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Astronomers Find Puzzling Planet That 'Shouldn't Exist' Orbiting Red Giant Star

Orbiting the red giant star Baekdu about 520 light-years from Earth is a Jupiter-sized planet called Halla. However, there's something extremely unusual about Halla: it shouldn't exist anymore, according to all-known scientific reasoning.

While at the present, Halla orbits about 0.49 astronomical units (AU) away from its host star, or about half the distance from the Earth to our sun, that wasn't always the case. Baekdu is a red giant in the late stages of its life, having already shrunk back from a period in which it had ballooned outward to many times its present diameter.

According to the work of a group of astronomers based at the University of Sydney in Australia, and published on Wednesday in Nature, that diameter was once wider than Halla's orbit, meaning the star should've swallowed the planet and incinerated it. Yet, it survived.

"Engulfment by a star normally has catastrophic consequences for close orbiting planets," study co-author Daniel Huber, an astronomer and research fellow at the Sydney Institute for Astronomy, said in a statement. "When we realized that Halla had managed to survive in the immediate vicinity of its giant star, it was a complete surprise."

The team's findings detailed Baekdu's surface inflated outward to roughly 1.5 times the radius of Halla's orbit. The bizarre behavior is a natural part of a star's life, as its hydrogen fuel becomes converted into helium and the fusion process changes. It'll happen to our sun, too, and the Earth will most likely be engulfed along with Mercury and Venus, and possibly also Mars.

The astronomers have considered a range of options for explaining Halla's survival, but none is really satisfactory.

One possible explanation is that Halla formed after Baekdu's massive expansion phase; another is that Baekdu was once part of a binary star system, but consumed its partner star, which stopped it from expanding to consume Halla. A third possibility is that Halla is a captured rogue planet, or that it migrated to its present orbit from further out in the Baekdu system; however, close studies of the planet's orbit suggest this is unlikely.

"The system was more likely similar to the famous fictional planet Tatooine from 'Star Wars,' which orbits two suns," said study co-author Tim Bedding, an astronomy professor at the University of Sydney.

"If the Baekdu system originally consisted of two stars, their merger could have prevented any one of them from expanding sufficiently to engulf the planet."

Astronomers have also recently discovered a binary star system with multiple planets for the second time. While single-planet binary systems have been found to be common, scientists had believed binary star systems were too unstable to support multiple stable planetary orbits.

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Supreme Court Strikes Down LGBTQ Discrimination Protections, Student Loan Relief Program

With the appointment of several sharply conservative Supreme Court justices by then-US President Donald Trump and a series of political reversals by the court, many in the US began to see the high court as having deviated from its non-partisanship. However, progressives pointed out the court's rulings have always been highly political.

The US Supreme Court issued a stinging blow to two parts of US President Joe Biden's agenda on Friday: discrimination protections for LGBTQ people and student loan relief. Both rulings were divided along ideological lines, with the three liberal justices dissenting from the six-justice conservative majority.

Student Loan Relief Plan Rejected

In one case, Biden v. Nebraska, the high court found Congress had not authorized the White House to forgive student loans using executive action when it passed a law in 2003 allowing the Department of Education to waive or forgive student financial aid for reasons related to war or other military operation or a national emergency.

"The Secretary asserts that the HEROES Act grants him the authority to cancel $430 billion of student loan principal. It does not," wrote Chief Justice John Roberts in the majority opinion, representing himself and the five other conservative justices.

"We hold today that the Act allows the Secretary to 'waive or modify' existing statutory or regulatory provisions applicable to financial assistance programs under the Education Act, not to rewrite that statute from the ground up," he continued.

Last August, Biden used his executive authority to implement a plan for canceling up to $10,000 in student loan debt for borrowers with incomes below a certain level, and up to $20,000 for those who received Pell Grants. However, the order was immediately challenged in the courts.

More than 40 million Americans hold student loan debt, with 43% of debtors being over the age of 40. Altogether, Americans hold some $1.6 trillion in student loan debt.

The Congressional Budget Office has estimated Biden's plan could eliminate $400 billion of that debt.

Earlier this month, Biden vetoed a bill passed by Congress that would also have repealed the student loan relief plan. In both houses of Congress, several Democrats crossed the aisle to vote with their Republican colleagues.

Biden Denounces Conservative 'Hypocrisy'

Speaking to the press on Friday afternoon, Biden noted student loan relief would continue under other programs implemented by his administration, which have helped more than 600,000 borrowers.

He noted 16 million people had already been approved for the program the court struck down, which he described as "snatching from their hands" a program that was about to "change their lives."

"I think the court misinterpreted the Constitution," Biden told a reporter on Friday who asked if he had overstepped his authority with the executive order.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 07/03/2023 12:05:26 PM

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"I believe the court's decision … was a mistake, was wrong. I'm not going to stop fighting to get borrowers what they need, particularly those at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale."
He announced a new program he said was consistent with the court's ruling and was grounded in the Higher Education Act to allow the Secretary of Education to forgive some loans.
Biden also announced an "on-ramp" program that would allow borrowers who miss payments a 12-month grace period before they are penalized for delinquency.
Citing Republican "hypocrisy," he noted that many of those who strongly supported the $760 billion Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) opposed the student loan relief program, even though they both address financial crises created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the student loan program was projected to cost a little more than half that of the PPP.
A Blow for LGBTQ Rights
In another ruling, its final of the term, the high court found that religious objection was a legal reason for a business to refuse service to a member of the LGBTQ community, despite a state law prohibiting such discrimination.
In the case 303 Creative LLC v. Elenis, six of the nine justices sided with a wedding website designer who wanted to be able to refuse to make web pages for weddings of same-sex couples, based on her belief as a Christian that same-sex relationships are immoral. Colorado law forbade such a practice, so she challenged the law in court.
"Colorado seeks to force an individual to speak in ways that align with its views but defy her conscience about a matter of major significance," wrote Justice Neil Gorsuch in the majority opinion, adding that those opposed to same-sex marriage were entitled to "tolerance" as well.
"The opportunity to think for ourselves and to express those thoughts freely is among our most cherished liberties and part of what keeps our Republic strong," he continued. "Of course, abiding the Constitution's commitment to the freedom of speech means all of us will encounter ideas we consider 'unattractive,' 'misguided, or even hurtful.' But tolerance, not coercion, is our Nation's answer."
In a stunning 11th-hour revelation, a US magazine reported earlier this week that much of the case was built on deception.
According to The New Republic on Thursday, when its reporters contacted the man who it was claimed in the lawsuit had attempted to contract 303 Creative, LLC for a wedding web page for him and his husband-to-be, they found the man had never contacted the company for such a service. In fact, not only was the man heterosexual instead of gay, but was already married to a woman at the time the proposal was allegedly made, in 2018.
The ruling comes amid hundreds of bills in state legislatures and the US Congress this year that have aimed to roll back the rights of LGBTQ people, in particular, transgender Americans. The right-wing advocacy group that has helped write and promote many of those bills, the Alliance Defending Freedom, is also the group that argued 303 Creative v. Elenisbefore the high court.

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Pentagon Admits Chinese 'Spy' Balloon 'Did Not Collect' Data During US Overflight

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Five months after accusing China of dispatching a spy balloon across US airspace and producing another rift in US-China relations, Washington has quietly admitted that the balloon neither collected or transmitted any data during its several-day trip across the US.

Asked a question about what he called a "PRC high altitude balloon," Pentagon spokesperson Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder told reporters on Thursday that while the US believed the airship had "off the shelf" equipment made in the United States, it did not collect data during its flight over the United States in late January and early February.

"It has been our assessment now that it did not collect while it was transiting the United States or overflying the United States, and as we said at the time, we took steps to mitigate the potential collection efforts of that balloon," Ryder said.

He added that "we are aware in previous cases, things like drones and other capabilities, what-have-you," have also used off-the-shelf capabilities, not making a specific reference to purpoted Chinese practices.

The question came in response to a report in the Wall Street Journal, citing anonymous US officials, which said that "the balloon was crammed with commercially available US gear, some of it for sale online, and interspersed with more specialized Chinese sensors and other equipment to collect photos, video and other information to transmit to China."

The report also said the balloon did not transmit any information while over the United States.

That same day, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning was also asked by reporters about the report. She replied that "the unmanned Chinese civilian airship drifting over the US was an entirely unexpected accident caused by force majeure. The US calling it a "spy balloon" is nothing but a smear against China."

The high-altitude balloon was shot down by the US Air Force off the coast of South Carolina on February 6, after it had been tracked slowly floating across the US since January 28, when it was spotted over Alaska. The US claimed the balloon was spying on military installations and a U-2 spy plane that flew past the balloon snapped photos that they said gave additional weight to those accusations.

China has maintained that the balloon was a civilian-owned scientific balloon that blew off course.

In the days after, Washington claimed the balloon was just one part of a vast balloon-based surveillance apparatus operated by China and used to spy on its neighbors. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken postponed his planned trip to China, which aimed to further heal the rift between Washington and Beijing created by provocative US actions on Taiwan last year, for several months in response to the report. Only earlier this month did the foreign minister finally resume his plans.

