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7/7/23 Friday

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Despite Zelensky Protestations, NATO Statesmen Understand 'Zero Likelihood' for Ukraine to Join Bloc

Ahead of the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, next week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is touring European countries in an effort to push his country's admission to the alliance. On Friday, that meant pushing Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to take up Kiev's cause at the summit.

Retired US Air Force Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski, a former analyst for the US Department of Defense, told Sputnik the NATO alliance has repeatedly stated it won't entertain the idea of Ukrainian membership until after the conflict is settled with Russia, which despite the public rhetoric to the contrary, Zelensky understands must eventually come to an end.

"I think there is a zero likelihood that Ukraine will be admitted next week, but there is a possibility that a smaller, post-conflict Ukraine will be added to NATO in coming years, or at least put on a track to membership," he said.

While the Brussels-based alliance has said it will not close the door on any country joining it, NATO members have so far been cool to the idea of adding Ukraine anytime soon. Even before the conflict with Russia began in February 2022, NATO had elaborated on a yearslong path of reform and conflict settlement - including that in the Donbass - before Ukraine could even be considered as an ally; several times since, NATO has reiterated its adherence to those standards for Ukraine.

The ranks of the hesitant include Washington, where US President Joe Biden has given ambiguous statements about Ukraine's future NATO membership, saying recently that his administration would not "make it easy" for Ukraine to join.

"Biden is surrounded by people who really do not know what they are doing, and of course Biden cannot be dealt with directly because he is senile and in poor mental health," Kwiatkowski said. "Biden's non-military advisors do wish to continue on the so-far-counterproductive path of weakening the military, economy and political stability of Russia - Biden's military advisers would prefer to engage China as the main enemy."

"Meanwhile, an election approaches, one that will be wrought with variables that Biden's people cannot control. In this confusion and disagreement on strategic goals, I think the conservative approach to delay any movement towards Ukraine as a member of NATO, is prevailing, and will prevail," she said.

Indeed, Zelensky himself recently stated that "we understand that we cannot be a member of NATO during the war, but we need to be sure that after the war we will be." However, he has also said negotiation with Russia is impossible.

Kwiatkowski said "Zelensky is often an idiot but he does understand that the conflict must end, in part because the western investors like Blackrock are ready to loan new money to Kiev and the US to rebuild Ukraine, and also because the stocks of available weapons systems are

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already depleted among his western allies. It is either a sign that he is ready to negotiate or settle, or that he's ready to be paid off to continue to do the will of the US, UK, and the outgoing NATO chief."

"I understand that NATO membership cannot be offered to a country engaged in an ongoing military conflict. Historically, only stable, at-peace countries can become members; otherwise, pre-existing NATO members are agreeing to go to war under the Article V protocol," she noted. "Perhaps peace will be articulated in Vilnius as a requirement for Zelensky in order for him to be considered as a future NATO member."

"At the same time, all of NATO's sometimes-non-interoperable older equipment and systems are being eliminated on the Ukraine battlefield - and this paves the way for a new US military industrial sector decision favorable to rebuilding all of NATO's military inventories and stock, and that is hoped to include Ukraine as a new buyer of these systems."

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'Step in Right Direction': Free Speech Activist Hails Order Blocking Biden-Social Media Coordination

On Tuesday, a federal judge blocked the Biden administration from communicating with social media companies about much of the content on their networks. For years, they have worked to suppress what the government called misinformation about COVID-19, election interference, and other topics Washington desired to keep out of the public discourse.

While the judge gave some allowances for continued communication about threats of violence and to national security, the rest was blocked via preliminary injunction due to the judge's belief that a lawsuit challenging the behavior on free speech grounds was likely to succeed.

Misty Winston, political activist, organizer and co-host of Facts on the Ground, told Sputnik on Friday that many critics have accused Judge Terry A. Doughty of making a partisan ruling in favor of Republicans, having been appointed by then-US President Donald Trump.

"That may very well be the case, but that doesn't change the fact that this is a good thing," she told Radio Sputnik.

"The government has no business contacting social media companies and requesting that they take down information. They try to use the idea that, oh, this is in the public interest because of false and misleading information about Covid. Well, a lot of the false and misleading information about Covid came from the government. And it wasn't just that they were silencing the average, everyday citizen: they were shutting down doctors and scientists and researchers who are at the top of their field. That's something that they should not be allowed to do. We have a First Amendment for a reason, and the First Amendment says that the government cannot limit your speech. And that is exactly what happens when the Biden administration contacts or any administration contacts social media companies and requests that they take down posts just simply because they want to call them misleading or misinformation, they get to define those terms."

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“It's going to be politicized, it's going to become a partisan issue. And that's really unfortunate because this isn't about Covid, it's not about left or right, this is about the government interfering with speech. And that is exactly what's happening.”

“We know it's not just simply them calling them up and being like, ‘hey, what do you think about this?’ They're calling up Twitter and they're saying, ‘here's this post. Here's this person. They don't we don't like what they're posting.’ I mean, we know that that is the case. And in fact, it goes even farther than that. We now know that the FBI was contacting social media companies to get information about a journalist, Aaron Maté, to give to the Ukrainian government. I mean, this is a huge thing, but it's not often talked about because I think mainstream media obviously is on the side of the government here. They obviously want to be able to have a lock down on the narrative. And so but we know that that's not true.”

Winston remarked that another example noted in Judge Doughty’s ruling was the suppression of a New York Post article about the contents of Hunter Biden’s so-called “Laptop From Hell,” which was published just weeks before the November 2020 election.

“In the Hunter Biden laptop story [there] is a massive indication of that, because that is I mean, the people who spent four or five years screaming about foreign election interference were themselves interfering in an election. That is election interference, to silence a story like that right before the election takes place. That is obviously going to have severe implications on the way people think about the election or who they may vote for. That is a really dangerous territory to be in, and to take down a news website and to take, you know, deplatform them and to remove their ability to to post a story that is based in fact, in truth, that is a really dangerous and slippery slope.”

“I'm not a big fan of [US Senator] Rand Paul (R-KY), but Rand Paul on the floor of Congress said the biggest purveyor of misinformation is the United States government. We know that to be true. They've lied to us how many times? Weapons of mass destruction, the Gulf of Tonkin, the Syrian gas attacks. I mean, it's just one after the other after the other. We know that they’ve lied to us on a regular basis. So the idea that we want to hand them over power to determine what is misinformation and give them the ability to censor anybody that disagrees with them - that's terrifying. That is not okay. And that is something we all need to be fighting against. And so this ruling is a really great step in the right direction in that in that fight.”

However, Winston’s criticism of those threatening free speech wasn’t just limited to the US government: the activist noted that recent policy changes by Twitter CEO Elon Musk have also restricted users’ access to information in a public forum. Over the weekend, Musk announced that users would be limited to seeing a certain number of posts per day, based on whether the user had a paid or unpaid account.

“He's trying to kill Twitter. Like, what else could it be? It's ridiculous. What is he thinking? I don't know if it was just a money grab. I know that Twitter has lost a lot of money. He claims that it's never about that. Right? It's never about the money,” Winston said. “He's a billionaire. That's ridiculous. But yeah, that would kill Twitter. I think people would flee the platform. Listen, I'm not paying for Twitter. Period. End of story. There's nothing about it that makes it that valuable to me that I'm willing to pay a monthly subscription to use a social media platform. I'm just not willing to do it. But limiting the amount of posts that people can see, that's so absurd, because you don't even have control over which posts that you see, it's just given to you in a random order on your feed.”

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She noted that Musk gave varying explanations about the cause of the limitations, including data mining and screenshots, none of which seemed to satisfy observers.
“You know what makes me giggle a little bit is that, you know, Elon Musk, the guy who released the Twitter Files and claims he's all about transparency. There was no transparency surrounding that whole ordeal over the weekend. There was no warning. There was no explanation. And then when explanations did come, they were kind of vague. And then it was like there was an explanation. Then there was another one, and then it was you know what I mean? Like there was no transparency. There was no communication about what was going on beforehand or even during the situation. And then finally, when he did explain … it was just a whole hot mess.”

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Nuclear Power ‘Lapdog’ IAEA to Suffer ‘Reputational Blow’ for Fukushima Wastewater Release

Numerous regional governments have for years protested Japan’s plans to release the wastewater from Fukushima Daiichi into the Pacific Ocean, including South Korea, China, and numerous Pacific Island nations, whose fishing fleets work the vast ocean waters.
The Japanese government has moved to begin the gradual release of 1.3 million tons of treated wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear power plant in Okuma. The water, which is radioactive from having been used to keep molten spent nuclear fuel cool in the aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami that devastated the Sendai plain, has been filtered through the Advanced Liquid Processing System (ALPS). The planned release will take place over 30 to 40 years.
Kevin Kamps, the radioactive waste watchdog at Beyond Nuclear, told Sputnik on Friday that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is caught in a vise between its advocacy for nuclear power and the reality of the detrimental effects of improper storage of its waste, which is a key problem with the Japanese government’s plan since 2011 to store that waste at the site of the damaged Fukushima nuclear power plant.
“I think it's just an industry public relations campaign to kind of say, look, the ocean's a big place, i's just going to disappear into nothingness. And it's not true,” he told Radio Sputnik. “In fact, it's going to concentrate the radioactivity in the food chain. And that's going to be the main pathway for human exposure as people eating Fukushima contaminated fish from the Pacific Ocean.”
“There's so many options that are better than dumping it in the ocean. One option is what they've been doing for the past 12 years, since this catastrophe began: storing it in tanks. It has not gone perfectly, but their rationale for not continuing with the tank storage is that they've run out of room, they've run out of physical space. And all I can say is, would you please give me a break? They have turned that region into a radioactive sacrifice zone because of the catastrophe,” Kamps said, adding that the area has already been rendered inhospitable by the radiation.
“There’s an option to expand the site perimeter, continue with the tank storage. A problem with that, though, is that site, as shown by the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami, it's not a stable site, so storage there may not be the best idea,” he noted.

