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7/10/23 Monday

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US Marine Corps Left Leaderless as GOP Senator Stonewalls Confirmation Process

For the first time since before the US Civil War, the US Marine Corps (USMC) lacks a chief officer, thanks to a wrench thrown in the gears of the nominations process by one Republican senator.

On Monday, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger officially retired as he had long planned, but there was no officer to replace him, leaving Assistant Commandant Gen. Eric Smith as the Marines' acting commander.

Such a situation has not occurred in the USMC for 164 years, since then-Commandant Gen. Archibald Henderson died in 1859 without an appointed successor. This time, however, it wasn't an act of God, but an act of man, that left the Corps' top office vacant.

Enter US Sen. Tommy Tuberville (R-AL), who since February has pledged to oppose all US Department of Defense general and flag officer nominations until the Pentagon rescinds its policy of providing paid leave and reimbursement for travel costs for service members who cross state lines to get an abortion.

In fact, Tuberville is not blocking confirmation votes from happening, he is withholding his vote and denying the Senate the unanimous approval of such high-level offices, which is used to project an image of political unity in the national defense.

The "hold" has stalled the appointment of nearly a dozen officers so far, including a new Marine Corps commandant. In a June opinion piece published last month, Tuberville pushed back on accusations that his blockade was affecting military readiness, arguing that "the current military is top-heavy as never before … We do not suffer from a lack of generals."

The policy in question was announced and instituted less than a year ago, after the US Supreme Court overturned the nationwide right to an abortion and more than two dozen Republican-controlled states passed laws either banning or severely restricting access to the procedure. The White House, under the control of Democratic US President Joe Biden, objected to the ruling and the Pentagon moved to ensure that service members continued to have abortion access, within the boundaries of their legal power.

Federal law already prohibits abortions from being obtained on military bases except in cases of rape, incest, or to save the pregnant person's life, and it prevents TRICARE, the military's health insurance program, from covering abortion except under those same situations.

However, according to the National Women's Law Center, it does not prevent the Pentagon from paying for other associated costs, such as travel and board, for service members who seek an abortion.

The White House and leading congressional Democrats have denounced Tuberville's "block," and even many Republicans, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), have said they disagree with the Alabama senator's tactics.

"I don't support putting a hold on military nominations," McConnell told reporters recently.

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In the coming months, other key military positions will also need to be filled, including the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The present chair, Gen. Mark A. Milley, is set to retire in September after four years in the role.

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Stoltenberg: Erdogan Has Agreed to Forward Sweden's NATO Bid to Parliament

After more than a year of political jockeying, Turkiye has agreed to support Sweden's bid to join the NATO alliance, which it applied to join last year.

In a statement on Monday afternoon, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan "has agreed to forward Sweden's accession protocol to the Grand National Assembly ASAP & ensure ratification. This is an historic step which makes all NATO Allies stronger & safer."

Stoltenberg said the decision was the result of a meeting he orchestrated between Erdogan and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson ahead of the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, that is set to begin on Tuesday.

Stoltenberg's office said Monday's agreements built on the trilateral memorandum signed last year in Madrid and noted Sweden's moves to abide by that agreement, including amending its constitution, ending its support for the Kurdish YPG and PKK militant groups, and cooperating with Ankara on counter-terrorism efforts. Turkiye and Sweden also agreed to drop all remaining economic barriers between them and work to step up trade and investment cooperation.

In a Monday statement, the White House said US President Joe Biden "welcome[s]" the news and "look[s] forward to welcoming Prime Minister Kristersson and Sweden as our 32nd NATO ally."

A source told Sputnik following that news that there were "no specific deadlines" on the Turkish parliament's approval of Sweden's membership application.

"The process will take some time, first there will be discussions in the commission, then it will be presented to the General Assembly. I can't give you specific dates right now," the source said.

The Scandinavian state applied to join the NATO alliance in May 2022, but while it met NATO's rigid political and military standards for membership, several allies withheld their support for other reasons, blocking its accession to the alliance, which requires unanimous approval of all member states. Turkiye demanded Stockholm end its support for Kurdish militant groups that Ankara considers to be terrorist organization, and debates inside the Hungarian government about criticisms made of Prime Minister Viktor Orban's government by Swedish political figures has prevented a parliamentary vote.

For several decades, Sweden has maintained neutrality in Europe's standoffs between military alliances, although the left-leaning capitalist state did maintain defense agreements with NATO and other Scandinavian states in the event of an attack by the Soviet Union or its Warsaw Pact allies. That neutrality was maintained even after the USSR and Warsaw Pact were both dissolved in the early 1990s.

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After Russia launched its special operation in Ukraine in February 2022, which was triggered in part by the threat of Ukraine joining NATO, Stockholm and Helsinki faced - and eventually acquiesced to - Western pressure to abandon their neutrality and join the Western anti-Russian alliance.

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Video: One Dead in Vermont as Northeast US Faces Down 'Potentially Catastrophic' Rains

Soaking rains across the northeastern United States early this week could be some of the worst seen in more than a decade. Flooding has already claimed one life in Vermont, which is destined to be the epicenter of the deluge.

The National Weather Service (NWS) gave a "red" colored risk of catastrophic flooding on Sunday extending from Washington, DC, nearly 500 miles north to the US-Canada border. At one point on Monday morning, the entire state of Vermont was under a flash flood warning, along with most of New Hampshire, where the worst is expected to be concentrated.

Meteorologist Matthew Cappucci called the atmospheric setup in the northeastern US a "moisture fire hose," explaining that storms passing through the area "would be like wringing out a washcloth: all that moisture [would be] squeezed out. As a result, torrential downpours are likely."

While some areas will see one or two rounds of storms passing through, a rotating low-pressure system will ensure that Vermont faces as much as 24 hours of continuous heavy rainfall.

The NWS office in Burlington warned on Monday morning that residents should "expect significant to potentially catastrophic widespread flash flooding through Monday evening, with possible impacts not seen since Irene."

Hurricane Irene was a powerful, destructive tropical cyclone that swept along the eastern coast of the United States in August 2011, leaving a swath of destruction stretching from South Carolina to Maine. In Vermont, every stream and river burst its banks, tearing apart so many bridges and roadways that many towns became isolated from the outside world for weeks and relief supplies had to be flown in via helicopter. Three Vermonters died in the storm, which killed 44 in the US overall.

Up to an inch of rain is forecast to fall every hour in Vermont, which has already received some 3 inches of rain in the last 24 hours.