The weeks after the shootdown were littered with reports that the investigative crew assigned to the balloon wreckage had determined it had extensive spying capabilities, including what US President Joe Biden has described as "two boxcars full of spy equipment." Meanwhile, a temporary "balloon hysteria" gripped North America, and US and Canadian air forces scrambled to shoot down several mysterious objects spotted in the sky, the origins of which were unknown but heavily implied to be part of the same alleged Chinese spy balloon operation.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 07/03/2023 12:05:26 PM

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However, recently the administration has sought to put the incident behind it. Earlier this month, Biden called the balloon “more embarrassing than it was intentional” for the Chinese leadership, and Blinken said “that chapter should be closed” as long as it doesn’t happen again.

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Hunter Biden’s Lawyer Sends Scathing Letter to GOP Chair Over 'Misinformation Campaign'

In the letter, the Biden lawyer refers to images of an alleged WhatsApp conversation between Hunter Biden and a purported Chinese businessman as “complete fakes.”

One of Hunter Biden’s lawyers reportedly sent a scathing letter on Friday to US Rep. Jason Smith (R-MO), the chair of the House Committee on Ways and Means, accusing him of feeding a "misinformation campaign" against the Biden son.

US media reported the letter claimed Smith was trying to undermine the law and feed “the misinformation campaign to harm our client, Hunter Biden, as a vehicle to attack his father.”

In the letter, Biden's lawyer Abbe Lowell references transcripts of interviews between the committee and IRS Supervisory Special Agent Gary Shapley, who earlier told the panel he had copies of WhatsApp messages in which Hunter Biden allegedly attempted to use his father's position as then-vice president to influence his business dealings.

"I will make certain that between the man sitting next to me and every person he knows and my ability to forever hold a grudge that you will regret not following my direction,” reads the message, from 2017, which was allegedly sent from Hunter Biden to a Chinese businessman.

Last week, Smith released transcripts of the interviews while the White House and Justice Department dismissed the IRS whistleblowers’ claims. Smith also tweeted screenshots of the message, according to a report, which Lowell says are “complete fakes.”

“Both include a photo of Mr. Biden not from 2017 but from the White House Easter Egg roll in April 2022 (long after the purported message was sent); both images portray the message in a blue bubble, when WhatsApp messages are in green; one image super-imposed the Chinese flag for the contact ID, when surely that was not how a text or contact was kept; and one purports to be a screenshot with the '...' of someone composing a text (as in Apple’s iMessage) when that does not happen on WhatsApp,” Lowell wrote in his letter, in reference to Smith’s tweeted images.

“In short, the images you circulated online are complete fakes,” he concludes.

In reference to the IRS whistleblowers, who Lowell says are “claiming that title in an attempt to evade their own misconduct,” Lowell added that the interviews were “orchestrated recitations of mischaracterized and incomplete ‘facts’ by disgruntled agents who believed they knew better than the federal prosecutors who had all the evidence as they conducted their five-year investigation of Mr. Biden.”

“Chairman Smith, it is easy when a committee does not operate with fairness and thoroughness and an adherence to rules and procedures to forward a false political narrative,” concluded Lowell in his letter.

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The investigation into Hunter Biden's legal troubles comes amid a recent plea deal in which the US president's son agreed to plead guilty to not paying taxes in 2017 and 2018 and enter a probation agreement on a charge of illegally owning a gun while being a drug user.
GOP leaders referred to the deal as a "slap on the wrist." He is expected to plead guilty in late July, according to reports.

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Shooting War in Earth's Orbit Would Severely Destroy Ability to Explore Space - Study

According to a recent study, if a literal 'star wars' were to break out, it would increase the probability of the Kessler syndrome - a phenomenon in which the amount of junk and space debris in Earth's orbit would reach a point where it creates more debris, prompting even bigger issues for satellites and space exploration missions.
A recent study published on Friday in the journal of Defense and Peace Economics found that a shooting war in space could make human exploration, in Earth's orbit, much more dangerous for human use even after fighting ceased.
The study suspects that a shooting war that destroyed 250 satellites could fill Earth's orbit with more than 25 million pieces of space debris. Each one of those fragments, in turn, would be the size of a marble or larger (1 centimeter) while moving at more than 22,000 miles an hour.
But it's not as if that dangerous space debris does not already exist in orbit. Currently, there are about half a million pieces of deadly space debris rocketing about in Earth's orbit.
A full-out space war could increase the current amount by a factor of more than 50. These fragments could have a lethal effect on spacecrafts, and thus our ability to explore space, resulting in Kessler syndrome.
"The cascade process can be more accurately thought of as continuous and as already started," former NASA scientist Don Kessler explainedabout the theory that was named after him.
Researchers add that a full-scale war isn't the only event that could trigger issues with space debris. Destruction of satellites could also cause more than 100,000 pieces of dangerous debris to be added to Earth's orbit.
"Each collision or explosion in orbit slowly results in an increase in the frequency of future collisions," Kessler added.
So while a space war could certainly exacerbate the issue, the phenomenon is already well underway.
In 2007, China carried out its first anti-satellite missile test, which was one of the greatest debris-generating events in history. It created more than 3,000 trackable objects and another estimated 150,000 debris particles, according to a 2012 article from a UK media. Russia then carried out its own, similar test in 2021.
Meanwhile, the US does not allow such a practice due to its risk of creating such debris.
However, the Pentagon has its eyes on space, and seems to be increasing its idea that conflict may be carried out in our planet's atmosphere. The Trump administration, for instance, was responsible for establishing the US Space Force (USSF) in 2019.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 07/03/2023 12:05:26 PM

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China and the US, according to one report, are now researching ways to destroy satellites without leaving behind debris.

"The establishment of the USSF resulted from widespread recognition that space was a national security imperative. When combined with the growing threat posed by near-peer competitors in space, it became clear there was a need for a military service focused solely on pursuing superiority in the space domain," their website reads.

Space exploration may seem infinite too, but the tools presently available rest within 22,000 miles above Earth's surface and include more than 8,000 satellites. About 90% of those objects are actually within 3,000 miles of Earth's surface.

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Hurricane Beatriz to Bring Heavy Rains, Possible Landslide to Mexico's Pacific Coast

The US National Hurricane Center (NHC) announced early Friday that tropical Storm Beatriz had developed into a Category 1 hurricane in the Pacific, and was likely to continue to strengthen off the Mexican coastline.

Meteorologists are presently carefully watching Hurricane Beatriz as it makes its way along the coastline of Mexico, near Lazaro Cardenas, about 70 miles southeast of Manzanillo.

An advisory notice issued by the NHC detailed parts of Mexico's Pacific coast including areas from Zihuatanejo to Cabo Corrientes were being placed under a hurricane warning alert, as a hurricane watch was issued for north of Cabo Corrientes to Punta Mita.

At present, Hurricane Beatriz is trailing Hurricane Adrian, the region's first cyclone to form this year and which has continued to move westward away from Mexico on Friday.

Labeled a Category 1 storm, Hurricane Beatriz is churning through southwestern Mexico with sustained winds measured at about 85 mile per hour (MPH) and a pressure of 992 millibars. It's currently making its way northwest at a speed of 13 MPH, according to the latest notice issued by the NHC.

Beatriz is expected to gain strength as its center moves near or over parts of southwestern Mexico on Saturday, but will lose speed as it tracks north, before slowing down on Monday as it turns away from the west-central coast of Mexico near Los Cabos.

Hurricane Beatriz carries with it a risk of flash flooding and landslides in areas with high terrain, as heavy rain is expected inland over southwest Mexico before the center of the hurricane eventually passes.

Beatriz-induced rainfall is expected to range from 3 to 5 inches, with a maximum isolated amount of 8 inches. The heavy rains are expected to fall across portions of southern and western Mexico from Guerrero northwest to Sinaloa and Durango.

"Life-threatening surf and rip current conditions" could also be forecasted to spread northward along the southwestern coast of Mexico, the agency warned in its bulletin.

Hurricanes in the North American region are strengthening as El Nino develops into what will most likely be a significant event, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has warned.

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The El Nino phenomenon can have wide-ranging effects across the globe, with trade winds, rainfall, flooding, wildfire risks, tropical cyclones, and even coral bleaching events being brought on by the climatic event.
Hurricane Beatriz and Adrian are a late start to the hurricane season for the Eastern Pacific, US meteorologists have reported, as the season typically begins on May 15.

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Missing Teen Emerges From British Columbia Park on Her Own After 54-Hour Search

The Canadian teen was missing for about two days after she became separated from her hiking group.
Esther Wang, 16, has been safely reunited with her family after she went missing in one of British Columbia's largest parks. Wang first became separated from her hiking group on Tuesday, and was lost in Golden Ears Park for about 54 hours before she was found.
At least 16 teams of mounties and search and rescue workers attempted to find Wang in the nearly 215 square mile park (555 square kilometers) which is about 25 miles northwest of the US-Canadian border. The search and rescue teams utilized volunteers, helicopter support, police dogs, and a police drone to find the missing teen.
When the hiking group's leader discovered Wang was missing, they alerted park officials who then contacted the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). According to one report, the hiking group was a group of four that were performing a youth activity related to earning The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award, for which Wang was trying to earn a bronze level.
The group had hiked the East Canyon Trail to Steve's Lookout, and then left the viewpoint at around 2:45 PM to return to their campground. During the 15 minute walk back, the group's leader realized Wang was missing, RCMP said in a news conference on Wednesday.
Somehow, the 16-year-old managed to walk out of Golden Ears Park on her own on Thursday night at around 9:30 PM, reports revealed. However, it remains unknown as to how the teen became separated from her hiking group, and how exactly, she was able to survive on her own.
"Her parents had still been there from the day's rescue efforts – they've been up there fairly continuously for the last couple of days – and she walked pretty much right into their arms," said Keith Schende, a RCMP Staff Sergeant.
The RCMP added that Wang appeared healthy and happy after she emerged. She was checked by emergency medical services, and left with her family on Thursday night. According to the RCMP superintendent, Wang exited the park on the East Canyon Trail, the same trail she had been on when she was first separated from the group.
"Esther's family has expressed sincere gratitude to all first responders and Search and Rescue groups," Wendy Mehat, a RCMP Superintendent said. "They are very thankful for this outcome and request privacy at this time."