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“A colleague of mine, Dr. Arjan Nakatani, is actually serving on the Pacific Islands Forum, reviewing this insane scheme on behalf of Pacific Island nations and opposing it. He has pointed out from the earliest days of the catastrophe that the radioactive wastewater could be transported to a more stable site and stored there. The reason this makes sense is tritium has a 12.3-year half life. Multiply by ten to get the hazardous persistence. That's 123 years. One hundred twenty-three years of storage is doable, humans can do that. That's really the best plan for what they have now.”

Kamps noted that several months after the 2011 disaster, radioactive cesium in the seawater along the California coast had doubled, proving that while “it’s a big ocean,” the radioactive materials won’t just disappear. In the case of Fukushima, it’s not just radioactive waste entering the water, either: the water itself is radioactive.

“The main culprit that we need to worry about is radioactive tritium, which is radioactive hydrogen, which means that the water molecules in that radioactive wastewater are themselves radioactive. It's not a contaminant per se. It's radioactive water. And other contaminants in there include strontium-90, cesium-137, iodine-129 - the list goes on. They have run it through filters.”

“The radioactive isotopes per element behave chemically just like their non-radioactive sibling. So, for example: cesium, that's going to go to muscle tissue; strontium, that's going to go to bone; tritium is going to go anywhere in the human body and other living things that hydrogen goes, which is everywhere. Radioactive carbon-14, the nuclear industry likes to say that they're carbon-free. Well, they're not carbon-14 free. And ironically enough, carbon-14 - which again, can go anywhere in the human body that carbon can go, which is everywhere - is perhaps the most biologically harmful of these radioactive poisons because it has a 5,500-year half-life. That means 55,000 years of hazard.”

“And all of these radioactive elements are going to enter the food chain and in fact, they're going to concentrate upwards to humans at the top of that pyramid, through fish, through seaweed. You mentioned that there has been panic buying of salt in South Korea to try to get salt not exposed to this ocean release before they start releasing. So the shelves in South Korea are devoid of salt because people are buying as much as they can before this bad idea began.”

Kamps noted other examples include the US’ underground storage sites for radioactive waste such as the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), buried deep under the New Mexico desert inside a watertight salt formation, where it is expected to safely decay for 10,000 years. However, even then, it took only 15 years for an accidental release of radioactive material, which escaped through a ventilation shaft.

Kamps said the IAEA’s endorsement of the release would deliver the agency “a huge reputational blow,” adding that it has long downplayed the risks of nuclear power and the outcomes of disasters such as that at Chernobyl in Soviet Ukraine in 1986.

“The International Atomic Energy Agency under the Nonproliferation Treaty of 1970 is a pro-nuclear power institution. Their job is to supposedly hold nuclear weapons proliferation in check while advocating an expansion of nuclear power. It's a schizophrenic mandate. And what they do is they will downplay Chernobyl, they will downplay Fukushima as part of their pro-nuclear power mandate.”

Kamps also noted that the Japanese government has been strongly pro-nuclear power since the 1950s, thanks to pressure by the US government, which occupied the country from the end

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of World War II until 1952. He accused the IAEA of being “a lapdog sitting in the lap of Tokyo Electric and the Japanese government.”

“It's pretty astounding that they're willing to stick to their script when, you know, they are getting called out by a long list of countries in the Pacific who are going to be harmed by this and by scientists with a lot more integrity than any of those those institutions I mentioned, who are saying that the data is nonexistent, analyzes have not been completed. It's all very half-baked. And I guess those promoting it are hoping that this public relations scheme to just make people look away and forget about it is going to work. So I guess that fight is on.”

“There's a growing list of countries that have banned importation of seafood from the Fukushima region, which include places like South Korea and China and elsewhere. And the list of countries that have spoken out very strongly against this wastewater dum, those same countries and many others, including Russia, the Philippines, the Pacific Islands Coalition, who have an expert panel looking at this, have pointed out just how sloppy the so-called analysis by Tokyo Electric and the Japanese government have been. The documentation is missing. The analyzes are far from complete. Even analyses that the IAEA promised to carry out are one-third done at this point, and yet they have signed off on the dumping to begin. So the public relations facade of proponents of dumping is very thin and they're being called out on it at the highest levels of many governments on the Pacific Ocean.”

Many of those same governments, Kamps noted, are also very heavily dependent on nuclear power and wrestle with many of the same questions of safe waste disposal. Pressure from anti-nuclear groups has also forced their hand, and the expert noted that in Japan, those groups have long been “the little Dutch boy with their finger in the dike, preventing this scheme from going forward for many years.”

“Hats-off to the Japanese anti-nuclear movement, which has kept the vast majority of reactors shut down since Fukushima. They won't let them be reactivated. And that's something that amazes me because we try so hard in the United States to do that, too. But we're often steamrolled in our efforts,” he said.

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Scientists Baffled by Ancient Supermassive Black Hole Considered Oldest Ever Found

A group of astronomers have discovered the oldest known supermassive black hole, over 13 billion years old. Now, they are struggling to understand how it could have formed so soon after the Big Bang.

At the center of the galaxy CEERS 1019 sits a supermassive black hole, as is common in most galaxies, except that this one formed sooner after the Big Bang than any other comparable black hole. According to calculations by a group of astronomers led by Steven Finkelstein of the University of Texas at Austin, it formed just 570 million years after the universe did.

“Until now, research about objects in the early universe was largely theoretical,” Finkelstein said. “With Webb, not only can we see black holes and galaxies at extreme distances, we can now

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start to accurately measure them. That's the tremendous power of this telescope," he said of the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) used in the study.

In the timeline of the early universe, that period was when the first stars and small galaxies were forming, following a period when most matter was so widely dispersed by the initial Big Bang explosion that it had not yet condensed enough to spark nuclear fusion and cast light into the universe. Yet, somehow, a massive black hole managed to form.

Black holes typically form following the death of massive stars; when the fuel that sustains their light has burned out, the core of the star collapses under its own immense gravity, which is so strong it overpowers basic subatomic nuclear forces and falls into an infinitely small spot with gravity so powerful that even light cannot escape from it.

Still, this black hole is on the smaller side: while the supermassive black holes that anchor other galaxies can be several billion times the mass of our sun, CEERS 1019 is about 9 million solar masses - an interstellar pipsqueak by comparison. Sagittarius A*, the supermassive black hole at the center of the Milky Way, is also quite small - just 4.3 million solar masses.

"Researchers have long known that there must be lower-mass black holes in the early universe. Webb is the first observatory that can capture them so clearly," said Dale Kocevski of Colby College in Waterville, Maine, in a statement. "Now we think that lower-mass black holes might be all over the place, waiting to be discovered."

Kocevski led one of three studies in the Cosmic Evolution Early Release Science (CEERS) Survey that used the JWST to study the super-distant objects; two others used similar methods and also found ancient black holes and galaxies, some of which were nearly as old as CEERS 1019.

Rebecca Larson of the University of Texas at Austin, who underlined another of the studies, noted the data obtained via the JWST is extremely detailed, allowing them to study not just the black hole, but also its host galaxy. In other cases, supermassive black holes often outshine their host galaxy due to the light given off by their consumption of surrounding matter.

"Looking at this distant object with this telescope is a lot like looking at data from black holes that exist in galaxies near our own," she said. "There are so many spectral lines to analyze!"

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Trump's Royal Ramble - Cartoon
By - Ted Rall

Special Counsel Jack Smith is looking into a Trump-era Oval Office meeting that reportedly turned chaotic as White House lawyers and Donald Trump's advisers "yelled" at each other while discussing plans to keep the former President in power.

The meeting included national security adviser Michael Flynn, former Overstock CEO Patrick Byrne, Trump attorney Sidney 'Release the Kraken' Powell, White House lawyers and others, including some who attended by phone.

Several witnesses have been asked about the meeting by prosecutors, including Rudy Giuliani.

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during a meeting with investigators. Byrne and Powell also spoke about the meeting under oath during testimony to the House select committee that investigated the January 6, 2021 riots. During the meeting, a plan was reportedly discussed that included Trump ordering the military to seize voting booths from key states Trump lost, appointing Powell as a special counsel to investigate voter fraud and the declaration of martial law.
The group nearly came to blows, according to reports published in US Media a few weeks after the December 18 meeting, and included insults, yelling and profanity.

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Rheinmetall to Open Tank Plant in Ukraine Within 12 Weeks - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall will open an armored vehicle plant in Ukraine within the next 12 weeks to help the country build and repair tanks amid the ongoing conflict with Russia, CNN reported on Monday, citing an interview with CEO Armin Papperger.
The company previously said it is eyeing a 200 million euro ($219 million) battle tank factory on Ukrainian soil, capable of producing approximately 400 tanks annually.
Papperger told CNN that the plant will be jointly operated with Ukrainian state-owned defense group Ukroboronprom, which will also own the facility.
The factory could be protected from a potential Russian attack, Papperger said.
"There are a lot of factories at the moment which are producing military goods [in Ukraine]. It is just another one — and we can protect that also," he stated.
Rheinmetall will also boost its annual output of artillery rounds from 100,000 to 600,000 next year, and much of that extra production would be sent to Kiev, the CEO said.
The German arms maker, in theory, could cover 60% of Ukraine's demand for artillery ammunition, Papperger added.
Addressing Germany's plans to meet NATO's 2% spending threshold next year, the Rheinmetall CEO said it is not enough. He suggested that the alliance should raise its goal to 3% of GDP to be ready to defend itself from a possible "Russian attack."