The storms began on Sunday, dumping several inches of rain across the region. Chalfont, Pennsylvania, recorded 8.01 inches on Sunday, with West Point, New York, home of the US Military Academy, recording 6.17 inches of rain falling in just three hours. For Reading, Pennsylvania, it was the wettest July day on record since before the US Civil War, which was fought from 1861 to 1865.

A woman in her 30s died in New York's Hudson Valley as she was swept away by floodwaters, reportedly while trying to carry a family pet through rapidly flowing water.

"Last night was complete chaos," Steven Neuhaus, the county executive of Orange County, New York, told US media on Monday.

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Footage posted on social media showed bridges swept away by floodwaters, roadways destroyed by landslides, and flood waters so high that only the tops of cars were visible. Such extreme weather events have become more common in recent years, with numerous cities around the globe seeing record rainfall that has triggered catastrophic and deadly flooding from Zhengzhou, China, to New York City, to Germany's Ahr Valley. Meteorologists and climatologists point to a rapidly warming global climate as the culprit, noting that warmer air holds more moisture, which allows stronger storms to form, and warmer waters gives hurricanes added fuel to become super-powerful.

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'No One is Safe': Biden Reportedly Curses at White House Staffers in Private Outbursts

At 80 years of age, Biden is the oldest US president. Born in 1942, he belongs to what is called the silent generation, which according to the National Investment Center is characterized as "thrifty, respectful, unassuming, and loyal." But White House aides are now revealing that Biden is far from "silent."

A recent report has revealed that the persona US President Joe Biden has curated - one of being a relaxed, uncle-type figure who enjoys wearing aviator sunglasses and eating ice cream, may actually be a façade.

Former and current aides to the president are revealing that the Biden the public knows—the one who softly whispers "here's the deal, folks" in addresses—is just one face the president wears in public. In fact, the president is so prone to anger, some aides tend to avoid meeting alone with him, or take a colleague to their meeting as a shield to protect themselves from his rage.

According to the president's aides, Biden has exclaimed such offensive remarks as: "God d*****, how the f*** don't you know this?!", "Don't f***ing bulls*** me!" and "Get the f*** out of here!"

"There's no question that the Biden temper is for real. It may not be as volcanic as [former US President] Bill Clinton's, but it's definitely there," Chris Whipple, the author of The Fight of His Life: Inside Joe Biden's White House, told the outlet.

In his book, Whipple wrote former White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told Biden "multiple times" that she would "know we have a really good, trusting relationship when you yell at me the first time." Whipple added in his book that Psaki "wouldn't have to wait long."

Biden aides reportedly indicated the president's anger has a variety of understandings among officials, some of whom see his behavior as a sign of respect and that it demonstrates the high expectations he holds for staffers.

However, some members of the White House staff have detailed that his yelling is equivalent to an interrogation process in which the commander-in-chief berates aides until it's clear they don't know the answer to his question.

One administration official reportedly remarked that "no one is safe" from Biden's ire.

"If there is something that's not in the brief, he's going to find it," explained Ted Kaufman, Biden's longtime chief of staff. "It's not to embarrass people, it's because he wants to get to the

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right decision. Most people who have worked for him like the fact that he challenges them and gets them to a better decision."
It's not the first time the president's rage has been revealed to the public. Biden cracked his kindly uncle persona when he was caught on a hot miccalling Fox News White House reporter Peter Doocy a "stupid son of a b****."

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Ohio's Cleveland Listed as Most Stressed US City

A recent study by WalletHub found that an alarming number of Americans, 83% in fact, currently feel stressed about inflation. Violence and crime are two other facets that are also stressing out at least three in four Americans.
A newly released study has revealed that the most stressed city in the US is none other than Cleveland, Ohio.
The study looked at more than 180 cities and compared the levels of stress as it related to unemployment rates, household income, health and divorce rates.
Stress levels in Cleveland ranked the highest for financial stress, the second in health and safety stress, and third in family stress. Cleveland, a city with a shrinking population that is now about 360,000 people, is a predominantly Black city with demographics showing residents are composed of about 48% of Black or African-American persons, and 40% white .
The city has the nation's second-highest poverty rate, behind Detroit, Illinois, and the highest divorce rate. Those who live in this city, according to the study, also suffer from a lack of sleep and get the second-fewest hours of sleep each night, after Detroit.
Cleveland also experienced a mass shooting just this Sunday that injured 12 people. The city's mayor, Justin Bibb, said he fears the city will "continue to see incidents like this occur unless change is made at the Statehouse."
The top 10 cities in America that ranked the "most stressed" include: Cleveland, Ohio; Detroit, Michigan; Baltimore, Maryland; Birmingham, Alabama; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Shreveport, Louisiana; Memphis, Tennessee; Fayetteville, North Carolina; St. Louis, Missouri; and Augusta, Georgia.
Baltimore ranked 4th in work stress, 5th in financial stress, and 9th in family stress, and 44th in health and safety stress. Meanwhile, Philadelphia - the City of Brotherly Love - ranked 8th in work stress, 9th in financial stress, 11th in health and safety stress, and 50th in family stress.

As for New York City, it reported having somewhat average stress levels in most of their categories, ranking 3rd in work stress. However, Washington, DC, ranked the highest in work stress, but showed low levels of stress in financial, health and safety stresses.
Huntington, West Virginia, ranked the highest in adults in fair or poor health (25.4%) whereas Portland, Maine, reported the lowest percentage of adults in fair or poor health (10%).
The top least stressed cities in the US are: South Burlington, Vermont; Fremont, California; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Overland Park, Kansas; Fargo, North Dakota; Lincoln, Nebraska;

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Burlington, Vermont; Bismarck, North Dakota; Rapid City, South Dakota; and Nashua, New Hampshire.

According to the study, South Burlington (the least stressed city) has the lowest unemployment rate (1.50%) in the US. The city has a small, but growing population of about 20,000 people. A majority of the city, like much of Vermont, is white (86%). At least 52% of the city's population is female, while 47% are male.

Less than half of those in South Burlington rent (40%) while nearly 60% own their own homes. The average household income is $95,000. But like many cities in the Northeast, South Burlington had an outrageous average home listing price of $579,000 in June of 2023, according to Realtor.com.

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Researchers Estimate Over 61,000 People Died During Europe's Hottest Summer

The study shines a glaring light on Europe's heat preparedness efforts, which may be insufficient in the face of this year's El Niño and worsening climate change.