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Hunter Biden Allegedly Photographed Himself Smoking Crack Behind the Wheel of a Car

The “laptop from hell” saga continues, as new information alleges Hunter Biden's complicated history with driving, crack cocaine, and prostitutes.

Hunter Biden, the son of US President Joe Biden, allegedly filmed himself smoking crack cocaine while driving. The incident reportedly took place in 2018, the same year he photographed himself driving 172 miles per hour (MPH) in a Porsche while on his way to Las Vegas for what appears to have been a planned orgy.

The now 53-year-old is seen in alleged photos flashing what appears to be a crack pipe, and smoking the addictive drug while driving through a residential area in Arlington Virginia, in early June of 2018.

The photos the reported information is based on come from a website called BidenLaptopMedia.com which was created by Marco Polo, a right-wing nonprofit group spearheaded by Garrett Ziegler, a former aide to former President Donald Trump.

The group released thousands of photos revealing intensely personal, and troubling images of Hunter Biden’s sex and drug history.

Nearly two months after he photographed himself smoking crack while driving, Hunter Biden allegedly snapped a photo of himself driving 172 MPH to Las Vegas in early August of 2018. In the series of released images include messages between Hunter Biden and what seem to be multiple prostitutes whom he was inviting to share his hotel hot tub with.

“I don't have a bathing suit and I really really wanted to wear a cute bathing suit. But I don't have any money to buy one so then I'm just going to have to be naked right?” wrote one woman to the president’s son.

“Honestly babe the problem is you have too many girls there,” another woman wrote. “I understand you like a lot of girls but that’s fine do one at a time at the tops to Which is fine but just hire the second girl for like 1 hour.”

“Sorry I’m not trying to tell you what to do here. But you even offered me more money this morning and I didn’t take it or ask and trust me I needed it. But I like you I think you’re a great person and we are very similar and have a lot in common.”

While his two reckless driving incidents did not appear to result in any harm to him or others, the first son admitted to a similar driving incident in the past, in his 2021 memoir, “Beautiful Things”. In the memoir, he wrote that he had “nodded off behind the wheel” while driving under the influence on a highway.

“Waking up an instant later, I found myself in midair, the car having jumped a soft curb on the passing lane and soaring at eighty miles an hour into a cloudless blue sky, heading into the gulch that divided I-10,” he wrote of the incident that took place outside Palm Springs, California.

“The car spun into the westbound lanes–the same direction as the oncoming traffic. Miraculously, there was a gap in the traffic until my car stopped dead in the emergency lane, hissing and coughing.”

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Hunter Biden, who has recently agreed to plead guilty to federal tax and firearm charges, is now facing a defamation suit filed by John Paul Mac Isaac, who owns the Delaware computer repair shop where the “laptop from hell” was left. Isaac filed his lawsuit in 2019, months after Hunter Biden failed to retrieve his laptop.

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Biden Says Will Pursue US Student Loan Forgiveness Through Higher Education Act

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he will pursue student loan forgiveness for borrowers in the United States through the Higher Education Act, following a Supreme Court ruling earlier in the day blocking the administration’s previous student loan forgiveness plan.

"I’m announcing today a new path consistent with today’s ruling to provide student debt relief to as many borrowers as possible as quickly as possible," Biden said during a press conference. "We will ground this new approach in a different law than my original plan, the so-called Higher Education Act."

Earlier on Friday, the US Supreme Court struck down Biden’s plan to discharge $10,000-$20,000 in eligible borrowers’ debt through the Higher Education Relief Opportunities for Students (HEROES) Act of 2003, which would cost approximately $430 billion, according to a Congressional Budget Office estimate.

The new path is "legally sound" and will allow the US Department of Education to compromise, waive or release loans under certain circumstances, Biden said.

However, the new approach will take longer, Biden said, adding that he directed his team to pursue the matter with haste.

The Biden administration will also alter its income-based student loan repayment program to require a minimum payment of 5% of disposable income, down from 10%, the president said.

Additionally, the Department of Education is instituting a 12-month "on-ramp" period to defer delinquency, default, credit agency reporting and debt collection referrals for borrowers who miss initial repayments from October 1, 2023 to September 30, 2024, Biden said.

The Secretary of Education has already taken initial steps to launch the new loan forgiveness program by starting a rulemaking process on the matter, Biden said.

Biden denied providing "false hope" to borrowers, when asked about the criticism by reporters. Biden instead claimed that Republicans took away that hope by challenging the plan.

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CIA Chief Notified Russian Counterpart That US Had No Role in Prigozhin's Mutiny - Reports

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WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - CIA Director William Burns recently called his Russian counterpart Sergey Naryshkin to inform him that the United States had no involvement in Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny against the Russian government, The Wall Street Journal reported on Friday citing officials familiar with the matter.

Burns told Naryshkin that the United States was not involved in the uprising and that the issue is an internal Russian matter, according to the report.

Earlier this week, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said the United States had good and direct communication with Russian government officials over the weekend concerning the mutiny by Prigozhin. President Joe Biden also stressed that the United States had no involvement in the rebellion.

The Wagner Group seized an army headquarters in the Russian southern city of Rostov-on-Don on the night of June 23 and moved toward Moscow on the following day. Prigozhin presented his actions as a response to the alleged attack on his group's field camps by the defense ministry, which the latter rejected.

Prigozhin agreed to stop the mutiny after negotiations with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who acted at the request of Russian President Vladimir Putin. On Tuesday, Lukashenko confirmed that Prigozhin had arrived in Belarus.

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Almost 270,000 Households Have No Power Due to Unexpected 'Inland Hurricane' – Web Tracker

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) –Almost 270,000 households in four US states lost power after they were hit by a so-called "inland hurricane" known as a derecho, PowerOutages.us said on Friday.

More than 141,000 customers experienced problems with electricity in Indiana, the portal said. Another 106,000 have the same issue in Illinois, while over 27,000 outages were registered in Tennessee and Georgia.

AccuWeather.com portal suggested that in some areas, power may not be restored until the weekend.

In Illinois, the storm with gusts up to 100 miles per hour hit agriculture fields, and farmers expect that not all crops will fully recover, the report said.

Illinois state police registered multiple rollovers at the interstates. However, no casualties were reported, according to local news outlets.

US National Weather Service describes a derecho as a widespread wind storm with a band of rapidly moving showers or thunderstorms, a wind damage swath of more than 240 miles, and wind gusts of at least 58 miles per hour.

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

Trump, Biden Failed to Appreciate Consequences of Withdrawal From Afghanistan– State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) – Both former US President Donald Trump and President Joe Biden failed to correctly assess how a US military withdrawal would impact the stability of the Afghan government, the State Department said in a report prepared by the After Action Review (AAR) team.

"The decisions of both President Trump and President Biden to end the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan had serious consequences for the viability of the Afghan government and its security," the report said. "For the Department, the end to the U.S. military mission presented an enormous challenge…"

Moreover, the decision of the American government to withdraw from Afghanistan undermined confidence in the Afghan government and triggered the collapse of the country amid deteriorating conditions on the ground and as the prospects for successful peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban (under UN sanctions) grew dimmer, the report added.

According to the report, it had long been predicted by various observers that the withdrawal of US military forces would precipitate the collapse of the Afghan government, but US officials ignored those views and relied instead on assurances that the Ghani government and its security forces would concentrate on the defense of Kabul and believed that they could resist the Taliban for some time.

The review team also found that an insufficient sense of urgency was one of the primary reasons the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, caught the State Department and the US embassy by surprise even though they prepared a range of scenarios, including the possibility of a full evacuation from Afghanistan.

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US Approves $105Mln Deal to Modernize Romania's F-16 Combat Fighter Force - DSCA

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has approved a possible $105 million deal for Lockheed Martin to modernize 32 F-16 combat fighters for NATO ally Romania, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) announced on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Romania of equipment and services to modernize thirty-two (32) F-16 Mid-Life Update Block 10/15 aircraft to be procured through third-party transfer from Norway," the press release said.

The deal included KY-58M and KIV-78 cryptographic devices for an estimated cost of $105 million, the DSCA said.

"The DSCA delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale today," the release added.

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The sale will also include AN/PYQ-10C Simple Key Loaders; Joint Mission Planning Systems; Night Vision Device (NVD) aviator vision systems and spare Image Intensifier Tubes; Electronic Warfare database support; Classified/Unclassified Computer Program Identification Number Systems (CPIN) and CPIN Electronic Combat International Security Assistance Program (ECISAP) equipment, the DSCA said.