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Canada to Send Additional 1,200 Troops to Latvia as Part of NATO Mission - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) – Canada will deploy an additional 1,200 troops in Latvia as part of NATO's Operation Reassurance, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Monday.
"Today, I'm announcing that we're going to more than double our presence, deploying up to an additional 1,200 members of the Canadian Armed Forces to serve and defend democracy and the rule of law. These additional personnel will reinforce and enhance our land, maritime and air

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capabilities and support special operations in Central and Eastern Europe," Trudeau said during a joint press conference with his Latvian counterpart, Krisjanis Karins.

Canada currently has some 1,100 troops in the Baltics as part of NATO's effort to strengthen the alliance's eastern flank. It is Canada's largest military deployment outside of its own borders.

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Canada Pledges $2Bln for NATO's Operation Reassurance Over Next 3 Years - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - Canada is allocating C$2.6 billion ($2 billion) in funding for NATO's Operation Reassurance in Eastern Europe over the next three years, the Canadian government said on Monday.

"Ahead of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Leaders' Summit this week, the Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, announced that Canada is committing $2.6 billion in funding starting in 2023-24, to renew and expand Operation REASSURANCE for three years," the statement said.

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PREVIEW - Biden Trip to Europe Centers on NATO Talks About Defense Capabilities, Ukraine Membership

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's trip to Europe over the coming days will focus on the NATO leaders' summit where talks will revolve around strengthening the alliance's defense capabilities, especially on its eastern flank, and reviewing Ukraine's continued plea to be allowed into the group.

Biden is scheduled to travel to the United Kingdom, Lithuania, and Finland from Sunday to Thursday, but will spend his time at the NATO leaders' summit in Vilnius on Tuesday and Wednesday.

White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters Friday that Biden will meet with all of the NATO leaders at the summit as well as a number of NATO partners from Europe and from the Indo-Pacific.

"They will discuss a range of subjects from strengthening NATO's eastern flank to modernizing NATO's deterrence and defense capabilities," Sullivan said.

US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith told reporters that the upcoming NATO summit will result in a concrete package of deliverables, including longer-term assistance on military modernization of Ukraine.

Smith also noted that the summit will address Ukraine's membership aspirations, but will not simply restate the Bucharest statement from 2008.

According to Sullivan, no one should anticipate that NATO will grant Ukraine membership during the summit this week, but allies will discuss what the necessary steps Kiev must take if it

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wishes to join.

"Vilnius will be an important moment on that pathway towards membership because the United States, our NATO allies, and Ukraine will have the opportunity to discuss the reforms that are still necessary for Ukraine to come up to NATO standards," Sullivan said. "So this will in fact be a milestone, but Ukraine still has further steps that it needs to take before membership."

Moreover, Sullivan mentioned that NATO allies have had ongoing discussions about whether Ukraine would need to fulfill the Membership Action Plan, which essentially establishes the standards that must be met to qualify for NATO membership, but he declined to comment on whether a decision will be finalized in Vilnius.

Biden is also scheduled to have a bilateral meeting with Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda prior to the start of the NATO summit.

After the NATO summit, Biden will deliver a speech on Wednesday evening in Vilnius about the United States' cooperation with allies and partners to take on challenges from Russia and other urgent matters such as climate change, according to Sullivan.

OTHER TRAVEL

Prior to the NATO leaders' summit, Biden will first travel to London for talks with King Charles III and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Sullivan said.

Biden's meeting with King Charles III will focus on mobilizing climate finance, especially bringing private finance off the sidelines for clean energy deployment and adaptation in developing countries, Sullivan said.

The US president's meeting with Sunak will revolve around a range of bilateral and global issues, he added.

Biden will conclude his trip in Europe with a visit to Helsinki on Thursday to participate in the US-Nordic leaders summit and for a bilateral meeting with Finish President Sauli Niinisto.

In these meetings, Biden will advance the United States' cooperation with the Nordic countries on shared regional security objectives, along with shared efforts on technology, health, climate and clean energy, Sullivan said.

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Senator Paul Says Passing Measure Urging Ukraine Into NATO May Lead US to War With Russia

WASHINGTON, July 8 (Sputnik) - Republican Senator Rand Paul said in a statement that a proposal from his congressional colleagues to potentially introduce and pass a resolution urging Ukraine's admission into NATO could lead the United States on a path to war with Russia.

Earlier in the day, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said he will be working with Republican and Democratic senators to pass a resolution pushing for the admission of Ukraine into NATO.

"Absolutely not. This is exactly wrong - as usual - and could very well lead us to war with Russia, something no one should want," Paul said on Friday in response to the proposal.

Graham said he believes there is an overwhelming majority of senators who would support this proposition.

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Ukrainian membership in NATO, according to Graham, could be one of the best way to prevent future wars and promote peace.

NATO leaders are expected to discuss this matter during a summit in Lithuania on Tuesday and Wednesday.

However, US officials this week indicated Ukraine is not yet eligible to join NATO and no one should expect the alliance to grant them membership after the summit in Vilnius.

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Disciplinary Panel Recommends Disbarring Giuliani Over Trump Election Claims

WASHINGTON, July 8 (Sputnik) - A three person attorney disciplinary committee recommended that Rudy Giuliani be stripped of his Washington, DC law license for trying to overturn the results of the 2020 US presidential election, a court filing revealed.

"We have considered in mitigation Mr. Giuliani's conduct following the September 11 attacks as well as his prior service in the Justice Department and as Mayor of New York City," the panel said in a document filed with the DC court of appeals on Friday. "But all of that happened long ago. The misconduct here sadly transcends all his past accomplishments. It was unparalleled in its destructive purpose and effect. He sought to disrupt a presidential election and persists in his refusal to acknowledge the wrong he has done. For these reasons, we unanimously recommend that Mr. Giuliani be disbarred."

The move centers around Giuliani, on behalf of then-President Donald Trump, filing a lawsuit to reverse the 2020 presidential results in Pennsylvania. The panel said he violated the law by filing the motion "when he had no factual basis, and consequently no legitimate legal grounds, to do so."

The panel's recommendation is not final, according to CNN, with the case still needing to be considered by DC's Board on Professional Responsibility and by the DC court of appeals.

Giuliani is also facing potential disbarment in the state of New York, where is law license is temporarily suspended.

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FBI Probing Biden's Iran Envoy Malley Over Handling of Classified Information - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 8 (Sputnik) - The FBI is investigating former US special envoy for Iran Rob Malley on matters concerning his handling of classified information, Semafor reported, citing a source briefed on the matter within the State Department.

Last month, Malley said he was placed on leave while his security clearance is under investigation, but did not disclose when he went on leave and for how long.

Axios previously reported that White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan expressed

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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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RFK Jr. Sees US Sending Ukraine Cluster Bombs as 'Reckless Escalation' - Press Team

WASHINGTON, July 8 (Sputnik) - US Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. opposes the Biden administration's decision to supply Ukraine with cluster munitions and describes it as part of a reckless pattern of escalation, his press team told Sputnik in a statement.

"He [Kennedy] opposes the decision as part of a reckless pattern of escalation," the statement said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the Pentagon confirmed the United States will deliver cluster munitions to Ukraine in a time-frame relevant to their counteroffensive. President Joe Biden later said the United States is providing Ukraine with cluster munitions for a temporary period while it continues to produce enough 155mm artillery shells to supply Kiev amid Russia's special military operation.

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US Charges Prison Officer With Covering Up Assault of Inmate - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 8 (Sputnik) - A former sergeant at a prison in Kentucky has been indicted for obstruction linked to the cover up of an assault of an inmate by several officers he supervised, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"A former Eastern Kentucky Correctional Complex (EKCC) sergeant was indicted by a federal jury in Lexington, Kentucky, for three counts of obstruction based on his efforts to cover up the assault of a restrained inmate by multiple officers that he supervised," the release said on Fridayl

The Justice Department alleged that in July of 2018, Eric Nantell, 47, watched lower-ranking officers assault a non-violent inmate who was lying face-down, shackled and handcuffed, in a prison shower cell.

Nantell stood outside of a shower, witnessed the assault and attempted to cover up the incident when he lied to a supervisor investigating the incident, according to the release. He also allegedly lied to a detective with the Kentucky State Police and a special agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the release added.

Nantell faces up to 20 years behind bars for each charge of lying to Kentucky state officials. He also faces as much as five years in prison for lying to the FBI.

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Biden Says US Must Renew Commitment to Forging Future 'Free From Chemical Weapons'

WASHINGTON, July 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in a statement that the United States should renew its commitment to forge a future without chemical weapons and called on other countries to join the Chemical Weapons Convention.

"Today - as we mark this significant milestone - we must also renew our commitment to forging a future free from chemical weapons," Biden said on Friday. "I continue to encourage the remaining nations to join the Chemical Weapons Convention so that the global ban on chemical weapons can reach its fullest potential."

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said earlier on Friday that the United States has finished the destruction of its chemical arsenal ahead of the deadline after the last remaining stockpile was destroyed at an Army depot in the US state of Kentucky.

"We will continue to stand with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to prevent the stockpiling, production and use of chemical weapons around the world," Biden said. "And together with our partners, we will not stop until we can finally and forever rid the world of this scourge."

In February, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said the United States would finalize the destruction of its chemical weapons this spring, but in May, Biden said the United States is on track to complete the destruction of the arsenal by this fall.