A new study conducted by public health experts across Europe found that 61,672 Europeans died from excruciating summer temperatures across the continent between May 30 and September 4 of last year.

Last summer, Europe experienced temperatures that soared to over 115 degrees Fahrenheit (over 46 degrees Celsius). Portugal reached a peak temperature in July of 47°C (116.6°F), though that temperature did not break its record temperature of 47.3°C in 2003.

The temperatures also caused the continent's second-worst wildfireseason on record, with nearly 17,000 fires having destroyed over 4 million acres (1.62 million hectares).

The deadly heat waves were fueled by climate change, with researchers finding that in every week of that summer, average temperatures consistently exceeded the baseline values of the previous three decades, with the highest heat hitting the continent between July 18 and July 24.

The countries that experienced the highest mortality rates included Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal. Following those nations were Bulgaria, Croatia, Malta, Lithuania, Estonia and Romania.

"The Mediterranean is affected by desertification, heat waves are amplified during summer just because of these drier conditions," said Joan Ballester, a study co-author and professor at the Barcelona Institute for Global Health.

In a separate study, researchers also found pollution from burning fossil fuels and other sources increased the death toll.

"We found 60% of the observed deaths can be attributed to climate change," said Ana Maria Vicedo-Cabrera, the head of the climate and health research group at the University of Berne, and the lead author of the separate study. She praised Monday's research., but warned the true death toll could be even higher.

Those who died from heat-related causes most likely already had existing health problems such as heart and lung disease. Researchers found that women, especially older women who are

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older than 80, were more likely than men to die, but that's because women are more likely than men to live into old age which makes them vulnerable to the heat.
While some countries across Europe have implemented ways of tackling the heat, including warning systems and cooling green spaces across cities, researchers say last summer's death toll is a sign those efforts are far from efficient.
"It's an indication to those countries that they need to review their plans and see what is not working," said Chloe Brimicombe, a climate scientist at Austria's University of Graz.
Juan Declet-Barreto, a senior social scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists who was not involved in Monday's study, explained that expanding access to air-conditioning is the most important factor in preventing deaths caused by heatwaves.
But those efforts may not come soon enough this year. As El Niño increases in strength and affects the global climate—in combination with human-caused climate change, planet Earth already set its warmest record in June of this year since at least 1940.
The study was published in the journal Nature Medicine on Monday.

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Trump Asks to Delay Classified Docs Trial Until After 2024 Election - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump's legal team asked the court to delay his trial over alleged mishandling of classified documents until after the 2024 presidential election.
"Proceeding to trial during the pendency of a Presidential election cycle wherein opposing candidates are effectively (if not literally) directly adverse to one another in this action will create extraordinary challenges in the jury selection process and limit the Defendants' ability to secure a fair and impartial adjudication," Trump's legal team said in a court filing dated Monday and obtained by Politico.
The team pointed out that Trump's campaign requires a "tremendous amount" of time and energy. That is why he and his personal aide and co-defendant Walt Nauta would be busy until the election day of November 5, 2024, it added.
"This schedule makes trial preparation with both of the Defendants challenging," the filing said, adding that the process requires a lot of "planning and time."
Trump's team called on the court to postpone "any consideration" of a new trial date.
US Special Counsel Jack Smith said in June he is seeking to have a trial begin on December 11.
Prosecutors in the case have charged Trump with 31 counts of willful retention of national defense information, one count of conspiracy to obstruct justice, one count of withholding a document or record, one count of corruptly concealing a document or record, one count of concealing a document in a federal investigation, scheming to conceal, and making false statements and representation.
Trump pleaded "not guilty" to the 37 criminal charges he faces.
According to the indictment, the classified documents Trump stored in boxes at his Mar-a-Lago

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residence in Florida included information about defense and weapons capabilities of both the US and foreign countries, US nuclear programs, potential vulnerabilities of the US and its allies to military attack, and plans for possible retaliation in response to a foreign attack.

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Cluster Bomb Deliveries to Ukraine Related to Lack of Industrial Defense Capacity – Joly

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) – The decision to supply Ukraine with cluster munitions is related to NATO's lack of industrial defense capacity and the alliance's focus should be on expanding it, Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs Melanie Joly said on Tuesday.

"Of course, we do not agree with the American position [on cluster munitions deliveries to Ukraine], and we've mentioned it to the American officials. Meanwhile, what I think the alliance needs to be focusing on is really expanding the defense industrial capacity, because we're in this position right now because of the issue of lack of defense, industrial capacity. So that's something that we need to be working on in Canada but also within the alliance," Joly said during a press conference from Vilnius.

Canada has a long-standing commitment to "human security," Joly said, while highlighting the roles played by former Canadian foreign affairs ministers on the issue. She noted that Ottawa remains committed to its obligations under international conventions on cluster bombs and landmines, including the 1997 Ottawa Treaty.

Joly added that despite Washington's decision to supply cluster munitions to Ukraine, and Kiev's use of the weapons on the battlefield, Canada would not cease its support for Ukrainian authorities in their fight against Russian forces.

Canada's stance on cluster bombs is related to the country's adherence to the 2010 Convention on Cluster Munitions, which prohibits the production, use, transfer, and stockpiling of cluster munitions. Ottawa became a signatory to the treaty in 2015.

Several NATO states and other partners including Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain and New Zealand have criticized the use of cluster munitions after Washington announced his intention to deliver the weapons to Ukraine.

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Gershkovich's Parents Say Biden Promised to 'Do Whatever It Takes' to Release Their Son

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) - The parents of detained American journalist Evan Gershkovich said on Tuesday that President Joe Biden promised them to do everything possible to bring their son home from Russia.

"Biden spoke to us and gave us a promise to do whatever it takes," his mother Ella Milman told

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ABC in an interview.
She added that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had also promised them that he would not rest until he had brought home all Americans wrongfully detained overseas.
Gershkovich, a Moscow-based Wall Street Journal reporter, has been detained since March 29 on espionage charges, which he, his employer, and the US government deny.
White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan confirmed last Friday that the US government had had discussions with the Kremlin about a potential prisoner swap, but there was still not a "clear pathway to a resolution."