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Japan to Fully Cover IBRD Losses if Ukraine Defaults - Source

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Japan will cover the losses of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), including interest payments, if Ukraine defaults, a source in the Russian Office at the World Bank told Sputnik, after the financial institution approved a new loan to the country.

"In case Ukraine defaults, Japan will fully cover the losses of the IBRD, including interest payments," the source said.

On Thursday, the Board of Executive Directors of the World Bank approved a $1.5 billion loan, guaranteed by the Japanese government, for Ukraine to address the needs of displaced people and support reforms to "enhance the transparency and accountability of public resources expenditures."

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World Bank Aware of Risks Related to Ukraine Funding, Passes Them on to Nations - Source

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The World Bank understands that risks related to funding of Ukraine are unacceptable and transfers them to interested nations, a source in the Russian Office at the World Bank told Sputnik.

"The World Bank is well aware of all the risks associated with financing of Ukraine, and — given that such risks are unacceptable for the World Bank itself — passes them on to interested countries," the source said.

On Thursday, the Board of Executive Directors of the World Bank approved a $1.5 billion loan, guaranteed by the Japanese government, for Ukraine to address the needs of displaced people and support reforms to "enhance the transparency and accountability of public resources expenditures."

The loan brings the emergency financing provided to Kiev by the World Bank and individual international donors to $37.5 billion to date, the institution said.

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

Fox News to Pay Ex-Producer $12Mln to Settle Lawsuit Alleging Hostile Workplace - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Fox News agreed to pay a former producer $12 million to settle a lawsuit alleging the media outlet of having a hostile workplace environment, the New York Times reported on Friday.

The report said former Fox News producer Abby Grossberg accused the company of operating a hostile and discriminatory workplace.

Grossberg specifically said that the network and former Fox host Tucker Carlson allowed a culture of rampant misogyny and sexual harassment and that she was also subject to sexist and antisemitic harassment during her time working on "Tucker Carlson Tonight."

Moreover, the report said Grossberg also accused the network of allegedly coercing her into giving false testimony in a deposition related to the Dominion case.

Grossberg, according to the report, said in a statement that she continues to stand by her allegations but is "heartened" that the network took her claims seriously.

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Kiev Exhausts World Bank Quota, Grants or Donor States to Fund New Projects - Source

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Ukraine has used up its country quota in the World Bank and any new projects will now be financed by either grants or guarantees from donor nations, primarily the European Union and G7, a source in the Russian Office at the World Bank told Sputnik.

"Ukraine has already fully exhausted its country quota in the World Bank," the source said. "Therefore, all new projects will be financed by grants or guarantees from donor countries, mainly from the EU/G7."

The Board of Executive Directors of the World Bank approved Thursday a $1.5 billion loan, guaranteed by the Japanese government, for Ukraine to address the needs of displaced people and support reforms to "enhance the transparency and accountability of public resources expenditures."

The source also added that as part of the Bretton Woods institutions, the main burden of financing Ukraine lies with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), while the World Bank only monitors how the assistance is being spent.

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Secret Probe Reveals US Coast Guard Academy Mishandled Sexual Assault Claims - Reports

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 07/03/2023 12:05:26 PM

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WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The US Coast Guard Academy mishandled numerous allegations of sexual assault and other misconduct by declining to criminally investigate the accusations, CNN reported on Friday.

Coast Guard officials informed members of Congress about a secret probe launched in 2014, entitled Operation Fouled Anchor, after inquiries from CNN, which reviewed internal documents from the investigation.

Investigators determined that allegations of assault at the academy were handled as administrative violations instead of criminal matters, with punishments as minor as extra homework or lower class standings, the report said.

Consequently, the report added, some individuals who faced accusations rose to high positions in the Coast Guard and other US military branches.

Inversely, many victims who brought the allegations left the academy, and as such, careers in military service, according to the report.

The report also said the probe found the Coast Guard Academy was more concerned about its reputation than the alleged victims.

The conclusions of Operation Fouled Anchor were kept quiet by agency leaders, the report added, many of whom had experience working or studying with the alleged perpetrators.

The Coast Guard told US Senate Commerce Committee staff during briefings that the probe identified more than 60 substantiated cases of rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment by cadets at the academy or that took place there, the report said.

The Coast Guard could not take action on nearly 40 cases over which they no longer had jurisdiction over the alleged perpetrators or criminal statutes had expired, although they pressured two of the individuals who faced accusations to retire, according to the report.

The probe found that the academy's leaders failed to adequately investigate allegations or hold alleged perpetrators accountable, the report said.

US Senators Maria Cantwell and Tammy Baldwin sent a letter on Friday to the Coast Guard to ask why the probe had been kept secret.

The senators also inquired as to whether the Coast Guard failed to use its authority to appropriately discipline individuals who were subject to the probe but remain in the service.

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Geostrategic History of 21st Century to Be Shaped by US-China Relationship – Milley

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) – The geostrategic history of the current century will be shaped by the US-China relationship, US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Friday.

"The geostrategic history of this century will likely be determined by the United States-China relationship and whether it remains in competition or tips into great power war," Milley said during an event hosted by the National Press Club.

According to Milley, China wants to become a regional hegemon in Asia within the next 10 years and to exceed global US military power by mid-century.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 07/03/2023 12:05:26 PM

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The Biden administration has repeatedly described its relationship with China as a strategic competition and voiced willingness to find ways to responsibly manage the relationship through effective communication channels, including at the military level.

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Guterres Urges Parties in Mali to Respect Ceasefire After UN Mission Withdraws - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, June 30 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is calling on all parties in Mali to respect the ceasefire as the United Nations mission withdraws from the country, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Friday.

"The Secretary-General takes note of resolution 2690 by which the Security Council decided to terminate the mandate of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) as of 30 June 2023 and directing its drawdown by 31 December 2023, following the request of the transitional Government of Mali," the statement said. "[Guterres] urges all the signatory parties to continue honoring the ceasefire as MINUSMA withdraws."

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Venezuela Not on Agenda During Blinken's Visit to Guyana, CARICOM Meeting - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has no planned sessions to deal with the situation in Venezuela during his upcoming visit to Trinidad and Tobago to meet with heads of government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) or during his visit to Guyana, a State Department official said on Friday

"I can confirm that there are no separate sessions specifically scheduled to deal with Venezuela," Deputy Assistant Director for Caribbean Affairs and Haiti Barbara Feinstein on Friday.

Feinstein made the comment shortly after the United States held secret meetings with Venezuela in Doha, Qatar, to establish direct channels of communication ahead of Venezuela's upcoming elections.

Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro has not yet set a date for the general elections that would allow the opposition's candidate to challenge him for the presidency.

Earlier on Friday, Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado was barred from holding public office for 15 years.

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UN on Mali Mission's End: Time to Withdraw If Requested to Leave

UNITED NATIONS, June 30 (Sputnik) - The United Nations cooperates with governments based on their needs and is ready to withdraw its missions if requested to leave, spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Friday, following a UN Security Council resolution on ending the Mali peacekeeping mission.

"Ultimately, we work with governments to make sure that we can fulfill the objective, but we cannot possibly do more for the people of Mali than their own authorities will permit at the end of the day. If we are requested to leave, that's what we will do," Haq told a briefing.

If the UN is unable to carry out a mission anymore, then it is time to withdraw, he added.

Earlier in the day, the UN Security Council unanimously voted to end the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali. MINUSMA is required to complete the transfer of its tasks and withdraw by the end of the year, according to a UN Security Council resolution.

The decision came after the Malian government asked the United Nations to urgently withdraw its mission. The government said that MINUSMA's 10-year presence in the country has failed to adequately respond to the security situation but rather is contributing to the escalating tensions.

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UN Urges All Interested Parties to Avoid Escalation at the Zaporizhzhia NPP - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 30 (Sputnik) – The United Nations is calling on all interested parties to avoid any steps that could increase tensions at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (ZNPP), the organization's spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Friday.

"We ourselves want to make sure that all parties are aware of the need to avoid any actions that could heighten tensions around the nuclear power plant," Haq told reports when asked to comment on the recent call by Russia to the UN to apply pressure on Kiev to refrain from engaging in provocations at the ZNPP.

Haq also noted the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is playing a key role in securing the situation at the ZNPP.

"They are continuing to work out to make sure that conditions at the plant are safe and secure," he said,

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said earlier in the day that IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi is well aware of who is responsible for the shelling of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant.

Lavrov also denied statements made in Kiev that Russia plans to blow up the ZNPP.

Grossi, in his turn, said on Friday that the Ukrainian counteroffensive creates an "additional layer of concern" about the safety of the ZNPP.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has earlier accused Russia, citing a report of Ukraine's intelligence and security services, of preparing to blow up the ZNPP because it was not interested in Ukraine's security. Russia has rejected these allegations, saying that the IAEA mission headed by Grossi, who visited the plant in June, could be convinced that these

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statements were nonsense.

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Milley Says Not Aware of Decision Yet on ATACMS for Kiev, But It's 'Ongoing Process'

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Friday he is not aware of any decisions with respect to sending the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) to Ukraine, but noted that it is a “continuous, ongoing process.”

“It's a continuous, ongoing process to my knowledge and I don't know of a decision yet, but, sure, that's a process,” Milley said during an event hosted by the National Press Club.