The US government announced in 2012 that it will complete the destruction of its chemical military arsenal by September 30, having concluded an agreement with all state parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention that entered into force in 1997.

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Cluster Bombs Will Kill Ukraine Civilians, Curse Land for Generations - Ex-CIA Officer

WASHINGTON, July 8 (Sputnik) - US cluster munitions sent by the Biden administration will not win the war for Kiev, but will be a curse on Ukraine's farmland for years, former CIA station chief Phil Giraldi told Sputnik.

Earlier on Friday, the Pentagon said the US will deliver cluster munitions to Ukraine in a time-frame relevant to their counteroffensive.

"It [cluster munitions] will not win the war for Ukraine," Giraldi said. "What the bombs will do is kill a lot of civilians as they spread their charges wide and the unexploded buried ordnance will be a curse on Ukraine's farmland wherever they are deployed for a long time to come."

The former CIA officer said the decision comes as Ukraine is losing on the battlefield against Russia, measured by its failing counterattack which has been supported enthusiastically by

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NATO, and the chanceries in Europe and the United States.

Giraldi said the move also illustrates the hypocrisy of the Biden Administration, which criticized the alleged use of such weapons last year by Russia.

The United States was not signatory to international agreements to ban the use of such weapons, Giraldi added, the deployment of which most countries consider to be tantamount to a war crime akin to using gas or chemicals.

US FULLY AWARE OF ESCALATION

President Joe Biden said the United States is providing Ukraine with cluster munitions for a temporary period while it continues to produce enough 155mm artillery shells to supply Kiev amid Russia's special military operation.

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov called the decision a "gesture of desperation," and one that is pushing humanity closer to a new world war.

University of Illinois Professor of Law and UN war crimes consultant Francis Boyle believes the US decision is an escalation in the use of terror weapons.

The cluster munitions, Boyle added, will only exacerbate the conflict by dramatically increasing the number of civilian casualties.

Moreover, it seems to be paving the way for a dramatic escalation of the war at NATO's Vilnius Summit next week in Lithuania, Boyle told Sputnik.

"Despite what they say in public, the Biden administration must know and understand these escalatory dynamics," Boyle added.

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US Deputy Treasury Secretary Traveling to Europe for Sanctions, Economic Talks - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 8 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo is traveling to Belgium, Germany, and Italy next week for talks with European allies on issues related to sanctions and mutual economic issues, the US Treasury Department said in a statement.

"Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Wally Adeyemo will travel to Europe from July 9 – 15 to discuss shared economic opportunities from the Inflation Reduction Act, securing clean energy supply chains, and continued coordination on countering sanctions evasion. Deputy Secretary Adeyemo will visit Belgium, Brussels; Frankfurt and Berlin, Germany; and Rome, Italy," the statement said on Friday.

Adeyemo will meet with European Commission officials in Brussels to discuss clean energy supply chains and efforts to counter the alleged evasion of sanctions by Russia, the statement said.

Adeyemo will also meet with private sector entities while in Brussels to discuss bolstering critical mineral supply chains, the statement said.

In Frankfurt, Adeyemo will hold a banking roundtable on the macroeconomic outlook and financial conditions in Europe, the statement said. In Berlin, Adeyemo will meet with German government counterparts to discuss issues including climate change and preventing the transfer of dual-use components to Russia, the statement said.

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Adeyemo will then meet with Italian government officials in Rome to discuss clean energy, the G7 agenda, strengthening the global economy, and Russian sanctions, the statement said.

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Democrats Criticize Biden Admin. Decision to Send Cluster Bomb to Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 8 (Sputnik) - The decision of the Biden administration to send cluster munitions to Ukraine is facing opposition from Democrats, the New York Times reported.

Democrats are accusing President Joe Biden of putting at risk the country's moral foundation, the report said on Friday.

US Congresswoman Chrissy Houlahan, who co-chairs a bipartisan congressional caucus on unexploded ordinance and demining, expressed concern that the Biden administration's decision blurs the lines of the moral high ground, the report said.

A Ukrainian victory in the conflict is a victory for the democracies across the world, but also one that cannot come at the expense of US values and thus democracy itself, Houlahan was quoted as saying in the report.

Along with other Democrats, Houlahan warned that the type of cluster munitions the US government plans to send to Ukraine will pose a threat to civilians long after the conflict ends.

Congressman Jim McGovern pointed out that several NATO members - unlike the United States - are parties to the international treaty banning the use of cluster munitions.

The cluster munition bomblets can travel far beyond the military targets and injure, maim and kill civilians - often long after a conflict is over, McGovern said in a statement.

Earlier on Friday, the United States unveiled a new military assistance package for Ukraine that includes cluster munitions.

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Biden Says Not The Time to Bring Ukraine Into NATO Now in Middle of War

WASHINGTON, July 8 (Sputnik) -US President Joe Biden in an interview on Friday said that it is not the time now to bring Ukraine into NATO.

"I don't think there is unanimity in NATO about whether or not to bring Ukraine into the NATO family now, at this moment, in the middle of a war," Biden said in an interview with CNN. "For example, if you did that, then, you know – and I mean what I say – we're determined to commit every inch of territory that is NATO territory. It's a commitment that we've all made, no matter what. If the war is going on, then we're all in war. We're at war with Russia, if that were the case."

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 8 (Sputnik) -

US-CHINA TALKS

* China hopes that the United States will contribute to a prompt return of bilateral relations to the right track, Premier of the State Council of China Li Qiang said on Friday.
* US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen held "candid and constructive" talks with Li Qiang in Beijing, the Treasury Department said in a readout of the conversation.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Russian forces have repelled ten Ukrainian attacks in the Donetsk direction over the past day, and the Ukrainian military lost over 420 soldiers and 16 pieces of military equipment, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday.
* Ukraine's counteroffensive has been slower than the United States had anticipated, US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl said.
* The Ukrainian military uses Western missiles installed on their fighter jets and NATO is is increasing Kiev's combat capabilities by supplying it with long-range weapon systems, Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev said.
* The International Atomic Energy Agency said that its experts have received additional access to the facilities of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (ZNPP) and did not observe any indications of explosives or mines so far.

US MILITARY PACKAGE FOR UKRAINE

* The United States will deliver cluster munitions to Ukraine within the period of time that is relevant to Kiev's counteroffensive, US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl said on Friday.
* The new US weapons package for Ukraine includes Patriot air defense systems, AIM-7 missiles for air defense and Stinger anti-aircraft systems, the Defense Department said.
* The United States has unveiled a new military assistance for Ukraine that includes dual-purpose improved conventional munitions, also referred to as cluster bombs, the Defense Department said.
* Russia's response to the decision of the United States to provide cluster munitions to Ukraine will be very serious, Grigory Karasin, the head of the Russian upper house's foreign affairs committee, told Sputnik.
* The US government’s decision to provide Ukraine with cluster munitions to use in its counteroffensive was difficult, but President Joe Biden ultimately decided to move forward on this decision after consulting with allies and US lawmakers, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said.

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UKRAINE BID FOR NATO MEMBERSHIP

* Ukraine must undertake reforms to meet the required standards before joining NATO and the United States is working with Kiev to make sure they can do that, White House National Security Council Senior Director for Europe Amanda Sloat said on Friday.

* During the upcoming summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, NATO leaders will address Ukraine's membership aspirations, but will not simply restate the Bucharest statement in 2008, US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said.

* The upcoming NATO summit will result in a concrete package of deliverables, including longer-term assistance on military modernization of Ukraine, Smith said.

* The leaders of the NATO member states will approve a multi-year package of support for Ukraine at the summit Vilnius on July 11-12, which will bring it closer to the alliance, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

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US Cluster Bombs for Ukraine 'Provocation' Bringing Humanity Closer to World War - Antonov

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The decision by the United States to deliver cluster munitions to Ukraine is a provocation that is pushing humankind closer to a new world war, Russian Ambassador in Washington Anatoly Antonov said on Friday.

"With tenacity worthy of a better use, Washington continues to 'raise the stakes' in the conflict," Antonov said in a statement. "No one doubted the deep involvement of the United States in the confrontation in Ukraine even without cluster munitions. However, the current level of American provocations is really off scale, bringing humanity closer to a new world war."

Earlier on Friday, the United States unveiled a new military assistance package for Ukraine that includes cluster munitions.

Antonov emphasized that the United States is so obsessed with the idea of defeating Russia that it does not realize the severity of its actions, which only lead to an increase in the number of victims and prolong Kiev regime's agony.

"The cruelty and cynicism with which Washington approached the issue of transferring deadly weapons to Kiev is striking," Antonov said. "The [Biden] administration completely ignored the theses about the inhumanity of such a step, voiced by experts, human rights activists and legislators, turning a blind eye to civilian casualties. Now, through the fault of the United States, for many years there will be a risk that innocent civilians will be blown up by non-functioning submunitions."

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Biden Admin Seeks More Oil to Refill Heavily-Drawn US Reserve - Dept of Energy

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has invited U.S. energy companies to submit more bids to refill the nation's heavily-drawn oil reserve, with the Department of

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Energy (DoE) citing six million barrels on Friday as its latest buying intent for the so-called Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR).

"You are invited to submit a proposal," said the DoE in a memo circulated within the US energy industry and posted on its website for the six million barrels it intended to purchase for the SPR. Prior to this, the department had announced buying plans for about 12 million barrels.

Bids for the six million barrels must be received by August 3 for delivery slated between October 1 and November 30, the DoE said.

