite the need for a new approach, however, the hawks in Congress and the White House will continue down the same path, Brenner told Sputnik.

"The neocons have no reverse gear or adaptability to discomforting reality," Brenner added.

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UN Continues to Work With Parties on Grain Deal Before July 17 Expiration - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, June 20 (Sputnik) - The United Nations continues its negotiations with Russia and Ukraine on the grain deal prior to its expiration on July 17, the UN Spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Tuesday.

“We continue to work with the parties, including the Russian Federation and Ukraine to ensure we can continue with the work of the Black Sea Initiative and the Memorandum of Understanding on Russian food and fertilizer,” Haq told the briefing.

We are going to continue as long as we can, he added.

Earlier today, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said that Russia believes that July 18 will be the day of the grain deal’s termination. At the same time, Russia does not exclude new face-to-face contacts with the UN on the grain deal, the diplomat added.

In mid-May, the grain deal was extended until July 17 without any changes. The Russian Foreign Ministry warned that Moscow would block the extension of the deal if its concerns about the implementation of clauses on Russian agricultural exports were not addressed.

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US Hopes India Will Continue to Purchase Russian Oil at Price Cap Level - White House

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes India will continue to purchase Russian oil at or below the level of the price cap imposed by the collective West, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"The Indians should speak for themselves when it comes to the oil they buy, but we certainly hope that they will continue to purchase it at or below the price cap levels, which they have," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Last week, Indian Oil Executive Director Vinod Kumar said India will increase imports of Russian oil and its share in the total volume will rise to 30% in 2023.

In December 2022, the Group of Seven (G7) countries, Australia and the European Union imposed a price cap of $60 per barrel on Russian crude oil transported by sea, thereby blocking the transport of oil bought at higher prices.

Russia responded by not selling its oil to countries supporting the price cap.

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US Hopes Black Sea Grain Initiative Will Be Extended - White House

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, will be extended despite Russia's signals to the contrary if certain terms are not implemented, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"We've seen the comments that are deeply unfortunate, that Russia would signal that there may not be an extension," Kirby said during a press briefing, in response to a question from Sputnik. "We certainly hope that it will get extended."

The agreement, negotiated by the United Nations and Turkey in July 2022 to facilitate the export of agricultural products from ports in the Black Sea amid the conflict in Ukraine, was last extended in mid-May through July 17.

Kirby said the United States will continue to support the United Nations and Turkey as appropriate to secure an extension of the agreement.

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US-India Defense Ties 'Very Robust,' Will Strengthen During Modi Visit - White House

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - Defense ties between the United States and India are robust and set to further improve during a visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the US this week, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"There is a very robust defense cooperation between the United States and India, and we are

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working, and we'll continue to work, to see if we can improve and deepen that defense cooperation," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Modi is set to visit the US from June 20-23, including stops in New York City and Washington, where he will meet with US President Joe Biden. Modi is also scheduled to meet with US Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Modi and US officials will discuss expanding defense cooperation into areas such as cyber, space and emerging technologies, Kirby said.

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Mayorkas, DHS Scrap Trump Policy, Allow 337,000 Illegals to Stay in US - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has scrapped another Donald Trump policy to deport illegal immigrants and has renewed temporary protection status for more than 337,000 illegals from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Nepal and Honduras, US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced in a public statement on Tuesday.

"The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) today posted Federal Register notices extending the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designations of El Salvador, Honduras, Nepal, and Nicaragua for 18 months," the statement said.

On June 13, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas announced he was going to rescind the 2017 and 2018 terminations of those TPS designations and instead extend the reinstated designations for 18 months, the USCIS noted.

"The extension allows approximately 239,000 current TPS beneficiaries [from El Salvador] to re-register to retain TPS through March 9, 2025. ...The extension [also] allows approximately 76,000 existing TPS beneficiaries [from Honduras] to re-register to retain TPS through July 5, 2025," the statement said.

The extension also covers 14,500 TPS beneficiaries from Nepal and 4,000 more from Nicaragua, the USCIS said.

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Biden, India's Modi to Discuss Ukraine Conflict During Meeting on Thursday - White House

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi are expected to discuss the conflict in Ukraine during their meeting in Washington on Thursday, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.

"There's no doubt in my mind that the war in Ukraine will come up this week during the state visit with Prime Minister Modi," Kirby said during a press briefing on Tuesday.

Modi's trip to the United States will begin in New York, where he will lead the International Day of Yoga celebrations at the United Nations headquarters on Wednesday. Modi will then arrive in

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Washington the following day for his meeting with Biden.