On Thursday, The Wall Street Journal reported citing officials that the United States is close to agreeing to send ATACMS to Ukraine.

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US Top General Says Not Surprised Ukrainian Counteroffensive Going Slower Than Predicted

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Friday he does not find it surprising that the Ukrainian counteroffensive is going slower than predicted as he personally said before that it will be very long and difficult.

"That it's [the counteroffensive] going slower than people had predicted, doesn't surprise me at all," Milley said during an event hosted by the National Press Club. "What I had said was this is going to take six, eight, ten weeks. It's going to be very difficult, it's going to be very long, it's going to be very, very bloody and no one should have any illusions about it."

Millay also said that in his view time is not particularly on either side of the conflict because the latter continues to be very dynamic.

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Biden Says Believes SCOTUS ‘Wrong’ to Block Student Debt Relief, Will Keep Pursuing Effort

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he believes the Supreme Court’s ruling that blocks the administration’s $430 billion student debt relief plan is wrong, vowing to continue to pursue student debt forgiveness through other means.

“I believe that the Court’s decision to strike down our student debt relief plan is wrong,” Biden said in a statement. “But I will stop at nothing to find other ways to deliver relief to hard-working middle-class families. My Administration will continue to work to bring the promise of higher

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 07/03/2023 12:05:26 PM

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education to every American."

Earlier on Friday, the US Supreme Court ruled that Biden's plan to discharge $10,000-$20,000 in eligible borrowers' debt through the Higher Education Relief Opportunities (HEROES) Act of 2023 is not authorized by the legislation.

The bill allows for waivers or modifications to financial assistance programs under the Higher Education Act (HEA), but not rewriting the statute to cancel billions of dollars in student loan principle, the ruling said.

The Supreme Court also blocked a challenge to the plan by respondents who claim the administration failed to follow proper public comment and rulemaking procedures. The respondents argued that had the administration followed procedures, they could have convinced the administration to pursue loan forgiveness through the HEA instead of the HEROES Act.

Biden will provide more details later on Friday about the administration's next steps on the matter, the statement said.

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Blinken Will Meet With Haitian Prime Minister During Caribbean Trip - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet with Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry during a trip to Trinidad and Tobago for a heads of government meeting of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Caribbean Affairs Barbara Feinstein said on Friday.

"Secretary Blinken will also meet with Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry to discuss the political security and humanitarian crises in Haiti," Feinstein said during a press briefing on the trip.

Blinken will urge Henry to work urgently with Haitian stakeholders to enlarge the political consensus and fashion a political path forward that returns Haiti to a democratic order, Feinstein said.

Blinken will also engage other Caribbean leaders on the situation in Haiti and reaffirm the United States' support for the Haitian national police and calls for the deployment of a multinational peacekeeping force, Feinstein said.

The United States sees CARICOM as a key partner in addressing the crises in Haiti, Feinstein added.

Blinken will visit Trinidad and Tobago on July 5 for the CARICOM meeting, but will then travel to Guyana on July 6 for a meeting with Guyanese leadership, the State Department said earlier on Friday.

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US Continues Work to Get Gershkovich, Whelan Released From Russia - White House

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 07/03/2023 12:05:26 PM

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WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration continues its work to get US citizens Evan Gershkovich and Paul Whelan released from Russia, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"We're still working at their release every single day, that has not changed," Kirby said. "Obviously, we have not been successful to date, but that doesn't mean that we aren't going to keep trying."

Kirby said the US government still seeks regular consular access to Gershkovich, claiming they have not been able to get it.

Last week, the Moscow City Court upheld the decision to extend the arrest of Gershkovich - a Wall Street Journal reporter who is accused in Russia of espionage in favor of the United States.

The court's meeting was held behind closed doors due to the confidentiality of the case files.

US Ambassador to Russia Lynne Tracy appeared in the court, accompanied by several employees of the US diplomatic mission.

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White House Says US Approach on Iran Will Not Change After Envoy Malley Placed on Leave

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The United States approach to putting pressure on Tehran to address its so-called destabilizing activities will not change regardless of US Special Envoy for Iran Rob Malley being placed on leave, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

On Thursday, media reported that Malley said he was placed on leave while his security clearance is under investigation. Malley did not disclose when he went on leave and for how long.

"This is a personnel issue that's better addressed by our State Department colleagues, I would just tell you, broadly speaking, that nothing's changed about the the consistent approach we are taking towards Iran," Kirby said during a conference call with reporters.

Kirby underscored that the United States will continue to put pressure on Iran and work in coordination with its allies and partners to address Tehran's nuclear ambitions, support for Russia's special military operation, among other activities.

According to State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller, Abram Paley is serving as the acting US special envoy for Iran.

Earlier this week, Axios reported that White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan expressed concerns to Israeli counterparts that Israel has been leaking information to the press about indirect talks between the United States and Tehran.

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Biden Says US Supreme Court Ruling on Free Speech Case Could Invite LGBTQI+ Discrimination

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Friday that the US Supreme Court's decision to allow businesses not to provide services involving speech contrary to their moral conscience could invite discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals.

Earlier on Friday, the Supreme Court ruled that the state of Colorado could not force a graphic designer, who believes that only a union of a man and a woman constitutes marriage, to develop wedding websites for same-sex couples.

Forcing an individual to create expressive works contrary to their sincere moral beliefs violates the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees five rights, including freedom of speech and the free exercise of religion, the ruling said.

"While the Court's decision only addresses expressive original designs, I'm deeply concerned that the decision could invite more discrimination against LGBTQI+ Americans," Biden said in a statement on the ruling. "More broadly, today's decision weakens long-standing laws that protect all Americans against discrimination in public accommodations – including people of color, people with disabilities, people of faith, and women."

The Biden administration remains committed to working with federal law enforcement agencies to enforce federal laws that protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, the statement said.

Biden also urges the US Congress to pass the Equality Act, which would enshrine civil rights protections for LGBT Americans in federal law, the statement added.

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Canada Wildfire Smoke Continues to Damage Air Quality Across US East Coast, Midwest - NWS

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The US National Weather Service (NWS) issued on Friday air quality alerts covering large portions of the US East Coast and Midwest that continue to be affected by smoke from Canada's wildfires.

"Air Quality alerts over parts of the Midwest, Great Lakes, central Appalachians, Northeast, and Mid-Atlantic," the NWS said in a statement.

The smoke from wildfires in Canada would continue impacting portions of the US northeast over the next few days, it added.

"However, air quality is expected to slowly improve due to a combination of thunderstorm activity and dispersion of the smoke as we head into the weekend," the statement said.

The air quality monitoring service IQAir said that the air quality index in New York City is equal to 161, which is qualified as "unhealthy" for the general population. In two other American cities, Washington, DC and Chicago, this level exceeds 100 or remains unhealthy for sensitive groups of people.

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Wildfires in Canada have already burnt 5.3 million hectares of forest land, an area three times the size of Lake Ontario, the country's emergency ministry said earlier this month. The wildfires have also prompted tens of thousands of evacuations from affected areas.

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White House Says Prigozhin Helped 'Engineer' Exit of UN Peacekeeping Mission From Mali

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Yevgeny Prigozhin, chief of private military company Wagner Group, was behind Mali's decision to end the UN peacekeeping mission's presence in the country, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"Earlier this month, the Malian transition government revoked its consent for the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission ... and demanded that the decade-long peacekeeping mission should immediately depart," Kirby told a briefing. "What isn't as widely known is that Prigozhin helped engineer that departure to further Wagner's interests. We know that senior Malian officials worked directly with Prigozhin employees to inform the UN Secretary General that Mali had revoked consent for the MINUSMA mission."

Kirby added that the UN mission is dedicated to protecting civilians, facilitating economic development, and advancing Mali's transition to democracy.

"The UN mission's sudden departure will only make worse economic hardship in the country and contribute to broader internal and regional instability while moving it only further away from the goal of the successful democratic transition," he said.

Earlier in the day, the UN Security Council unanimously voted to end the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali. MINUSMA is required to complete the transfer of its tasks and withdraw by the end of the year, according to a UN Security Council resolution.

The decision came after the Malian government asked the United Nations to urgently withdraw its mission. The government said that MINUSMA's 10-year presence in the country has failed to adequately respond to the security situation but rather is contributing to the escalating tensions.

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US Encourages Dialogue Between Xi, Zelenskyy to Continue - White House

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The United States encourages the dialogue between Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy to continue and not be a one-off, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday

"It's important that President Xi had a conversation with President Zelenskyy, we were glad to see that," Kirby said. "We would encourage that dialogue to continue, not have it be a one-off."

Kirby stressed that China could "potentially play a role in supporting some sort of negotiated

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 07/03/2023 12:05:26 PM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 07/03/2023 12:05:26 PM

peace settlement."

In April, Xi held a phone call with Zelenskyy at Kiev's request. The two presidents exchanged views on their countries' bilateral relations and the Ukraine crisis. China pledged to send its special representative to Ukraine and other countries to hold in-depth consultations on the settlement of the crisis.

On February 24, one year after the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, China released a 12-point document entitled "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis," which underscores respect for the sovereignty of all countries, the cessation of hostilities and the resumption of peace talks between Moscow and Kiev. Russian President Vladimir Putin said that some of the provisions of the plan could be a basis for a peace settlement, "if the West and Kiev are ready for it."