It added that submission of a bid "does not commit the Government to procure or contract for any supplies", making it clear that purchases will be subject to pricing and other conditions that may not be stated in the circular.

The administration had previously stated that it intended to oil for the SPR at around $70 per barrel. At Friday's market settlement, benchmark U.S. crude was priced at just under $74 a barrel.

The Biden administration has leaned heavily on the SPR since late 2021 to offset tight crude supplies that had raised fuel costs for Americans. As of last month, the SPR's crude balance was at its lowest since November 1983 after the release of about 200 million barrels or more from the reserve over the past 18 months.

The administration's use of the SPR has been a highly-charged matter for oil bulls and opponents of President Joe Biden. Both sides accuse him of indiscriminately releasing hundreds of millions of barrels from the stockpile to subdue crude prices and shore up his political standing with American voters — when the reserve is meant for emergency use, in times of critically short oil supply.

Biden, in his defense, said he was acting to reduce record high pump prices of fuel, which stood at above $5 per gallon last June and now hovers at around $3.50. The administration also blames last year's high crude prices for US inflation getting to four-decade highs of above 9% in June.

The DoE has, meanwhile, canceled 140 million barrels in congressionally mandated sales from the SPR scheduled for fiscal years 2024 through 2027.

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US OKs $605Mln Sale of Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles to Sweden - DSCA

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) – The United States approved a possible sale of 250 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) and related equipment to Sweden for an estimated cost of $605 million, the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Sweden of Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) and related equipment for an estimated cost of $605 million," the agency said in a press release.

Besides the missiles, Sweden has also requested to buy up to six AMRAAM C-8 Guidance Sections, spare AIM-120 control sections and containers, AMRAAM Test Set telemetry kits,

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encryption devices, munitions support, spare parts, consumables, accessories, and other equipment and services, according to the release.

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US Cluster Munitions For Ukraine Are Gesture Of Desperation - Antonov

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - Washington's move to send cluster munitions to Ukraine is a gesture of desperation, while it also ignored the objections of its allies, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said in a statement on Friday.

"Cluster munitions are a gesture of desperation," Antonov said. "Such a measure speaks of the recognition by the United States and its satellites of their impotence. However, here they do not want to admit their own failures and the failure of the attempts of the Armed Forces of Ukraine to carry out an offensive against the Russian regions. Therefore, they commit new madness."

Earlier in the day, the United States unveiled a new military assistance package for Ukraine that includes cluster munitions.

"Washington ignored the negative voice of its allies regarding the dangerous use of indiscriminate cluster munitions," Antonov said. "This is despite the fact that among the members of the North Atlantic Alliance, there are many states that participate in the well-known Convention on Cluster Munitions. The UN Secretary-General's concerns also meant nothing to the administration."

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Senator McConnell Says Last US Chemical Weapon Stockpile Destroyed in Kentucky

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Friday that the United States has finished the destruction of its chemical arsenal ahead of the deadline after the last remaining stockpile was destroyed at an Army depot in the US state of Kentucky.

“Chemical weapons are responsible for some of the most horrific episodes of human loss. Though the use of these deadly agents will always be a stain on history, today our Nation has finally fulfilled our promise to rid our arsenal of this evil. The Blue Grass Army Depot in my home state of Kentucky has led U.S. disposal efforts with its state-of-the-art destruction facility,” the senator’s office cited McConnell as saying.

In February, Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said the United States would finalize the destruction of its chemical weapons this spring, but in May, President Joe Biden said that the United States is on track to complete the destruction of its chemical weapons arsenal by this fall.

The US government announced in 2012 that it will complete the destruction of its chemical military arsenal by September 30, by agreement with all state parties to the Chemical Weapons

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Convention that entered into force in 1997.

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US Providing Ukraine Cluster Bombs Temporarily While Producing More Artillery Ammo - Biden

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is providing Ukraine with cluster munitions for a temporary period while it continues to produce enough 155mm artillery shells to supply Kiev amid Russia's special military operation, President Joe Biden said on Friday.
"So what I finally did, I took the recommendation of the Defense Department to – not permanently – but to allow for this transition period while we get more 155[mm] weapons, these shells, for the Ukrainians," Biden said in an interview with CNN.

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Biden Says Was 'Difficult Decision' To Provide Cluster Munitions To Ukraine

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) -US President Joe Biden said in an interview on Friday that the decision to send cluster munitions to Ukraine was a difficult one.
"It was a very difficult decision on my part. And by the way, I discussed this with our allies, I discussed this with our friends up on the Hill," Biden said in an interview with CNN. "The Ukrainians are running out of ammunition."
Earlier in the day, the United States unveiled a new military assistance package for Ukraine that includes cluster munitions.
"This is a war relating to munitions. And they're running out of that ammunition, and we're low on it," Biden said. "And so, what I finally did, I took the recommendation of the Defense Department to – not permanently – but to allow for this transition period, while we get more 155 weapons, these shells, for the Ukrainians."

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Sullivan Says Meet With Polish Counterpart Friday to Discuss Issues Concerning Belarus

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday that he met with his Polish counterpart Jacek Siewiera to discuss issues concerning Belarus.
"I had the opportunity this morning to meet with my counterpart from Poland, the Polish national security advisor," Sullivan said during a press briefing. "The first and main topic of conversation

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was the evolving threat from Belarus."

Sullivan explained that they both discussed whether the Wagner private military company will ultimately end up in Belarus, which is still very much an open question.

Moreover, Sullivan said they also addressed the assertions about potential deployments of nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki recently said that Poland wants to join the nuclear exchange program among NATO countries to counter the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons to Belarus.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said in mid-June that Moscow had transferred the first part of the nuclear warheads to Belarus and would complete the task of moving tactical nuclear weapons by the end of the year. Putin said the deployment was an element of deterrence and a signal to those thinking of inflicting a strategic defeat on Russia.

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New US Military Aid Including Cluster Bombs Valued at $800Mln - Blinken

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) – The new US defense assistance package for Ukraine totals $800 million worth of arms and equipment from Department of Defense stocks, including cluster bombs, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"This package contains critical security assistance totaling $800 million worth of arms and equipment from Department of Defense stocks," Blinken said in a statement.

This package also includes additional precision aerial munitions, munitions for multiple launch rocket systems, 155mm howitzers, 155mm and 105mm artillery ammunition, air defense munitions, anti-tank missiles and rockets, more armored Bradley and Stryker vehicles, and other equipment, he added.

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US State Dept. Approves Potential $203Mln Sale of Hellfire Missiles to France - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The US State Department granted approval for a potential $203 million sale of Hellfire Missiles to France, the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of France of AGM-114R2 Hellfire Missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of $203 million," DSCA said in a statement.

France requested to purchase up to 1,515 AGM-114R2 Hellfire Missiles, as well as logistical and program support, the statement said.

The proposed sale would not alter the basic military balance of the region or impact the United States' defense readiness, the statement added.

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Ukraine to Record Where It Uses US-Provided Cluster Bombs to Simplify Demining - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - Kiev has agreed to record areas where it uses US-supplied cluster munitions to make future demining efforts easier, US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl said on Friday.
"The Ukrainian government has offered us assurances in writing on the responsible use of DPICMs [dual-purpose improved conventional munitions] including that they will not use the rounds in civilian populated urban environments, and that they will record where they use these rounds, which will simplify later demining efforts," Kahl said in a press briefing.

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Pentagon Says Ukraine Counteroffensive Slower Than US Had Hoped

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - Ukraine's counteroffensive has been slower that the United States had anticipated, US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl said on Friday.
"It is slower than we had hoped," Kahl said during a press briefing.

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US to Deliver Cluster Bombs to Ukraine Within Timeframe for Counteroffensive - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United States will deliver cluster munitions to Ukraine within the period of time that is relevant to Kiev's so-called counteroffensive, US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl said on Friday.
"The one thing I will say is they will deliver [the cluster munitions] in a timeframe that is relevant for the counteroffensive," Kahl said.

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US Has Hundreds Of Thousands Of Cluster Rounds For Ukraine Below 2.5 Dud Rate - Kahl

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has hundreds of thousands of cluster rounds available for Ukraine that are below the dud rate of 2.5 percent, Colin Kahl, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, told reporters on Friday.
"We have hundreds of thousands of these rounds available below the dud rate threshold," Kahl

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said.

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US Govt. Did Not Participate in Recent Talks Between Lavrov, Ex-US Officials - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The US government did not participate nor sought to pursue diplomacy during a recent meeting between former US officials and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.
"My understanding is there was a meeting of the Council on Foreign Relations with the Foreign Minister of Russia," Sullivan said during a press briefing. "That meeting did not include participation from the United States government, the United States government did not pass messages through that meeting, the United States government did not seek to pursue diplomacy direct, indirect or otherwise through that meeting. Period."

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US Choice to Give Ukraine Cluster Bombs Difficult, Biden Decided to Approve - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The US administration's decision to provide Ukraine with cluster munitions to use in its counteroffensive was difficult, but President Joe Biden ultimately decided to move forward on this decision after consulting with allies and US lawmakers, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.
"It's a difficult decision...There was a unanimous recommendation from the national security team, and President Biden ultimately decided, in consultation with allies and partners and in consultation with members of Congress, to move forward on this step," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

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New US Ukraine Aid Includes Patriot System Munitions, AIM-7 Missiles, Stingers - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The new US weapons package for Ukraine includes Patriot air defense systems, AIM-7 missiles for air defense, and Stinger anti-aircraft systems, the Pentagon said on Friday.
"The capabilities in this package include: Additional munitions for Patriot air defense systems; AIM-7 missiles for air defense; Stinger anti-aircraft systems," the statement said.
The package also includes 32 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles and 32 Stryker Armored

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Personnel Carriers, it added.