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West Faces Difficulties Ramping Up Artillery Shell Production for Ukraine - Kirby

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) - Western countries are experiencing difficulties ramping up artillery shell production for Ukraine, and the United States providing Kiev with cluster munitions is a "bridging solution," White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.
"It is difficult for the West to keep up with the artillery shell production of what they need," Kirby told CNN.
The official also defended the decision to send cluster bombs to Ukraine.
"So they could continue to fight in this gunfight, we are going to provide them with the bridging solution of some cluster munitions," he said.
Kirby added that these munitions would give Kiev "more flexibility." However, he emphasized that the main reason for providing this type of weapons is to allow the West to increase production of artillery shells.
The Biden administration last week unveiled a new military assistance package for Ukraine that includes cluster munitions in a move widely criticized by human rights activists, and opposed by some US lawmakers. On Monday, Congressman Matt Gaetz said he will co-sponsor a US defense budget amendment that would ban the US from transferring cluster munitions to Ukraine or any other country.
Cluster munitions are banned by the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which has been ratified by 123 countries. The US, Ukraine, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and South Korea have not signed the convention.

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Americans' Confidence in Higher Education Sharply Declines – Poll

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) - US adults reported significantly less confidence in the institution of higher education, according to a Gallup poll released Tuesday.

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The poll, conducted June 1-22, found that 36% of respondents had a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education, compared to the two previous readings conducted in 2018 (48%) and 2015 (57%). The remaining 40% and 22% of respondents expressed "some" or "very little" confidence, respectively.

The Gallup poll did not explore the reasons behind the decline in confidence, although it noted that previous research indicated that Democrats were concerned about costs while Republicans were concerned about politics.

In the latest poll, the majority (59%) of Democrats expressed confidence in higher education, while Republicans' level of confidence fell the most – by 20 points to 19%.

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NATO Membership Not Likely in Ukraine's Immediate Future - White House's Kirby

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) - Ukraine is unlikely to join NATO in the near future and will need to implement several key reforms before it can join the alliance, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"NATO membership in the immediate future is not likely, because that would put NATO at war with Russia," Kirby told CNN, when asked whether the allies meeting in Vilnius would outline a pathway for Ukrainian membership. "What the allies will do over the next couple of days is talk about a path to get Ukraine there eventually, and what that pathway needs to look like ... Eventually they'll get there, but there's a lot of things that still need to be done before we reach that point."

Kirby added that Ukraine still needs to work on key reforms including good governance, rule of law and political adjustments in order to meet the requirements of NATO membership, but said allies understand that these would be difficult to achieve in the near term due to the ongoing conflict.

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Biden Says Stoltenberg's NATO Leadership 'Really Matters' at This Critical Moment

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) - Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's continued leadership of NATO is extremely important at this "critical" period, US President Joe Biden said Tuesday.
Last week, Stoltenberg said he would remain in office until October 1, 2024 after the alliance decided to extend his tenure for the fourth time.
"I think it's really important at this critical moment in Ukraine and the whole NATO issue, that you continue to lead NATO. You're trusted; no one knows the situation that we're facing better than you do," Biden said at a meeting with Stoltenberg on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Vilnius.
NATO is going through a "historic moment" as it is adding Finland and Sweden to the alliance, Biden stressed.
"And your leadership really matters. And we agree on the language that you propose, relative to the future of Ukraine being able to join NATO. And we're looking for a continued united NATO," he said.
Vilnius is hosting the NATO summit from July 11-12. Earlier in the day, Stoltenberg proposed canceling the membership action plan for Ukraine to accelerate its accession process.
White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said last week that Ukraine will not join the alliance coming out of the summit in Vilnius.

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RPT - US Uses Kiev to Clean Inventory of Banned Cluster Bombs - Ex-Pentagon Aide

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) - US manufactured cluster bombs are hard to sell because they have been banned in so many countries, hence the Pentagon is only too glad to unload them on Ukraine, former Pentagon analyst and Air Force Lieutenant Colonel, Karen Kwiatkowski, told Sputnik.
The Biden administration last week announced that it was providing Ukraine with cluster munitions in a move widely criticized by human rights activists, and opposed by some US lawmakers. On Monday, Congressman Matt Gaetz said he will co-sponsor a US defense budget amendment that would ban the United States from transferring cluster munitions to Ukraine or

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any other country.

"The Pentagon's interest seems to be in getting rid of stockpiled munitions, and these cluster bombs are honestly difficult to get rid of for profit as so many nations have banned them," Kwiatkowski said. "From a US military industrial perspective, the consequence is the Pentagon and its contractors will get clear old inventory… to design and sell more profitable new weapons that serve a similar military purpose - to terrorize populations and slow a military advance."

In terms of the progress of the conflict and prospects for peace, she added, the use of cluster bombs, like mines in general, can be a battlefield tactic that freezes off land area and transportation lines, and destroys the use of territory where they are emplaced or used.

"Cluster bomb usage and the mining of territory seems to be part of a latter stage of traditional land battle, a phase that facilitates the establishment of new borders, and an end of active fighting," Kwiatkowski said.

Ukraine, meanwhile, she added, had so far shown a dismal record of restraint and accountability in its use of all the other weapons systems supplied by the United States and its allies and there was no reason to suppose it would show any more responsibility or care in its use of cluster munitions.

Kwiatkowski also took aim at the double standards employed by Western media in how they spin the use of the munitions.

"In 2022, Western media repeatedly discussed how reported Russian use of cluster bombs on Ukrainian territory kill, maim and terrorize more often than not, civilian populations," Kwiatkowski recalled.

Moreover, she added, there is evidence of US cluster bomb damage done in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as every other place where these munitions have been used.

"This US decision and NATO's flaccid acceptance of it, contrary to the policies of many NATO member states, serves as the latest example of extreme hypocrisy, and it is being observed and understood for exactly that by all of Europe, as well as the rest of the world," Kwiatkowski concluded.

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US House Republicans Warn McCarthy About Plan to Reject 'Bloated' Spending Bills - Letter

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) - A group of US House Republican lawmakers sent a letter to Speaker Kevin McCarthy warning him of their intention to oppose appropriations bills that they believe authorize too much spending, urging the speaker to work with them to revise the legislation.

"We therefore write to inform you that we cannot support appropriations bills that will produce a top-line discretionary spending level barely below the bloated Fiscal Year 2023 level," the letter said on Monday.

The lawmakers expect all appropriations measures to follow the Fiscal Year 2022 topline level of $1.471 trillion, and without the use of reallocated rescissions to increase spending beyond that topline, the letter said.

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Without adhering to such a spending cap or achieving other “significant policy victories” - such as border security measures - it will be impossible to reach 218 Republican votes in favor of appropriations legislation, the letter said.