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UPDATE - US Supreme Court Blocks Challenge to Biden's Student Loan Forgiveness Plan - Ruling

(Updates with more details in paras 11-12; modifies headline and lede)

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court issued a ruling on Friday that blocks a challenge to US President Joe Biden's $430 billion student loan forgiveness plan based on a lack of jurisdiction, vacating and remanding the case in a unanimous decision.

Biden's plan to discharge $10,000-$20,000 in eligible borrowers' debt through the Higher Education Relief Opportunities for Students (HEROES) Act of 2003 would cost approximately $430 billion, according to a Congressional Budget Office estimate.

The HEROES Act is intended to provide assistance to federal student loan borrowers as may be necessary due to a national emergency or disaster. Two borrowers sued to enjoin Biden's plan, arguing that the administration failed to follow necessary rulemaking and notice-and-comment procedures.

A US district court previously rejected their argument but nevertheless vacated the plan as substantially unauthorized.

"Because respondents fail to establish that any injury they suffer from not having their loans forgiven is fairly traceable to the Plan, they lack Article III standing, so the Court has no jurisdiction to address their procedural claim," the ruling said.

Article III of the US Constitution limits the US Supreme Court to resolving "cases" or "controversies."

The decision does not resolve the respondents' procedural claim because the court concludes that they lack standing to bring it, Justice Samuel Alito said in the court's majority opinion.

The ruling vacates the judgment of the US District Court for the Northern District of Texas and remands with instructions to dismiss, the opinion said.

The court also denies as moot the Department of Education's application for a stay pending appeal, the opinion said.

The respondents claim that if the department had followed standard comment and rulemaking

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 07/03/2023 12:05:26 PM

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procedures, they would have had a chance to convince them to pursue loan forgiveness through the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965, the ruling said.

The respondents cannot show that their purported injury of not receiving loan forgiveness under the HEA is "fairly traceable" to the HEROES Act plan, the ruling said. However, a decision regarding the lawfulness of the plan does not directly impact the respondents' ability to obtain loan relief under the HEA, the ruling also added.

The Supreme Court also issued a ruling on Friday blocking Biden's plan as unauthorized under the HEROES Act, which allows the Secretary of Education to waive or modify financial assistance programs under the HEA, but not to rewrite the statute to cancel billions in student loan principle, the ruling added.

The ruling, on which justices were split six to three, reversed a previous district court ruling and remanded the case for further proceedings consistent with the Supreme Court's opinion.

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White House Says US Does Not Have Reliable Information to Confirm Prigozhin in Belarus

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The United States does not have reliable information to independently confirm Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin is in Belarus, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"The truth is we don't have information that we consider deemed reliable enough to be able to confirm his whereabouts," Kirby said during a conference call with reporters.

Kirby added that the White House reports about Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko saying Prigozhin is in Belarus, but the United States is not in a position to independently confirm that.

The Wagner Group seized an army headquarters in the Russian southern city of Rostov-on-Don on the night of June 23 and moved toward Moscow on the following day. Prigozhin presented his actions as a response to the alleged attack on his group's field camps by the defense ministry, which the latter rejected.

Prigozhin agreed to stop the mutiny after negotiations with Lukashenko, who acted at the request of Russian President Vladimir Putin. On Tuesday, Lukashenko confirmed that Prigozhin had arrived in Belarus.

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White House's Kirby Says Has Nothing on Poland's Appeal to Host US Nuclear Weapons

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday he has nothing to share regarding Poland's appeal to host US nuclear weapons.

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Earlier in the day, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said that Poland wants to host US nuclear weapons following Russia's deployment of tactical nuclear arms in Belarus.

"I don't have any conversations of that sort to read out or speak to with you at all on that," Kirby said. "We just don't talk about the deployment of nuclear systems one way or the other, so i am certainly not going to start doing that today."

Kirby also pointed out that Washington has seen no indications that Moscow has any intention to use either tactical or strategic nuclear weapons inside Ukraine or on the continent.

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US Supreme Court Says Biden Student Loan Forgiveness Plan Not Authorized Under HEROES Act

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's plan to forgive approximately $430 billion in federal student loans is not authorized under the legislation the administration cited as their authority, the US Supreme Court said on Friday.

The Biden administration sought to discharge $10,000-$20,000 in eligible borrowers' debt through the Higher Education Relief Opportunities for Students (HEROES) Act of 2003, which would cost approximately $430 billion, according to a Congressional Budget Office estimate

"The HEROES Act allows the Secretary to 'waive or modify' existing statutory or regulatory provisions applicable to financial assistance programs under the [Higher] Education Act, but does not allow the Secretary to rewrite that statute to the extent of canceling $430 billion of student loan principal," the Supreme Court said in a ruling.

The administration's debt forgiveness plan is not a waiver because it augments and expands existing provisions dramatically, the ruling said. The plan is also not a modification because it effectively constitutes the introduction of a "whole new regime," the ruling said.

The ruling reverses a previous decision by the District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri and remands the case for further proceedings consistent with the Supreme Court's opinion.

Chief Justice John Roberts delivered the court's majority opinion, joined by Justices Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett. Justice Elena Kagan filed a dissenting opinion, in which Justices Sonia Sotomayor and Ketanji Brown Jackson joined.

The Supreme Court also released a related decision on Friday, vacating and remanding a challenge to Biden's plan by respondents, who argued the administration failed to follow proper rulemaking and public comment procedures.

The respondents claimed that had the administration followed proper procedure, they could have convinced them to pursue loan forgiveness through the Higher Education Act of 1965. The court's decision regarding the lawfulness of the plan does not directly impact the respondents' ability to obtain loan relief under the HEA, the ruling said.

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

Kirby Says No New Announcements When Asked If US Providing Ukraine Cluster Munitions

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday that there are no new announcements at the moment when asked about reports that the Biden administration is moving closer to approving sending Ukraine cluster munitions to aid in its counteroffensive.

"We're going to continue to have those conversations with the Ukrainians going forward as we have over the last 16 months, we'll continue to review those requests and adapt as appropriate, I just don't have a decision or announcement on any anything new today," Kirby said during a conference call with reporters.

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US Supreme Court Says State Cannot Force People to Provide Services Contrary to Conscience

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court said in a ruling on Friday that the state of Colorado cannot force an individual to provide goods or services that require speech contrary to their moral conscience, reversing a lower court ruling in a case involving a graphic designer who refuses to make wedding websites that defy her beliefs about marriage.

The graphic designer, Lorie Smith, filed a lawsuit to clarify a Colorado state law that prevents businesses from denying their goods and services based on race, disability or sexual orientation. Smith worried that the law could be used to compel her to create websites celebrating weddings between men and men or women and women, which she does not endorse based on her belief that marriages are between a man and a woman.

"The First Amendment prohibits Colorado from forcing a website designer to create expressive designs speaking messages with which the designer disagrees," the ruling said. "The First Amendment's protections belong to all, not just to speakers whose motives the government finds worthy. In this case, Colorado seeks to force an individual to speak in ways that align with its views but defy her conscience about a matter of major significance."

The First Amendment of the US Constitution protects five rights, among which is the right to freedom of speech.

Justice Neil Gorsuch delivered the opinion of the court, joined by Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett. Justice Sonia Sotomayor filed a dissenting opinion, in which Justices Elena Kagan and Ketanji Brown Jackson joined.

The decision reverses the prior ruling of the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals, which affirmed a district court ruling that Smith was not entitled to the injunction she sought.

Smith's services qualify as "pure speech" based on its expressive nature, the majority opinion said.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 07/03/2023 12:05:26 PM

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"The First Amendment envisions the United States as a rich and complex place where all persons are free to think and speak as they wish, not as the government demands," the majority opinion said.

The dissenting opinion instead argues that an act of discrimination is not protected under the First Amendment. The US Constitution contains no right to "refuse service to a disfavored group," the dissenting opinion said.

A business that chooses to sell to the public assumes a duty to serve the public without "unjust" discrimination, the dissenting opinion said.

"The lesson of the history of public accommodations laws is altogether different. It is that in a free and democratic society, there can be no social castes. And for that to be true, it must be true in the public market," the dissenting opinion added.

The majority opinion threatens to "balkanize" the market and allow the exclusion of other groups from services, according to the dissenting opinion.

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US Supreme Court Blocks Biden's $430Bln Student Loan Forgiveness Plan - Ruling

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court issued a ruling on Friday that blocks US President Joe Biden's $430 billion student loan forgiveness plan based on a lack of jurisdiction, vacating and remanding the case in a unanimous decision.

Biden's plan to discharge $10,000-$20,000 in eligible borrowers' debt through the Higher Education Relief Opportunities for Students (HEROES) Act of 2003 would cost approximately $430 billion, according to a Congressional Budget Office estimate.

The HEROES Act is intended to provide assistance to federal student loan borrowers as may be necessary due to a national emergency or disaster. Two borrowers sued to enjoin Biden's plan, arguing that the administration failed to follow necessary rulemaking and notice-and-comment procedures.

A US District Court previously rejected their argument but nevertheless vacated the plan as substantially unauthorized.

"Because respondents fail to establish that any injury they suffer from not having their loans forgiven is fairly traceable to the Plan, they lack Article III standing, so the Court has no jurisdiction to address their procedural claim," the unanimous ruling said.