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Sullivan Says US Consulted Allies on Decision to Provide Ukraine Cluster Bombs

WASHINGTON, July 7(Sputnik) - The United States consulted with allies about its decision to provide Ukraine with cluster munitions to use in its counteroffensive and they understood the Biden administration's decision, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"We consulted closely with allies in deciding to do this, and some allies who are not signatories to the Oslo Convention embraced it with open arms that this is absolutely the right thing to do," Sullivan said during a press briefing. "Even allies who were signatories to the Oslo Convention, while they cannot formally support something that they've signed up to a convention against, have indicated both privately and many of them publicly over the course of today that they understand our decision."

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Cluster Bombs for Kiev 'Difficult Decision,' But National Security Team United - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday that providing Ukraine with cluster munitions was a "difficult decision" that President Joe Biden arrived at after a unanimous recommendation from the US national security team.

"It's a difficult decision, but there was a unanimous recommendation from the national security team and President Biden ultimately decided, in consultation with allies and partners, and in consultation with members of Congress, to move forward on this step," Sullivan told a briefing.

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US Announces New Drawdown Package for Ukraine That Includes Cluster Bombs - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has unveiled a new military assistance for Ukraine that includes dual-purpose improved conventional munitions, also referred to as cluster bombs, the Department of Defense announced in a release on Friday.

"Today, the Department of Defense (DoD) announced additional security assistance to meet Ukraine's critical security and defense needs," the release said. "This package will provide Ukraine with additional artillery systems and ammunition, including highly effective and reliable

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dual-purpose improved conventional munitions (DPICM), on which the administration conducted extensive consultations with Congress and our Allies and partners.
The new package consists of additional air defense munitions, armored vehicles, anti-armor weapons and other equipment, the release said.

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Sullivan Says Ukraine Will Not Join NATO Coming Out of Vilnius Summit

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said Ukraine will not join NATO coming out of the NATO leaders summit in Vilnius next week.
"Ukraine will not be joining NATO coming out of this summit, we will discuss what steps are necessary," Sullivan said during a press briefing.
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US Not Going to War With Russia, Does Not Enable Kiev to Hit Russian Territory - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is not going to war with Russia in Ukraine and it is not enabling Kiev with the capacity to hit Russian territory, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.
"The United States is not going to war with Russia and Ukraine, and second, the United States is not providing weapons to Ukraine to attack Russia. We do not encourage or enable attacks on Russian territory from Ukraine," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

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US Would Welcome Zelenskyy at Vilnius Summit to Focus on NATO-Kiev Relationship - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United States would welcome Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the NATO summit in Vilnius next week to focus on the alliance's relationship with Ukraine, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.
"President Biden would welcome the opportunity to meet with President Zelenskyy at the NATO Summit [where] we'll dive into the question of NATO's relationship with Ukraine," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

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US, Russia Held Talks This Week on Prisoners, But No Path to Resolution Opened - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters on Friday that the United States had conversations with Russia earlier this week regarding prisoners, including journalist Evan Gershkovich, but the talks have not opened a path to any resolution.

"It is true and we have said that we remain in contact with Russian authorities at high levels on these cases to try to figure out a way to bring unjustly detained Americans home including Evan," Sullivan said. "What the Kremlin said earlier this week is correct, there have been discussions, But those discussions have not produced a clear pathway to a resolution."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov earlier this week said there are certain contacts between Russia and the United States when it comes to potential prisoner exchanges but Moscow prefers to not discuss this publicly.

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Cluster Munitions That US Will Give Ukraine Have Dud Rates Not Higher Than 2.5% - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) -Cluster munitions that Washington will give to Ukraine have dud rates not higher than 2.5 percent, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters on Friday.

"The cluster munitions that we would provide have dud rates far below what Russia is providing, not higher than 2.5%," Sullivan said.

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Police Charge 17-Year-Old Boy Over Fatal Baltimore Block Party Shooting - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) – The police charged a 17-year-old boy as a person of interest in connection with the weekend's block party shooting that killed two people and injured almost 30 others, WBAL-TV 11 News reported on Friday.

The charges were issued after officers executed a search warrant on a house, the report said.

The boy remains in the Baltimore Center Booking and Intake Center on charges of possession of a firearm by a minor, assault weapon possession, reckless endangerment, and having a handgun in a vehicle, according to the report.

Baltimore authorities are continuing their investigation into the shooting rampage that occurred during a block party in the city's Brooklyn neighborhood on Sunday. They announced a $28,000

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reward for information that leads to the arrest of those responsible for the shooting.

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US Recognizes Cluster Bombs Risk Civilian Harm, Long Deferred Supplies to Kiev - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United States recognizes that cluster munitions pose a risk to civilians and therefore deferred the decision to supply them to Kiev for as long as it could, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.
"We recognize the cluster munitions are creating risk of civilian harm from unexploded ordnance. This is why we deferred the decision for as long as we could. But there is also a massive risk of civilian harm if Russian troops and tanks roll over Ukrainian positions and take more Ukrainian territory, and subjugate more Ukrainian civilians because Ukraine does not have enough artillery, " Sullivan told a briefing.

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Sullivan Says Ukraine Needs Bridge of Supplies as US Artillery Production Ramps Up

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters on Friday that it will be critical to provide Ukraine with a bridge of supplies while US domestic artillery production is ramped up.
"It will be critical to provide Ukraine with a bridge of supplies, while our domestic [artillery] production is ramped up," Sullivan said.

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US Capitol Police Begin Planning Officer Body Camera Test Program - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol Police (USCP) are beginning to design a test program for the implementation of body cameras on their officers at the United States Capitol complex, FedScoop reported on Friday.
“[USCP Chief Tomas Manger] believes that body-worn cameras are a great tool and the USCP is in the very early stages of planning for a pilot program that would be tailored to the unique considerations of the legislative branch,” USCP communications director Tim Barber reportedly said in a statement.
The test program comes following an executive order signed by US President Joe Biden last year that orders federal agencies to produce policies on the use of body cameras. However,

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USCP falls under the legislative branch of the US government, not the executive branch like most federal law enforcement agencies.

USCP does not currently use body cameras, Barber said. The department has only started initial conversations on the matter, Barber added.

Some US lawmakers called on USCP to adopt body cameras following the January 6 Capitol riot, but the effort never came to fruition, the report said.

There may be other federal agencies that are not covered by Biden's executive order on body cameras, including the Office of Probation and Pretrial Services and the Government Publishing Office Police, the report said, citing Electronic Privacy Information Center attorney John Davisson.

Potential USCP adoption of body cameras raises privacy concerns, considering USCP's jurisdiction extends into neighborhoods around the Capitol, Davisson said. USCP ought to establish restrictions on the collection and use of recordings if they adopt body cameras, Davisson said.

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US Will Have More to Say About Cluster Munitions for Kiev This Afternoon - White House

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United States will have more to say on the potential provision of cluster munitions to Ukraine later today, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"I think we will have to say more about this later this afternoon," Kirby told CNN.

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UN Chief Says Continued Implementation of Grain Deal Essential for Food Security

UNITED NATIONS, July 7 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres considers the continued implementation of the grain exports agreement - formally known as the Black Sea Initiative - to be very important for global food security, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"The Secretary-General notes the indispensable role food and fertilizer exports from the Russian Federation and Ukraine continue to play in support of global food security," Dujarric said in a statement. "He reiterates the importance of full and continued implementation of the agreements signed in Istanbul in July 2022, to help ensure that these products can reach global markets smoothly, efficiently and at scale."

Dujarric noted in the statement that the grain deal has contributed to reducing food prices by 23% since March 2022.

Moscow has repeatedly criticized the implementation of the agreement in that Russian grain

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and fertilizer are still subject to Western sanctions while most of the exported grain ends up in the collective West and only a small amount goes to the Third World countries that need food products the most.

On July 22, the United Nations and Turkey brokered a deal with Russia and Ukraine in Istanbul to enable safe exports of grain and fertilizer via the Black Sea.

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White Supremacist Who Killed 23 People at Texas Walmart Given 90 Life Terms in Prison

EL PASO, July 7 (Sputnik) - White supremacist Patrick Crusius has been sentenced to 90 life terms in prison for killing 23 people at a Walmart shopping center in El Paso, Texas, in August 2019, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Friday.

In February, Crusius pleaded guilty to 90 federal counts that included 45 hate crime charges.

On August 3, 2019, the 21-year-old Crusius killed 23 people and wounded more than 20 others when he opened fire in a Walmart shopping center in El Paso.

Crusius traveled some 600 miles from Allen, Texas, to El Paso to carry out the shooting and used an assault rifle.

Crusius admitted that he had intentionally targeted Mexican nationals, according to a police report.

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US Senator Lindsay Graham Urges Passing Resolution on Ukraine's Admission Into NATO

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - US Senator Lindsay Graham on Friday urged his colleagues in the Senate to adopt a resolution on Ukraine's accession to NATO.

"I will be working with Republicans and Democrats in the Senate to pass a resolution urging the admission of Ukraine into NATO," Graham said via Twitter.

The senator expressed confidence that Ukraine's membership in NATO is vital to the future security of Europe and the world.

"I believe there is an overwhelming majority of Senators supporting this proposition," Graham said.

Earlier on Friday, US Permanent Representative to NATO Julianne Smith said the alliance's leaders will address the issue of Ukraine's aspirations to become a member during NATO's upcoming summit in Vilnius, Lithuania.