The letter recommends McCarthy pause floor considerations of any appropriations measure until all 12 appropriations bills have been reported out by the Appropriations Committee. The letter also urged McCarthy to publicly reject the possibility of an omnibus appropriations measure or a supplemental Ukraine appropriations bill.

“We intend to keep the promises we made to the American people to cut federal spending, reduce the size and scope of the woke and weaponized federal bureaucracy, and ensure their security,” the letter said.

The lawmakers are prepared to work with McCarthy to bring US President Joe Biden to the negotiation table, the letter said.

Party unity demands a “clear mission” to cut discretionary spending on the federal bureaucracy to pre-pandemic levels, the letter added.

The letter was signed by US Representatives Scott Perry, Chip Roy, Bob Good and Lauren Boebert.

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US Uses Kiev to Clean Inventory of Banned Cluster Bombs - Ex-Pentagon Aide

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) - US manufactured cluster bombs are hard to sell because they have been banned in so many countries, hence the Pentagon is only too glad to unload them on Ukraine, former Pentagon analyst and Air Force Lieutenant Colonel, Karen Kwiatkowski, told Sputnik.

The Biden administration last week announced that it was providing Ukraine with cluster munitions in a move widely criticized by human rights activists, and opposed by some US lawmakers. On Monday, Congressman Matt Gaetz said he will co-sponsor a US defense budget amendment that would ban the United States from transferring cluster munitions to Ukraine or any other country.

"The Pentagon's interest seems to be in getting rid of stockpiled munitions, and these cluster bombs are honestly difficult to get rid of for profit as so many nations have banned them," Kwiatkowski said. "From a US military industrial perspective, the consequence is the Pentagon and its contractors will get clear old inventory… to design and sell more profitable new weapons that serve a similar military purpose - to terrorize populations and slow a military advance."

In terms of the progress of the conflict and prospects for peace, she added, the use of cluster bombs, like mines in general, can be a battlefield tactic that freezes off land area and transportation lines, and destroys the use of territory where they are emplaced or used.

"Cluster bomb usage and the mining of territory seems to be part of a latter stage of traditional land battle, a phase that facilitates the establishment of new borders, and an end of active fighting," Kwiatkowski said.

Ukraine, meanwhile, she added, had so far shown a dismal record of restraint and

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accountability in its use of all the other weapons systems supplied by the United States and its allies and there was no reason to suppose it would show any more responsibility or care in its use of cluster munitions.

Kwiatkowski also took aim at the double standards employed by Western media in how they spin the use of the munitions.

"In 2022, Western media repeatedly discussed how reported Russian use of cluster bombs on Ukrainian territory kill, maim and terrorize more often than not, civilian populations," Kwiatkowski recalled.

Moreover, she added, there is evidence of US cluster bomb damage done in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as every other place where these munitions have been used.

"This US decision and NATO's flaccid acceptance of it, contrary to the policies of many NATO member states, serves as the latest example of extreme hypocrisy, and it is being observed and understood for exactly that by all of Europe, as well as the rest of the world," Kwiatkowski concluded.

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Biden to Nominate Derek Chollet for Defense Undersecretary for Policy Position - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden plans to nominate State Department Counselor Derek Chollet to be the next Undersecretary of Defense for Policy to replace Colin Kahl, Bloomberg reported, citing people familiar with the matter.

The position will become vacant following the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, this week, while Biden has not yet made his decision public, the report said on Monday.

Kahl is going to participate in the NATO summit, which is taking place on July 11-12, the report added.

Before assuming office as the State Department Counselor in January 2021, Chollet also served as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs between June 2012 and November 2014 under then-President Barack Obama.

Chollet was among the US diplomats who were helping negotiate a deal between Germany and the United States in 2021 that threatened new sanctions linked to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline if Russia cuts gas supplies to Europe, the report said.

The deal became obsolete in the aftermath of explosions that made the pipeline inoperable.

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US Never Checked How $35Bln in Europe Defense Aid Since 2015 Was Spent - Report

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) - The US government has spent more than $35 billion in the past nine years to boost the military preparedness of its NATO European allies to withstand

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alleged potential Russian aggression but the Pentagon still has not set out any performance goals or assessment programs to see if the money has been spent properly, or effectively at all, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a new report.

"The [Department of Defense's] European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) helps boost the military readiness of European allies and deter Russian aggression," the GAO said.

Since 2015 the United States has spent $35 billion through the initiative on activities like supporting American troop deployments in Europe, the report noted.

However, "the Defense Department hasn't established performance goals and measures to determine if the resources are being used effectively. We recommended that it do so," the GAO report said.

The Defense Department has not established performance goals and measures for EDI even though the lavishly funded initiative has supported a variety of military activities in Europe, including troop rotations, intelligence activities, and construction of projects such as airfields, ranges, and other military facilities, the GAO said.

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US House Panel Concludes FBI Helped Ukrainian Intelligence Censor US Accounts - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) - The FBI helped the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) to censor social media accounts based in the United States as part of an effort to combat alleged Russian disinformation, CNN reported, citing a US House Judiciary Committee report.

The FBI forwarded Meta (banned in Russia) an SBU-provided list of accounts flagged for removal, based on their alleged involvement in spreading disinformation, the report said on Monday.

However, the list included some US-based accounts, including the US State Department's own Russian-language Instagram account, the report said.

The FBI and SBU marked authentic accounts belonging to the US government and journalists in an effort to have them censored, the report said.

The Judiciary Committee's allegations are based on information gained through subpoenas sent to Meta and Alphabet – the parent company of Google and YouTube – the report said.

Google was inundated with censorship requests following the launch of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the report said, citing a senior Google cybersecurity official. The requests primarily came from the Ukrainian government, other Eastern European governments, the EU and European Commission, the employee reportedly said.

The judiciary panel's report was developed alongside the subcommittee on the weaponization of the US government, which is investigating governmental abuse of authority and collaboration with private companies to suppress certain viewpoints.

The FBI's actions constitute unconstitutional misconduct and endanger national security, the lawmakers' report said.

The subject is expected to arise during a committee hearing with FBI chief Christopher Wray later this week, the report added.

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The allegations mirror those made earlier this year in the so-called Twitter Files, which featured an email demonstrating collaboration between the FBI and SBU to forward censorship requests to Twitter.

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Majority of US Voters Say Congress Should Make Fentanyl Crisis Number 1 Priority - Poll

WASHINGTON, June 11 (Sputnik) - More than half of all US voters - nearly three out of five of all parties - want Congress to give priority to the flood of fentanyl drugs into the United States and their second highest concern is the wide-open land border with Mexico, a new Morning Consult poll revealed.