Article III of the US Constitution limits the Supreme Court to resolving "cases" or "controversies."

The decision does not resolve the respondents' procedural claim because the court concludes that they lack standing to bring it, Justice Samuel Alito said in the court's majority opinion. The ruling vacates the judgment of the US District Court for the Northern District of Texas and remands with instructions to dismiss, the opinion said.

The court also denies as moot the Department of Education's application for a stay pending appeal, the opinion said.

The respondents claim that if the department had followed standard comment and rulemaking

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procedures, they would have had a chance to convince them to pursue loan forgiveness through the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965, according to the ruling.

The respondents cannot show that their purported injury of not receiving loan forgiveness under the HEA is “fairly traceable” to the HEROES Act plan, the ruling said. However, a decision regarding the lawfulness of the plan does not directly impact the respondents’ ability to obtain loan relief under the HEA, the ruling added.

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UNSC Votes to End Peacekeeping Mission in Mali by Year-End

UNITED NATIONS, June 30 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council unanimously voted on Friday to end the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali by the end of the year.

"Decides to terminate MINUSMA’s mandate under resolution 2640 (2022) as of June 30 2023," the resolution said.

MINUSMA is required to immediately start cessation of its operations, transfer of its tasks, as well as the orderly and safe drawdown withdrawal of its personnel, with the objective of completing the process by December 31 2023, in close consultation with the transition government of Mali, according to the resolution.

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Ukraine Seeks Starting Process to Join NATO Now, Concluding After Conflict Ends - Official

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Kiev is asking that the process for Ukraine to join NATO start now and finalizing it after the conflict with Russia ends, Office of the President of Ukraine deputy head Ihor Zhovkva said on Friday.

"We are not talking about finalization of membership of Ukraine to NATO before the end of the war," Zhovkva said. "What we are asking for - to start this process, to start with the stage number one and then we have a very good formula which we already introduced in twenty declarations between Ukraine and individual member states... to support the membership of Ukraine to NATO when conditions allow."

Zhovkva said the Ukrainian leadership is "realistic" and understands that before Ukraine achieves victory it cannot be admitted to NATO.

Starting the process of joining NATO means receiving an invitation for membership, Zhovkva said, adding that if the alliance makes such a move at the alliance’s upcoming summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, it would send a "very positive and reassuring message."

The NATO summit is scheduled to take place in Vilnius from July 11-12 and will be chaired by Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

In September 2022, Zelenskyy announced that Ukraine was applying for a fast-tracked

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membership in NATO. Zelenskyy said earlier in June that Kiev hoped to receive an invitation to join the alliance during the summit in Vilnius, but noted that Ukraine was disappointed not to have received a clear positive response about joining NATO as well as the European Union.
Stoltenberg said on June 19 that a formal invitation for membership would not be discussed at the summit but rather ways to "move Ukraine closer to NATO."
Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russia was closely monitoring the situation, recalling that Kiev's orientation toward NATO was one of the main reasons for Moscow undertaking a special military operation last year.

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Alan Arkin, 'Little Miss Sunshine' Oscar Winning US Actor Dead at 89 – Reports

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) – US actor Alan Arkin recipient of an Oscar in 2006 for staring in "Little Miss Sunshine" passed away at the age of 89, People reported on Friday.
The Oscar and Tony Award-winning actor, passed away aged 89, his sons Adam, Matthew, and Anthony confirmed in a joint statement, the report said.
Arkin was described as a talented individual, a loving husband, father, and great-grandfather, the report said citing his sons, noting that he would be missed.
Arkin was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1934, and moved to Los Angeles with his parents during his childhood. After college, he had a brief musical career and then embarked on his acting journey, starting at the Second City improvisational comedy troupe in Chicago.
The actor joined Broadway in 1961, where he appeared in "From the Second City", winning his Tony-winning performance in 1963 over his role in "Enter Laughing". During his over 50-year acting career, Arkin appeared in over 100 movies and was nominated for six Emmy Awards.

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Sullivan Discusses Stability in Indo-Pacific With Vietnam Senior Diplomat - White House

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has met with Vietnam's Communist Party top diplomat Le Hoai Trung and discussed a host of bilateral and international issues, including peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, the White House said on Friday.
"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with the Chairman of the Communist Party of Vietnam's Central External Relations Commission, Le Hoai Trung at the White House on June 29, 2023," the White House said in a press release. "[They] discussed a wide range of areas for future cooperation, including on energy, climate change, investment, education, human rights and efforts to uphold peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific."
The two officials reaffirmed the strength of their countries' bilateral relations on the ten-year

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anniversary of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership, the release said.
On Thursday, Trung also met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to discuss ways to bolster economic partnerships through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity and strengthen cooperation especially because the United States hosts this year the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

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Blinken to Visit Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana Next Month for Caribbean Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit the dual-island country Trinidad and Tobago to meet with heads of government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) before traveling to Guyana for talks with the country's leadership, US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Friday.
"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago July 5, 2023. Secretary Blinken will participate in the Caribbean Community Heads of Government meeting and the 50th Anniversary of CARICOM celebration," Miller said in a statement.
Blinken will engage with the heads of government on "pressing issues" in the region, the statement said.
The meeting follows and builds on a trip by US Vice President Kamala Harris to The Bahamas earlier this month, where she co-hosted the US-Caribbean Leaders Meeting, the statement added.
Blinken will then travel to Guyana on July 6 to meet with Guyanese President Mohamed Irfaan Ali and Foreign Minister Hugh Todd and key cabinet members, the statement said.
Blinken will discuss "priority bilateral issues" with the officials, including food and energy security, decarbonization, climate resilience and regional migration, the statement said.

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CIA Chief Made Secret Trip to Ukraine to Discuss Battle Plans, Ceasefire Talks - Reports

(Adds details, background in paras 3-11)
WASHINGTON, July 1 (Sputnik) - The head of the CIA in a secret trip to Ukraine held talks with officials on an ambitious strategy to retake territory from Russia and open ceasefire talks with Moscow by year end, The Washington Post reported, citing officials familiar with the visit.
CIA Director William Burns during the trip in June met with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Ukraine's top intelligence officials, the report said on Friday. The purpose of the visit was to reaffirm the Biden administration's commitment to sharing intelligence designed to help Ukraine in the conflict, the report added.
Ukraine officials told Burns they aim to move artillery and missile systems near the boundary

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line of Crimea and push further into eastern Ukraine by the fall. Then Kiev intends to open negotiations with Moscow for the first time since they broke down in March of last year, the report said, citing people involved with the planning.

Ukrainian officials said they hope by agreeing not to take Crimea, Russia would accept whatever security guarantees Kiev can secure from the West, the report added.

One Ukrainian official told the media outlet that the "the US agrees that Ukraine should enter the negotiations from a strong position."

The CIA refused to comment when asked about Burns' assessment of Kiev's plans, the report said.

Burns's trip occurred just before Wagner chief Yevgeniy Prigozhin's mutiny. The report said the US intelligence community had detected in mid-June that Prigozhin was plotting something, but those findings were not relayed to Ukrainian officials.

According to the report, Kiev is under extraordinary pressure from Western allies that provided Ukraine with billions of dollars in weaponry ahead of the counteroffensive.

On Friday, The Wall Street Journal reported that Burns recently called his Russian counterpart, Sergey Naryshkin, to inform him that the United States had no involvement in Prigozhin's mutiny against the Russian government.

Ukraine launched its much-touted counteroffensive in early June after multiple postponements. The Russian Defense Ministry has repeatedly said that Ukrainian troops are trying to advance in the South Donetsk, Bakhmut, and Zaporizhzhia directions, but without success.

On Tuesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Ukraine lost as many as 259 tanks and 780 armored vehicles since the start of its counter-offensive. A number of Western media also noted the weak results of Kiev's counteroffensive, while Zelenskyy himself admitted that the progress was "slower than desired."

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CIA Chief Made Secret Trip to Ukraine to Discuss Battle Plans, Ceasefire Talks - Reports

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Trump Says China's Bases in Cuba Are Most Serious Treat to US

WASHINGTON, July 1 (Sputnik) - Chinese military bases in Cuba represent the most serious threat to the United States, former President Donald Trump said at a forum.

"China – they opened up military bases, they are opening up military operations in Cuba, 90 miles off our coast. That is the most serious threat that I can imagine," Trump said at the Moms for Liberty forum in Philadelphia on Friday.

He accused the media of silencing that because current US President Joe Biden is "very vulnerable" on that.

Trump said earlier this week that he will give China two days to remove any of its military installations from Cuba or otherwise will impose tariffs and taxes on billions of dollars worth of their goods.

US intelligence agencies tracked employees of the Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE at suspected Chinese spy facilities in Cuba, The Wall Street Journal reported last week, citing sources familiar with the matter.

Earlier in June, WSJ reported, citing US officials familiar with classified information, that China had reached a deal with Cuba to establish a spy base in the island nation as a response to US military activities near the Chinese borders, including in Taiwan. Commenting on the article, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said the report "is not accurate." Cuba's Embassy in Washington said the article was "totally mendacious and unfounded information," while the Chinese diplomatic mission had no comment.

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Trump Says Would Slash US Department of Education, Return School Policy to States

WASHINGTON, July 1 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said during remarks to political group Moms for Liberty that he will undertake several educational reforms if reelected in 2024, including slashing the federal Department of Education and returning school policy decisions to state governments.