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Griffits, UNCTAD Chief Seek to Hold Meetings in Moscow to Extend Grain Exports Agreement

UNITED NATIONS, July 7 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths said on Friday that he and UNCTAD Secretary-General Rebeca Grynspan seek to hold meetings with Russian officials in Moscow to extend the grain exports agreement - formally known as the Black Sea Initiative - before it expires on July 17.

"We continue… to work very hard and I know that Rebecca, if I could just speak for her, is very keen to get the opportunity to sit down in Moscow," Griffiths said.

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US, Partners Adopt Declaration On Coalition Against Synthetic Drugs – Blinken

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) – The United States and its international partners adopted a declaration that formalizes the creation of a coalition countering synthetic drugs, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"On behalf of all signatories, I am very proud to adopt a joint ministerial declaration that formalizes the creation of this coalition," Blinken said after the inaugural ministerial meeting in an online format.

He pointed out the importance of partnerships between governments, as well as cooperation with non-government stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector.

"This declaration signals our collective commitment to curb the threats from synthetic drugs," Blinken said.

Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Todd Robinson said on Thursday that 84 countries and a number of international organizations decided to join the coalition.

The US State Department said earlier that the coalition plans to reconvene on the margins of the 78th UN General Assembly and the March 2024 UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

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US Charges Ex-Military Official for Defrauding Gold Star Family Members - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - Former US Army financial counselor Caz Craffy has been charged for allegedly defrauding Gold Star family members, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said in a statement on Friday.

A Gold Star family member is the immediate family member of a fallen US serviceman or servicewoman who died in a time of conflict.

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"The Securities and Exchange Commission today charged former US Army financial counselor Caz L. Craffy for defrauding Gold Star family members and others by engaging in unauthorized trading - including of life insurance and family survivor benefits they received following the death of an active duty service member," the statement said.

Craffy also recommended that customers undertake excessive trades and higher risk strategies that did not match their risk profiles, the statement added.

Between May 2018 and November 2022, Craffy used his position and access to manipulate family members and advise them to transfer their benefits into brokerage accounts that he managed outside of his official duties with the US Army, the statement said.

"In that 54-month span, Craffy's customers incurred more than $1.64 million in commissions and fees, most of which Craffy pocketed, while the accounts he managed suffered approximately $1.79 million in realized losses and faced additional unrealized losses of approximately $1.8 million," the statement added.

The SEC filed the complaint in US District Court for the District of New Jersey, charging Craffy with violating the anti-fraud provisions of federal securities laws and Regulation Best Interest, according to the statement.

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UN Chief Against Cluster Munitions on Battlefield, Including Ukraine - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres says cluster munitions have no place on the battlefield - including in the Ukrainian conflict, UN Spokesperson Farhan Haq.

"The Secretary-General supports the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which as you know, was adopted 15 years ago. He wants countries to abide by the terms of that convention," Haq told journalists. "And so as a result, of course, he does not want there to be continued use of cluster munitions on the battlefield."

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US Working With Ukraine to Implement Reforms so Kiev Can Join NATO - White House

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - Ukraine must undertake reforms to meet standards before joining NATO and the United States is working with Kiev to make sure they can do that, White House National Security Council Senior Director for Europe Amanda Sloat told reporters on Friday.

"The president had spoken to that very directly and he said Ukraine would have to make reforms to meet the same standards any other NATO country before they join," Sloat said "Certainly, everything that we are continuing to do now and we will continue to do forward is

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working with Ukraine to ensure that they are able to do them."

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US Aims to Strengthen US-Indonesia Relations on Blinken's Visit - Senior Dept. Official

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United States aims to strengthen its relations with Indonesia during Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit next weekend, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink said on Friday.

"We look forward to strengthening our partnership with Indonesia through this visit, and in the months and years ahead," Kritenbrink said during a conference call.

Blinken will travel to Jakarta, Indonesia, next weekend to participate in the annual US-ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting, East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers Meeting, and the ASEAN Regional Forum.

According to Kritenbrink, Blinken will have a bilateral meeting with Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi to discuss a range of issues, including climate change, maintaining and protecting the rules-based international order, and promoting sustainable economic growth.

Both sides will also discuss ways that the United States and Indonesia can address the crisis in Burma, build their economic ties to the Indo-Pacific economic framework, and further strengthen their people-to-people connection, Kritenbrink said.

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US Open to Engagement With North Korea But Unlikely to Meet at ASEAN Forum - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United States remains open to diplomatic engagement with North Korea, but Secretary of State Antony Blinken is unlikely to meet with one of the country's officials during his upcoming trip to Jakarta, Indonesia, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink said on Friday.

Blinken is set to travel to Indonesia for an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) forum next week.

"We are open to - and I'm confident the Secretary will reiterate this – we are open to engagement and diplomacy with the DPRK [North Korea]," Kritenbrink said. "I do not anticipate any meeting between the United States and North Korea at the ASEAN regional forum meetings."

Kritenbrink said it is not his place to speculate on who North Korea may send to the ASEAN forum.

Although issues related to North Korea may not be on the ASEAN forum agenda, the United States will likely raise such issues, he said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is also scheduled to attend the ASEAN forum, where

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he will draw attention to the militarization of the region.
There is no meeting between Blinken and Lavrov to announce at this time, Kritenbrink said.
However, there will be a more detailed schedule released closer to the forum, Kritenbrink added.

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US Coordinating Closely With Ukraine on Kiev's Request for Cluster Munitions - Official

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) – The United States is closely coordinating with Ukraine on its request for cluster bombs while Kiev offered assurances that the munitions would be used responsibly, National Security Council Senior Director for Europe Amanda Sloat said on Friday.
"We are continuing to coordinate closely with Ukraine, which has requested these [cluster] munitions and offered assurances that they would be using them responsibly," Sloat said during a press briefing.

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NATO Leaders to Address Ukraine Membership Aspirations in Summit

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) – During the upcoming summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, NATO leaders will address Ukraine's membership aspirations, but will not simply restate the Bucharest statement in 2008, US Permanent Representative to NATO Ambassador Julianne Smith said on Friday.
"We will be addressing Ukraine's membership aspirations and that is something that NATO allies continue to work on. But it is not just restating Bucharest, it will look different than what we said in 2008," Smith said during a press briefing.

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NATO Summit to Unveil Longer Term Aid on Military Modernization of Ukraine - US Official

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) – The upcoming NATO summit in Vilnius will result in a concrete package of deliverables, including longer-term assistance on military modernization of Ukraine, US Permanent Representative to NATO Ambassador Julianne Smith said on Friday.
"The focus [of the summit] will be on reaffirming our support for Ukraine. There will also be a package of concrete deliverables, both in terms of longer-term practical assistance on things like their military modernization and questions of interoperability. We'll be working with them on

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enhancing their political relationship and so there'll be some developments there," Smith said during a press briefing.

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US Restrains Over $500Mln in Assets of Russian Businesspeople - Justice Sept.

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has blocked $500 million worth of assets of Russian business elites since Moscow began its special military operation in Ukraine, Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco said on Friday.

"We have restrained over $500 million in assets of Russian oligarchs and others who prop up the Russian regime and have evaded U.S. economic countermeasures," Monaco said at a G7 justice ministers' meeting.

The US has also indicted over 30 individuals for sanctions evasion, export control violations, money laundering, and other crimes, she added.

"And, with the help of our international partners, arrests have been made in over half a dozen countries, with a view towards extradition to the United States," she said.

Monaco also pointed out the need to combat corruption in Ukraine, which she described as the internal enemy of the country.

"We enthusiastically embrace the decision of the G7 to aid Ukraine's commitment to fight the internal enemy of corruption," she said.

Monaco announced that last month the Department of Justice sent its veteran federal prosecutor, Jared Kimball, to Kiev to work on the rule of law and anti-corruption capacity building.

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Biden to Deliver Speech on Supporting Ukraine After NATO Summit - NSC Official

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will give a major speech upon the conclusion of the NATO summit in Vilnius on supporting Ukraine, NSC Senior Director for Europe Amanda Sloat told reporters on Friday.

"After the Summit, President Biden will give a major speech in Vilnius about the importance of supporting Ukraine and defending democratic values globally," Sloat said.

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McCarthy Opting Not to Endorse Trump Amid Concerns About Republican Unity, Races - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy is opting not to endorse former US President and 2024 Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump amid concerns about such an endorsement's impact on the party's unity and electoral chances, Politico reported on Friday.

McCarthy is standing with many swing-state House members who worry that backing Trump could weaken their standing in their own 2024 races, giving those colleagues political cover, the report said.

However, McCarthy has told members that they must rally behind whichever candidate proves victorious in the primaries, regardless of whom they support right now, the report said, citing Congressman Dan Meuser.

McCarthy told House Republicans that they can back candidates other than Trump, such as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis or former US Vice President Mike Pence, but that they must ultimately back whoever wins the primary races, according to Meuser.

If McCarthy were to throw his support behind Trump at this moment, he could risk exacerbating existing fractures within House Republican ranks, another congressman reportedly said on the condition of anonymity.

The congressman speculated that Republicans are likely to lose their majority in the House if Republicans nominate Trump as their 2024 presidential candidate, the report said. Moreover, McCarthy would likely lose any chance at becoming minority leader if Republicans lose the House, the congressman said.

Other top House Republicans including Majority Leader Steve Scalise and Majority Whip Tom Emmer have likewise declined to endorse Trump at this time, the report noted.

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Extreme Heat Likely Killed Man in Death Valley National Park – Report

A 65-year-old man found dead in Death Valley National Park on Monday is believed to have died from the effects of the extreme heat, officials from the National Park Service (NPS) said on Friday.