"[N]early 3 in 5 voters want to see heavy attention paid to fentanyl trafficking into the United States, and just under half would prioritize a probe into operations at the US-Mexico border," Morning Consult said in a statement via Twitter on Monday.

Both issues have been the subject of lesser-noticed hearings this year but have not gotten nearly as much attention as the Republican-controlled House of Representatives' new probes into such issues as the financial affairs of President Joe Biden's son Hunter Biden, the statement said.

"Rather than investigations involving the two presidential front-runners, or any of the other hot-button subjects tested, our data shows Republicans would be on more popular turf if they were to focus their attention on elevating immigration, an issue on which their members of Congress have a 46% to 38% trust advantage over Democrats and Biden gets his highest disapproval rating (51%)," the statement said.

Some 58% of all voters said the fentanyl crisis should be the number one concern of Congress and land border security with Mexico coming second at 45%, the statement said.

Republicans showed the most concern over the fentanyl issue at 63%, slightly head of Independents at 62% and Democrats at 50%, the statement added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 11 (Sputnik) -

NATO SUMMIT

* US President Joe Biden will hold a bilateral meeting with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Tuesday on the sidelines of the NATO Summit in Vilnius, the White House said on Monday.

* Erdogan said that expects to resolve the issues with Ankara's purchase of F-16 fighter jets at

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a meeting with US Biden on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Vilnius.
* 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.
* Erdogan said that Sweden's accession to NATO will become possible after Turkey joins the European Union.
* Erdogan has agreed to forward the NATO accession protocol for Sweden to the parliament for ratification as soon as possible, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS
* Russia and China should strengthen cooperation in multilateral mechanisms and protect the interests of developing countries, Chinese President Xi Jinping said on Monday.
* Trade between Russia and China can exceed $200 billion in 2023, Russian upper house speaker Valentina Matvienko said.
* China will continue consistent cooperation with Russia, Matvienko said.

WESTERN MILITARY SUPPORT TO UKRAINE
* The United States' decision to provide cluster munitions to Ukraine will not affect support from other nations, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.
* Ukraine's attempts to shell the Kerch transport crossing in Crimea and Russian regions of Rostov and Bryansk on July 9 would have been impossible without the assistance from the United States and other Western nations, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* Russian defense ministry said on Monday that a total of 4,845 foreign mercenaries have been destroyed during the special military operation, while another 4,801 mercenaries escaped from Ukraine.
* Ukraine has lost up to 275 military in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* Russia considers the transfer of the leaders of the nationalist Azov battalion (banned in Russia) by Ankara to Kiev as a violation of agreements, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, adding that the matter will be discussed with Turkey.

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Hunter Biden Has Extensive Ties With Dozen of Senior US Officials – Reports

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, has maintained "extensive ties" with almost a dozen of current and former senior government officials since the time when his father was vice president in the Barack Obama administration, Fox News revealed on Monday, citing its own digital analysis.
The list of officials with whom Hunter Biden was or continues to be in close contact includes US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, senior Biden advisor

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Michael Donilon, a close aide to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, and several other people, the report said.

Hunter Biden and Sullivan were cooperating with each other during their joint work on the board of the Truman National Security Project, a liberal foreign policy think tank. Sullivan worked there in 2017-2019, while Hunter was also serving on the board of Ukrainian energy company Burisma Holdings and the Chinese private equity fund BHR Partners. The US is currently investigating those and his other foreign business activities.

Fox News reminded that former White House official Mike McCormick accused Sullivan of being a "conspirator" in the Biden family's "kickback scheme" in Ukraine at the time.

The report also cites an extensive email exchange between Hunter Biden, at the time when he was in Burisma, and then-Deputy Secretary of State Blinken. That correspondence shows that the two men scheduled at least one meeting with each other.

Moreover, their communications go back at least a decade. For instance, Hunter contacted Blinken's wife, Evan Ryan, who is currently serving as White House cabinet secretary, in June 2010 asking for his non-government email address, the report said.

"Can I get Toni's non-govt email? I wanted to send him something," that message said.

The report also mentioned email exchanges between Hunter Biden and several other cabinet members.

US House Oversight Committee launched an investigation into alleged criminal acts committed by the Biden family, including corruption and influence peddling. Earlier this month, panel chairman James Comer characterized the alleged actions as "organized crime."

The committee's probe is partially based on accusations from a confidential FBI informant, who alleges that Joe and Hunter Biden received millions of dollars from a Ukrainian energy company. Lawmakers are also investigating deals tied to China.

In June, Hunter Biden's attorneys and the US Justice Department announced an agreement under which he will plead guilty to misdemeanor tax charges and enter a pretrial diversionary agreement on a felony firearms offense in an effort to resolve the criminal probe against him and avoid prison time.

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Biden Says He Welcomes Erdogan's Pledge to Transmit Sweden NATO Bid for Ratification

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday that he welcomes the decision by his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan to move forward Sweden's NATO bid for ratification by the Grand National Assembly and emphasized that the United States is willing to work on boosting Turkey's defense.

"I welcome the statement issued by Turkey, Sweden and the NATO Secretary General this evening, including the commitment by President Erdogan to transmit the Accession Protocol for Sweden to Turkey's Grand National Assembly for swift ratification," Biden said. "I stand ready to work with President Erdogan and Turkey on enhancing defense and deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic area. I look forward to welcoming Prime Minister Kristersson and Sweden as our

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32nd NATO Ally. And I thank Secretary-General Stoltenberg for his steadfast leadership."

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US Transparency Group Requests Investigation of Biden Joint Chiefs Nominee's Racial Bias

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - The American Accountability Foundation (AAF) on Monday filed a request for an investigation with the Office of the Air Force Inspector General into President Joe Biden's nominee to be the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General C.Q. Brown, for being allegedly racially biased.

"[T]oday the American Accountability Foundation is announcing the filing of a complaint with the Office of the Air Force Inspector General requesting an investigation into General Brown's discriminatory comments and potential unlawful impact on military personnel," AAF said in a statement.

The organization argues that Brown has a history of making statements about hiring and promotion decisions in the Air Force based on race and not qualifications and monitoring the private beliefs of recruits, airmen, officers, and employees with the intention of censoring those beliefs, according to the statement.

The foundation exemplified its claims by providing a number of quotes, including from Brown's interview with the Washington Post in January 2021, when the general said that "We broke up our promotion boards to actually do developmental categories, so it wasn't kind of about a big one-size-fits-all by and large….," adding that "the other things that we have to do is ensure that we have diversity on the boards, but also diversity on the candidate list."