Kirby said Biden and Modi will have "deliverables" to announce regarding defense cooperation, climate change, technology, space and cyber issues.

Modi will also address the US Congress on Thursday at the invitation of Congressional leaders.

In addition, the Indian prime minister will attend a luncheon hosted by US Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

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Boeing, China Airlines Finalize Order for Eight B-797 Dreamliner Jets - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - Boeing and China Airlines have finalized an order for the latter to purchase eight 797 Dreamliner jets, the US aircraft manufacturer said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Boeing [NYSE: BA] and China Airlines today finalized an order for eight 787-9 Dreamliners at the 2023 Paris Air Show," the statement said.

The heads of Boeing and China Airlines, Stan Deal and Su-Chien Hsieh, signed the agreement during the 2023 Paris Air Show, the statement said.

The new order would allow China Airlines to introduce a Dreamliner aircraft fleet over the next several years, the statement quoted Boeing as saying.

This agreement also enables the Chinese air carrier to reduce fuel use and emissions by 20%, the statement said.

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Most US Voters Believe Fauci Lied About US Ties to Gain-of-Function Virus Research - Poll

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - A plurality of US voters believe that former chief presidential medical advisor Anthony Fauci lied about the United States' ties to gain-of-function research on viruses, such as that conducted on coronaviruses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Tuesday.

Most respondents, 47%, believe that Fauci lied about the US government funding gain-of-function research, while 39% believe he told the truth, the poll said. Another 15% of respondents were unsure.

Most voters also suspect that US officials covered up China's role in the COVID-19 pandemic, the poll found.

The very first cases of COVID-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, emerged among Chinese scientists conducting gain-of-function research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, US government officials purportedly said, according to reports released earlier this month.

Earlier this year, US President Joe Biden signed legislation urging the release of information on

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sick researchers from the Wuhan lab, including whether the researchers were involved in coronavirus research.

In February, a House subcommittee on the COVID-19 pandemic requested information from Fauci and other senior US government health officials on the novel coronavirus's origins, having already determined that US taxpayer dollars were given to the Wuhan lab to conduct gain-of-function research.

Scientists conduct gain-of-function research to enable pathogens to be more transmissible in an effort to find out more about possible preventative measures.

Fauci was aware of the research at the start of the pandemic and may have acted to conceal that information by downplaying the "lab leak" theory of the pandemic's origins, according to the panel.

Fauci has testified under oath to Congress that he and his colleagues did not engage in gain-of-function research and if some did, they did so according to established rules.

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US Justice Dept. Says Hunter Biden Probe Continues Despite Reaching Plea Agreement

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department is continuing its investigation into Hunter Biden, son of US President Joe Biden, despite reaching a plea agreement on tax charges and a separate deal to settle a firearms charge, the US Attorney for the District of Delaware's office said on Tuesday.

US Attorney for the District of Delaware David Weiss filed charges against Biden on Tuesday for two misdemeanor tax offenses and a felony firearm offense, the office said in a statement. Biden agreed to plead guilty to the tax offenses and enter into a pre-trial diversion agreement on the firearms offense, the statement said.

"Hunter Biden is charged with two violations of failure to pay income tax and one violation of unlawful possession of a firearm by a person prohibited," the statement said. "The investigation is ongoing."

The tax charges carry maximum sentences of one year in prison each and the firearm charge 10 years, the statement said. Biden is not expected to face jail time under the plea agreement, although a judge will have the final say, US media reported on Tuesday, citing sources familiar with the matter.

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US Imposes Sanctions on 2 South Sudanese Officials for Alleged Sexual Violence - Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - The United States imposed sanctions on South Sudanese officials James Nando and Alfred Futuyo for their alleged involvement in conflict-related sexual

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violence, the US Department of the Treasury said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Today, following the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated two South Sudanese individuals involved in conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan. The two individuals designated today have abused their positions of political and military authority to carry out acts of sexual violence against citizens of South Sudan," the release said.

The US government alleges that Nando, who served as a major-general in the South Sudan People's Defense Forces, did not prevent, discourage or punish troops responsible for sexual violence with respect to women and girls, including for at least 64 instances of rape and sexual slavery between June and September 2021 in Western Equatoria, the release said.

The US government also alleges that forces under the command of Western Equatoria Governor Alfred Futuyo abducted 887 civilians and raped or gang-raped 43 of them as part of numerous attacks in Western Equatoria, the release added.

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Trudeau Opens Selection Process for Next Supreme Court of Canada Judge - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has opened the process to select the next judge who will serve on the Supreme Court of Canada, the Office of the Prime Minister said on Tuesday.