NPS said in a press release that the unidentified man's body was found by a maintenance worker in a car 30 yards off the road. Officials said they have determined from their initial investigation the effects of the heat likely caused the driver to veer the road.

According to meteorologists from Accuweather, the high on July 2 was 126 degrees Fahrenheit with temperatures topping 122 degrees Fahrenheit on Monday. These temperatures were higher than early July's historical average high temperature of 116 F. In addition, overnight low temperatures didn't drop below 98 degrees Fahrenheit between Sunday and Monday, compared to the historical average of 89 degrees Fahrenheit for a low.

On July 4th and 5th, weather experts from the US National Centers for Environmental

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Prediction announced that the earth experienced the hottest global temperature ever recorded, with the average global temperature reaching 17.01 degrees Celsius (62.62 Fahrenheit). The following day, temperatures climbed higher. In addition, since last week, a heat dome has settled over parts of the South and the Southwest United States, ratcheting up temperatures even further and putting people's lives and health at risk.

Heat-related deaths are the leading cause of weather-related fatalities in the United States, the National Weather Service (NWS) said. On average, there are 153 heat-related deaths every year, according to a 10-year average report produced by the NWS.

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Dow Jones Asks UN Official to Demand Russia Release Evan Gershkovich - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - Dow Jones, the publisher of the Wall Street Journal, directed its lawyers to ask a United Nations human rights official to press Russia to release reporter Evan Gershkovich, who was detained on espionage charges earlier this year, the newspaper reported on Friday.

The request to put pressure on Moscow was submitted to Mariana Katzarova, the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Russia and timed to coincide with the 100th day of Gershkovich's detainment, the report said.

The lawyers asked Katzarova to work with the Russian authorities to ensure Gershkovich can exercise his legal rights, including the right to regular consular access, and to ensure his health and safety while preventing inhumane or degrading treatment, the report added.

On Tuesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said there were certain contacts between Russia and the United States regarding a potential prisoner exchange.

On March 29, Gershkovich was detained in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg on suspicion of trying to collect classified defense information for the United States. The Wall Street Journal has rejected the allegations and demanded Gershkovich's immediate release. On June 22, the Moscow City Court upheld the decision to extend the detainment of Gershkovich.

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US House Oversight Panel Head Requests Briefing on Cocaine Found in White House - Letter

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - US House Committee on Oversight and Accountability Chairman James Comer on Friday sent a letter to Secret Service Director Kimberly Cheatle requesting a briefing on the presence of drugs in the White House, after cocaine was found there earlier this week.

"The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is investigating details surrounding the

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discovery of cocaine in the White House. This alarming development requires the Committee to assess White House security practices and determine whose failures led to an evacuation of the building and finding of the illegal substance," the letter said.

The letter requests a staff-level briefing on the situation by July 14.

Earlier this week, US Senator Tom Cotton also sent a letter to Cheatle requesting the agency publicly reveal whether the cocaine was found in an area where confidential information is exchanged.

Comer said in the letter that the incident raises additional concerns with the House Oversight Committee regarding the level of security maintained at the White House. The cocaine was found in a storage facility that is routinely used by staff and guests to store cell phones, the letter said, citing a senior law enforcement official.

"The presence of illegal drugs in the White House is unacceptable and a shameful moment in the White House's history," Comer said in a statement via Twitter.

Congress funds White House security procedures and the House Oversight Committee maintains jurisdiction over Secret Service operations, Comer added.

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US Senator Questions Turkey, Hungary NATO Status Amid Swedish Accession Delays - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - US Senator Jim Risch, the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, questioned the future of Turkey's and Hungary's membership in NATO due to their stance on the Swedish accession to the alliance, Punchbowl News reported on Friday.

"I'm to the point where… maybe it's time that we did review the way people join and the way people are retained," Risch said on Thursday. "If you're going to be a member of this alliance, you've got to act like a member of this alliance."

Risch accused Turkey of trying to use NATO accession issues to resolve unrelated problems, the report said.

Sweden's bid to join NATO has been stymied by Turkey and Hungary, who Risch claims are acting in self-interest instead of that of the alliance, the report said.

Earlier this week, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell suggested blocking the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey until it supports Sweden's accession.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on Thursday that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson will jointly participate in a meeting during the alliance's summit in Vilnius, Lithuania.

However, experts told Sputnik chances are slim for Turkey to approve Sweden's membership bid in time for the summit in Vilnius next week.

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US Treasury Secretary Yellen to Meet Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng on July 8 – Reports

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen will meet and have dinner with Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng on Saturday evening as part of her official visit to the country this week, Bloomberg reported on Friday citing a senior Treasury official.

Also on Saturday, Yellen will meet with sustainable finance professionals and have lunch with a number of female economists, the report said.

Yellen arrived in China on July 6 to meet with senior Chinese officials on an array of economic issues, as well as to bolster ties between Washington and Beijing amid rising tensions over trade restrictions. She will depart the country on Sunday, July 9.

During a roundtable discussion in Beijing earlier on Friday, Yellen said that the United States is concerned about export controls recently imposed by China on rare earth elements used in microchips.

Earlier this week, China announced that buyers of two chipmaking metals, gallium, and germanium, will need to apply for export permits starting on August 1. Beijing's move has been seen as retaliation against Western curbs on China's access to advanced chip manufacturing equipment.

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US Adds 209,000 Jobs in June, Below Estimate Growth

(Adds details, comments and context in paras 6-11)

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - US employers added 209,000 jobs in June, according to Labor Department data on Friday that came in below economists' estimates for the first time in 16 months, signaling progress in the Federal Reserve's bid to fight inflation with higher interest rates.

Economists polled by US media had expected a jobs growth of 230,000 for last month, from a previously published 339,000 for May which the Labor Department revised down to 306,000 on Friday.

The unemployment rate remained unchanged at 3.6% in June while wages expanded by 0.4% from a 0.3% growth in May. Fed officials have said employment and wage growth have to cool significantly to effectively restrain the worst inflation the United States has encountered in four decades.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) hit 40-year highs in June 2022, expanding at an annual rate of 9.1%. Since then, it has slowed, growing at just 4% per annum in May, for its slowest expansion in two years. The Fed's favorite price indicator, the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Index, grew by 3.8% in May.

The Fed's tolerance for inflation is, meanwhile, just 2% per annum. In response to the runaway price growth since the end of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2022, the central bank has

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raised interest rates 10 times, adding a total of 5% to the previous 0.25%. While the Fed paused its rate hike cycle last month, there is speculation it could resume that when it meets on July 26 for its next rates review.

"The [previous] straight readings that were higher than the consensus [have] finally been broken, albeit narrowly," economist Adam Button said in a commentary on the June jobs data, posted on the ForexLive forum.

But last month's higher wage growth was likely to catch the Fed's attention, he said, pointing to the other "one streak that's still going: 30-straight months of jobs growth".

The labor market has been the juggernaut of the US economy, adding hundreds of thousands of jobs a month over the past three years after initially losing 20 million to the COVID-19 pandemic.

While policy-makers over the world typically celebrate on seeing good jobs numbers, the Fed is in a different predicament. The central bank wishes to see an easing of conditions that are a little "too good" now for the economy's own good — in this case, unemployment at more than 50-year lows and average monthly wages that have grown without stop since March 2021.

Such job security and earnings have cushioned many Americans from the worst price pressures since the 1980s and encouraged them to continue spending, further feeding inflation.

The Fed has a mandate of ensuring "maximum employment" through a jobless rate of 4% or below, and keeping inflation "manageable." The last was a task easily achieved before the COVID-19 breakout, when prices expanded less than 2% a year. The pandemic and the trillions of dollars of relief spending by the government, however, triggered runaway inflation since mid-2021.

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Over 75% of Americans Say Current Impacts of Racism Should Be Taught in Schools – Poll

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) - More than three-fourths of Americans believe that the current impacts of racism should be taught in schools, and over 80% think that the history of racism in the US should be part of curricula, according to a Gallup poll published on Friday.

"More than three in four Americans support curricula that teach students about the current impacts of racism (76%)," the pollster said.

Black Americans (87%) are more likely to support the inclusion of the current impacts of racism in the US, followed by Hispanic (77%) and White adults (72%).

A whopping 81% of Americans think that the history of racism in the US should be included in curricula.

"Even more Americans support teaching Black Americans' contributions to the U.S. and their impact on society today (86%). Black adults are slightly more likely than White and Hispanic adults to say these topics should be taught. Still, large majorities of each group agree," the pollster added.

At the same time, Americans look divided on including Juneteenth — a new federal holiday commemorating the end of slavery in the US — in public school curricula. Sixty-one percent

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believe it should be included, with every fifth opposing it.
The poll was conducted from March 30-April 14 among 13,023 adults.

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Blinken to Visit Indonesia, Accompany Biden On Trip to UK, Lithuania – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 7 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will discuss Russia and the situation in the South China Sea during his upcoming trip to Indonesia, and will accompany President Joe Biden on his trip to the UK and to the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Friday.
"In advance of the Secretary's travel to Indonesia, he will accompany President Biden on his trip to the United Kingdom and Lithuania for NATO meetings from July 9-12," Miller said in a statement.
While in Indonesia, Blinken will participate in the annual US-ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting, and ASEAN Regional Forum. He will stress Washington's commitment to ASEAN centrality and support for the ASEAN-US Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, according to the statement.
"He will address economic cooperation, the global fight against climate change, the ongoing crisis in Burma, the situation in the South China Sea, and Russia's war against Ukraine," Miller said.
Blinken will also participate in the second US-Indonesia Strategic Dialogue with his counterpart, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, he added.

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