In November 2020, Brown said "I hire for diversity" and he "purposely" builds his office, his front office, and his team with diverse backgrounds, the statement cited the general as saying in an interview with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

In May, President Joe Biden tapped current US Air Force Chief of Staff Charles Brown to serve as the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff instead of Milley, who will retire by October.

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Madonna Says to Reschedule North American Leg of Tour Amid Recovery After Infection

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - US singer Madonna, who fell severely ill with a bacterial infection last month, is rescheduling the North American leg of her world tour and plans to start in Europe this October, the singer said on Monday.

"The current plan is to reschedule the North American leg of the tour and to begin in October in Europe," the singer wrote on social media.

Madonna, 64, was slated to kick off her Celebration World Tour on July 15, commemorating the 40th anniversary of her music career.

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The singer added that she's on the road to recovery after having fallen ill last month from a serious bacterial infection that led to her hospitalization in the ICU, and that her main priority is her health.

"My focus now is my health and getting stronger and I assure you, I'll be back with you as soon as I can," the Grammy winner wrote.

Dates for the tour's rescheduled North American leg have yet to be announced.

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UPDATE- Biden to Hold Bilateral Meeting with Erdogan on Tuesday in Vilnius – White House

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will hold a bilateral meeting with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Tuesday on the sidelines of the Vilnius NATO Summit, the White House said on Monday.

"In the evening, the President [Biden] will participate in a bilateral meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkiye. This bilateral meeting at the Lithuanian Exhibition and Conference Center, Vilnius, Lithuania will have an out-of-town pool spray at the top," the White House statement said.

Erdogan expressed his intention to meet with Biden and work on solving issues around the acquisition of F-16 fighter jets by Ankara.

According to Politico, Biden is expected to hold a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday, however, there is no official confirmation from either Kiev or the National Security Council.

Earlier, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that the Ukrainian president will join the upcoming NATO summit in Vilnius to take part in the first meeting of the new NATO – Ukraine Council.

In early June, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Kiev hoped to receive a clear invitation to join the bloc at the summit in the Lithuanian capital, scheduled to take place from July 11-12. He also said the Ukrainian military was disappointed that Ukraine had not yet received a clear positive response about joining both the European Union and NATO.

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White House Says Biden, Erdogan to Hold Bilateral Meeting in Vilnius on Tuesday

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will hold a bilateral meeting with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Tuesday on the sidelines of the NATO Summit in Vilnius, the White House said on Monday.

"In the evening, the President [Biden] will participate in a bilateral meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkiye. This bilateral meeting at the Lithuanian Exhibition and Conference

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US Congressman Gaetz Says Will Co-Sponsor NDAA Amendment to Ban Cluster Munitions Transfer

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Matt Gaetz said on Monday that he will act as the Republican co-sponsor for an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that would ban the United States from transferring cluster munitions to Ukraine or any other country.

"Democrat Congresswoman Sarah Jacobs… introduced an amendment to the NDAA that reads, 'notwithstanding any other provision of law, no military assistance shall be furnished for cluster munitions,'" Gaetz said on an episode of his online show Firebrand. "I'm going to be the Republican co-sponsor of the Jacobs amendment before the House Rules Committee."

The amendment also restricts defense export licenses from being issued for cluster munitions and bans cluster munitions technology from being sold or transferred, Gaetz said.

Cluster munitions will not end the conflict in Ukraine, Gaetz said. Cluster bombs are features of the world's "bloodiest and most inhumane" wars, Gaetz added.

Children in Ukraine will be left without limbs and parents if Congress does not stop Biden's decision to transfer cluster munitions, he said.

Last week, Jacobs said she was "disappointed and alarmed" by the prospect of the US sending cluster munitions to Ukraine. Cluster munitions will prevent economic rebuilding and recovery efforts after the conflict, in addition to posing risks to civilians, Jacobs said.

The decision to send cluster munitions has also been met with criticism from several US allies, as well as Moscow. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova over the weekend said the provision of cluster munitions is intended to prolong the conflict in Ukraine.

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White House Says Supports $886Bln US Defense Spending Bill for Fiscal Year 2024

(Update: adds details in paras 5-6)

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and his administration support Congress passing the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2024, which provides $886 billion in defense-related spending, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) said on Monday.

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"The Administration strongly supports enactment of a National Defense Authorization Act for a 63 consecutive year and is grateful for the strong, bipartisan work of the House Armed Services Committee on behalf of America's national defense," OMB said in a statement.

The US House of Representatives may begin consideration of the NDAA later this week, according to a schedule shared by Majority Leader Steve Scalise.

NDAA investments in support of the Pacific and European deterrence initiatives will help address a changing global threat landscape, the OMB statement said.

However, the Biden administration opposes some measures included in the NDAA, such as funding for nuclear sea-launched missiles and warheads, the formation of a Space National Guard, and a prohibition on using funds to provide Russia with required New START Treaty notifications, the statement said.

Moreover, the administration opposes the establishment of a new inspector general to oversee assistance to Ukraine, as well as an expansion of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction's authority, the statement said.

The Biden administration looks forward to working with Congress to address its concerns, the statement added.

"Our plan also increases oversight and accountability of the Biden administration's defense spending to prevent waste, fraud, abuse, and corruption, so that no dollar goes unaccounted for," Scalise said in a statement on the NDAA.

Scalise criticized the Biden administration's Defense Department for spending money on diversity, equity and inclusion programs instead of lethality, noting that one of Congress' most important duties is funding national defense ensuring taxpayer dollars are used responsibly.

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Biden to Hold Meetings With Erdogan, Zelenskyy on Sidelines of NATO Summit - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will hold bilateral meetings with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the margins of the upcoming NATO Summit in Vilnius, media reported on Monday.

Biden's schedule over the next two days will include meetings with Erdogan and Zelenskyy, Politico reported.

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White House Says Opposes New START Notification Restrictions in 2024 NDAA

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - The administration of President Joe Biden opposes a provision in the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that would restrict funds from being used to notify Russia pursuant to the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty

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(New START), the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) said on Monday.
"The administration strongly opposes section 1234, which would prohibit the use of certain [Defense] Department funds from being used to provide the Russian Federation with 'notifications as required by the New START Treaty," OMB said in a statement.
Although the United States ceased notifications under the New START in June, the NDAA measure would unduly constrain the ability of the United States to reverse the action, the statement said.
The United States continues to send ballistic missile launch and major strategic exercise notifications, pursuant to older agreements that remain in force, the statement said.
The Biden administration broadly supports passage of the NDAA by Congress, the statement added.
The US House of Representatives may begin consideration of the $886 billion bill later this week, according to House Majority Leader Steve Scalise.