"I want to move our education back to the states," Trump said on Friday. "We may have a little remnant… a little coordination, but it will be 1%, 2%."

Trump said that he will allow parents to vote to fire school principals who are not performing to their standards as part of an effort to bolster local control and parental rights in education.

The former president also vowed to restore order to schools in the United States by overhauling standards on school discipline and juvenile justice to remove violent students from classrooms and place them into alternative institutions.

Trump said he would cut funding for schools who teach about concepts including critical race theory and transgenderism. He also said he would instruct the Justice Department to pursue cases against schools who engage in "militant and country-destroying practices" for violating the Establishment Clause of the US Constitution, comparing political ideology with religious thought.

Moreover, Trump said he would direct the US Justice Department to pursue civil rights claims

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 07/03/2023 12:05:26 PM

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against schools who engage in unlawful racial discrimination, following a Supreme Court decision earlier this week effectively ending affirmative action in higher education.
Moms for Liberty advocates against government overreach and intimidation tactics in education, according to the group's website.

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US Energy Dept. Announces Purchase of Additional 3.2Mln Barrels of Oil to Refill Reserve

WASHINGTON, July 1 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Energy said in a press release that it purchased an additional 3.2 million barrels of crude oil that will be used to refill the Strategic Petroleum Reserve.
"Today, the US Department of Energy's (DOE) Office of Petroleum Reserves announced that contracts have been awarded for the acquisition of 3.2 million barrels of US produced crude oil for the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR)," the Energy Department said on Friday.
According to the Energy Department, the 3.2 million barrels of crude oil are being purchased for about $71.98 per barrel.
The Energy Department will announce an additional purchase of crude oil on July 7, the release said.
Biden authorized the withdrawal of more than 200 million barrels from the SPR since November 2021 as part of an effort to mitigate soaring gasoline prices for Americans.

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UN Says Black Sea Initiative Must Continue as 'Lifeline for Global Food Security'

UNITED NATIONS, July 1 (Sputnik) - The grain export agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, and the Memorandum of Understanding between the United Nations and Russia must continue because they are a lifeline for global food security, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.
"Signed in Istanbul in July 2022, the Black Sea Initiative (BSI) and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aim to facilitate shipments of grain and fertilizers from the Russian Federation and Ukraine to world markets. These agreements remain a lifeline for global food security and they must continue," Dujarric said in a statement on Friday.
Grain and fertilizer exports via the Black Sea as well as other exports from Russia have resulted in a global food index price decrease of 22%.
Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and the United Nations reached an agreement on July 22, 2022 to provide a safe humanitarian maritime corridor for vessels carrying food and fertilizer exports from Black Sea ports.
Russia has criticized the implementation of the agreement, saying the majority of the exports were ending up in the countries of the collective West and only a small amount in the third

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world. In addition, Russia has complained that the agreement was not implemented fully since the Western sanctions against Russia were not removed for exports of Russian grain and fertilizer.

On May 18, 2023, Russia extended the agreement for an additional 60 days, until July 17. However, Moscow has repeatedly warned that it will not extend the agreement if not implemented in full.

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US Lawmaker Files Budget Amendments to Ban US From Giving Kiev F16s, Long-Range Missiles

WASHINGTON, July 1 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said she filed amendments to the defense budget that would forbid the US from providing Ukraine with F-16 jets and long-range missiles and cut off all funding to Kiev until a diplomatic resolution to the conflict is found.

"We should be pushing for peace, not funding war. I filed amendments to the NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act] that strip out all funding for Ukraine and prohibit providing them with F-16 fighter jets and long-range missiles. The death and destruction must stop, so in order to achieve peace, I also filed an amendment to prohibit any and all funding to Ukraine until a diplomatic solution to the war is reached," Greene said in a tweet on Friday.

Earlier in the day, US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said he is not aware of any decisions with respect to sending the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) to Ukraine, but noted that it is a "continuous, ongoing process."

On Thursday, The Wall Street Journal reported citing officials that the United States is close to agreeing to send ATACMS to Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's top aide earlier this week said Kiev still hoped to receive the first supply of F-16 fighter jets in aid from Western countries by the end of 2023. Last week, Politico reported, citing Western officials, that Ukraine could receive its first F-16 fighter jets from Western sponsors in early 2024.

A former Pentagon official told the media that the Netherlands and Denmark could be among the first suppliers, but no final decision had been made yet.

Russia has slammed the possible delivery of F-16 fighters to Ukraine, warning that the jets will become a legitimate military target for Russian forces. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has warned that the delivery of F-16s to Ukraine will be a further escalation because the jets have a modification that makes them nuclear-capable.

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Biden Issues Memo Concluding Review of JFK Assassination Records - White House

WASHINGTON, July 1 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has issued a memorandum concluding the review of declassified records related to the 1963 assassination of former President John Kennedy, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre announced.

"As part of the Biden-Harris administration's continued commitment to government transparency and accountability, President Biden issued a memorandum today concluding the review of records from President John F. Kennedy's assassination records collection. Under President Biden's leadership, agencies have fully declassified over 16,000 records since 2021," Jean-Pierre said on Friday.

The action reflects Biden's instruction that all information related to Kennedy's assassination should be released except when the strongest possible reasons counsel otherwise, Jean-Pierre said.

"As a result, over 99 percent of the records in the collection are now publicly available at the National Archives," Jean-Pierre said.

In keeping with Biden's direction, the National Archives will digitize the entire collection to make it more accessible to the public, she added.

Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963 while riding in a motorcade in Dallas, Texas. The president was shot by US Marine Corp veteran Lee Harvey Oswald, according to the official Warren Commission report released in 1964.

The Warren Commission's report was initially sealed until 2039 before Congress passed the so-called JFK Records Act in 1992, which directed the National Archives and Records Administration to develop a collection on the assassination.

The official narrative has been the subject of intense criticism whereby a number of alternative theories to explain Kennedy's assassination have since been offered.

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Blinken Expresses Appreciation for Saudi Support During Shooting Incident - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by telephone with Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan and expressed appreciation for Saudi Arabia's support during a shooting incident outside of the US consulate in Jeddah on Thursday, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with the Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Prince Faisal bin Farhan. The Secretary expressed appreciation for Saudi Arabia's support during the recent shooting incident outside the US Consulate General in Jeddah and its continued support for our diplomatic missions," Miller said in a statement on Friday.

A State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Thursday that no US citizens were harmed in the deadly shooting incident that took place outside the US consulate in Jeddah.

The US consulate went on a lockdown during and after the incident, the State Department

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spokesperson said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 1 (Sputnik) -

UNREST IN FRANCE
* More than 870 people were detained in France overnight as a result of mass protests - and riots - in response to a police shooting dead a 17-year-old teenager during a traffic stop, the BFMTV broadcaster reported on Friday.
* The French Cabinet ordered the deployment of armored vehicles of the Gendarmerie due to the ongoing mass riots in the country, the broadcaster reported, citing a law enforcement source.
* The French authorities will identify those who call for protests through social media in light of the ongoing unrest triggered by the killing of the teenager, French President Emmanuel Macron said.

POLAND ASKS TO HOST US NUCLEAR WEAPONS
* Poland wants to host US nuclear weapons in response to deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said on Friday.
* White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said he has nothing to share regarding Poland's appeal to host US nuclear weapons.

SHOOTING IN MOLDOVA
* Two people were killed at the Chisinau airport in Moldova on Friday after an individual, identified as a foreigner, opened fire, the Interior Ministry said.
* The Moldovan special police brigade detained the individual, the Interior Ministry said.
* Moldovan Prime Minister Dorin Recean said a citizen of Tajikistan opened fire at the Chisinau airport.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Friday he does not find it surprising that the Ukrainian counteroffensive is going slower than predicted as he personally said before it will be very long and difficult.
* The White House said there are no new announcements about reports that the Biden administration was moving closer to approving sending Ukraine cluster munitions.
* The US government is taking additional steps to increase the recruitment of persons wishing to fight for the Ukrainian military against the background of the unsuccessful course of the conflict in Ukraine for the Biden administration, a military-diplomatic source in Damascus told Sputnik.

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* The Russian military repelled five Ukrainian attacks in the Donetsk area in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* The Pope's peace envoy to Ukraine Cardinal Matteo Zuppi and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia discussed humanitarian initiatives that can facilitate a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Ukraine, the Vatican said.

RUSSIAN ENERGY SECTOR
* Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak instructed oil companies to prioritize petrol supplies to the domestic market, even when exports are more profitable, the Russian cabinet said on Friday.
* The Russian oil company Rosneft elected Mohammed Bin Saleh Al Sada as chairman of its board of directors.

UN PEACEKEEPING MISSION IN MALI
* The UN Security Council unanimously voted on Friday to end the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali by the end of the year.
* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is calling on all parties in Mali to respect the ceasefire as the United Nations mission withdraws from the country, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

RUSSIAN HOCKEY PLAYER DETAINED IN POLAND
* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday that he is sure the Russian embassy in Warsaw will clarify the situation regarding the detention of a Russian ice hockey player in Poland.
* The Russian embassy in Warsaw has sent a note to the Polish Foreign Ministry to request information about the detained Russian ice hockey player, an embassy spokesperson told Sputnik.

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