The Canadian Judicial Council announced on June 12 that Supreme Court Justice Russell Brown decided to retire after serving on the bench since 2015 amid an investigation into alleged misconduct during an event in the United States in January.

"The Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, today opened the process to select the next justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, to fill the vacancy created by the retirement of Justice Russell Brown. Applications from qualified candidates will be accepted until Friday, July 21, 2023," the Office of the Prime Minister said in a statement.

Accordingly, a non-partisan Independent Advisory Board for Supreme Court of Canada Judicial Appointments will be tasked with identifying jurists of the highest caliber, who are also bilingual and representative of the Canada's diversity, the statement said.

Upon concluding the selection process, the Independent Advisory Board will review the submitted applications and forward a shortened list of the highest qualified candidates retained for Trudeau's consideration.

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US House Oversight Committee Head Says Panel Will Continue Biden Probe Despite Guilty Plea

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WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - The US House Oversight Committee will continue its probe into alleged corruption by the family of US President Joe Biden despite his son, Hunter Biden, reaching a plea deal with the Justice Department on tax and gun charges, Committee Chairman James Comer said on Tuesday.

Biden agreed to plead guilty to two counts of willful failure to pay federal income tax and reached a pretrial diversion agreement on a felony charge of possessing a firearm as an unlawful drug user, court documents filed earlier on Tuesday revealed.

"These charges against Hunter Biden and sweetheart plea deal have no impact on the Oversight Committee's investigation. We will not rest until the full extent of President Biden's involvement in the family's schemes are revealed," Comer said in a statement.

Comer characterized the plea agreement as a "slap on the wrist" amid the panel's investigation into potential corruption, influence peddling, and bribery by the Biden family.

The plea deal resolves the Justice Department's five-year probe into Hunter Biden, according to his attorney.

The Oversight Committee's investigation is operating alongside a separate House probe into the alleged weaponization of the US government, including its federal law enforcement, for political purposes.

Former US President Donald Trump criticized the Hunter Biden plea deal as well, calling the US justice system "broken."

"The corrupt Biden DOJ just cleared up hundreds of years of criminal liability by giving Hunter Biden a mere 'traffic ticket,'" Trump said via social media.

US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene similarly criticized the plea deal, characterizing it as a "stunt" to make Hunter Biden appear cooperative with the Justice Department. The Justice Department is protecting their "puppet President" by refusing to prosecute Joe and Hunter Biden for alleged bribes from Ukrainian businessmen, Greene said.

US President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden "love their son" and will support him as he continues to "rebuild" his life, the White House said in a statement.

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CORRECTION - Hunter Biden Agrees to Plead Guilty to 2 Federal Charges - Court Document

(Corrects headline and lede to clarify Hunter Biden will plead guilty to only two charges)

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden's son has agreed to plead guilty to two federal tax charges and has reached a deal with the Justice Department to settle a separate firearms charges, a US court document revealed on Tuesday.

"The first Information charges the defendant with tax offenses – namely, two counts of willful failure to pay federal income tax, in violation of 26 U.S.C. 7203. The defendant has agreed to plead guilty to both counts of the tax Information," US attorney David Weiss said in a letter.

Hunter Biden will also enter into a so-called "Pretrial Diversion Agreement" agreement with the Justice Department with respect to one count of possession of a firearm by a person who is an unlawful user of or addicted to a controlled substance., Weiss added.

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Blinken Says Voiced US Concerns Regarding China's Military, Intelligence Actions in Cuba

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday that he used his recent visit to Beijing to deliver the United States' "deep concerns" over China's military and intelligence activities in Cuba.

"I made very clear that we would have deep concerns about PRC's [China's] intelligence or military activities in Cuba," Blinken told reporters during a press conference with UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly in London.

Blinken noted that the Biden administration has engaged in a number of diplomatic measures with different countries related to similar issues and expressed confidence that Washington had achieved "some success" in slowing down these efforts.

Blinken also vowed that the United States would monitor the situation very closely in order to protect itself and its interests.

Earlier on Tuesday, US media reported that Beijing and Havana were negotiating establishing a joint military training center in Cuba. The possible deployment of Chinese troops in Cuba has caused concerns in the United States, the report said.

However, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said that she was not aware of such plans.

Earlier in June, US media reported that China had allegedly been using since 2019 a military base in Cuba to gather intelligence on the United States.

Cuba has denied the claims about an agreement to create a Chinese base that would be used to gather intelligence on the United States.

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