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Biden, UK King Stress Strength of Relationship at Windsor Castle Meeting - White House

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and King Charles III highlighted the strength of US-UK bilateral ties during their meeting at Windsor Castle on Monday, the White House said in a readout.
"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. met today with King Charles III at Windsor Castle," the readout said. "They underscored the strength of the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom and the friendship between our people. Following the meeting, they engaged with a group of leading philanthropists and investors focused on mobilizing finance to address the climate crisis."
On Monday, Biden also met with UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. They agreed to hold the first high-level meeting in October to drive progress under the Atlantic Declaration economic cooperation framework, the UK government said.
They also discussed Sweden's NATO aspirations, support for Ukraine and other geopolitical issues, including the Indo-Pacific region and Iran.

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White House Says Opposes Ukraine Aid Inspector General, Bolstered Afghan Probe

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - The administration of US President Joe Biden opposes provisions included in the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that would create a new inspector general to oversee aid to Ukraine and bolster authorities of the inspector general for Afghan reconstruction, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) said on Monday.

"The Administration opposes section 1222, which would establish another inspector general to oversee Ukraine assistance," OMB said in a statement. "Similarly, the Administration opposes section 1220, which would significantly expand the authority of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction to conduct oversight of amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for 'assistance for the benefit of the Afghan people.'"

OMB pointed to existing oversight structures within the US Defense Department and Government Accountability Office that monitor the United States' aid to Ukraine.

The expansion of oversight authorities for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction is "unnecessary and unprecedented," the statement said, again pointing to existing oversight structures.

However, the administration broadly supports the FY24 NDAA's passage by Congress, the statement said. The House of Representatives may begin consideration of the $886 billion bill later this week, according to House Majority Leader Steve Scalise.

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US, EU Discuss Efforts to Limit Russia's Revenue, Prevent Sanctions Evasion - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Wally Adeyemo met in Brussels with his European counterparts to discuss efforts to limit Russia's revenue, prevent sanctions evasion, the Department of the Treasury said on Monday.

"Today, Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Wally Adeyemo met with foreign counterparts from the European Commission and European Union and executives from companies in the clean energy industry in Brussels, Belgium," the department said in a statement. "In meetings with Executive Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis, Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni, and Secretary-General Stefano Sannino, the Deputy Secretary discussed joint efforts to hold Russia accountable for their illegal war, including actions to limit Russia's revenue, erode their military-industrial complex, and prevent sanctions evasion."

Adeyemo also underscored the importance of continued economic support for Ukraine, it added.

While in Brussels, Adeyemo met with ambassadors to the EU from Greece, Cyprus, and Malta to discuss the implementation of sanctions against Russia, the statement said.

He also spoke about commitments to the green economic transition and to building secure, resilient clean energy supply chains, according to the statement.

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State Dept. Says Concerned About Chinese Disposal, Russian 'Undeclared' Chemical Arms

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has concerns about China's chemical weapons stockpile destruction efforts, as well as Russia's purported maintenance of "undeclared stockpiles," Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance Mallory Stewart said on Monday.

"We have questions about some of the destruction of China's stockpile," Stewart said during a press briefing. "We also have concerns specifically with respect to the undeclared chemicals weapons that Russia is maintaining."

The statement comes following the destruction of all declared US chemical weapons stockpiles last week.

The US remains committed to the Chemical Weapons Convention, Stewart said.

However, threats posed by chemical weapons still exist and require the active focus of US officials, Stewart said. The US will continue to support the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) through engagement and financial support, Stewart added.

Russia destroyed the last of its chemical weapons stocks in 2017 as verified by the OPCW.

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State Dept. Says Decision on Cluster Bombs for Kiev Won't Impact Support From Allies

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - The United States' decision to provide cluster munitions to Ukraine will not affect support from other nations, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"We consulted closely with our allies and partners on this decision. I am not going to detail all those conversations but i don't believe - based on those conversations - we don't believe the decision will impact support for Ukraine from around the globe," Miller told a briefing. "We do not believe this is an issue that is going to crack the unity that we've had with our allies and partners."

Miller added that the decision was made based on the fact that Ukraine is in the middle of its counteroffensive and is running low on munitions. Kiev will conduct an extensive demining operation after the conflict is over, he added.

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Biden Arrives in Vilnius Ahead of NATO Summit

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has arrived in Vilnius, Lithuania, ahead of the NATO summit, the White House press pool said on Monday.

"President Biden deplaned AF1 [Air Force 1] at 7:25 p.m. local time in Vilnius. Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda and a military guard in olive green uniforms carrying guns greeted him. The guard lined a red carpet as POTUS [president of the United States] walked off the plane," it said.

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US Probably Needs 2 More Rate Hikes This Year in Fight Against Inflation - Fed's Daly

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve will probably need two more rate hikes this year to continue its fight against US inflation although the pace of the central bank's monetary tightening also needs to be slowed to preserve growth, San Francisco Fed President Mary Daly said Monday.

"We may end up doing less or more than a couple rate hikes this year, depending on the data," Daly said in a live-streamed discussion on the economy and interest rates. "Today, with the labor market still strong, the risks of doing too little [with inflation] are outweighing the risks of doing too much. But it's appropriate to slow [the] pace of rate hikes."

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, hit 40-year highs in June 2022,

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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, or 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 raised interest rates by 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 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.

The June jobs report for the United States, however, signaled some relief for the Fed's campaign in curbing inflation. According to the Labor Department, US employers added only 209,000 non-farm payroll jobs last month, some 100,000 below the estimates. It was the first time in 16 months that the number wasn't higher than what was projected by economists.

Despite the smaller-than-forecast job growth, wages of Americans as a whole expanded by 0.4% in June from a 0.3% growth in May even as the unemployment rate dropped 3.6% from a previous 3.7%. The Fed has insisted that both job numbers and wages have to drop appreciably for it to discontinue rate hikes in the longer term.

Daly's colleague, Loretta Mester, who's president of the Cleveland Fed, told a separate event on Monday that she still regarded inflation as "stubbornly high."

"Wages pressures remain too high to get inflation back to 2%," said Mester, who admitted that she had wanted a rate hike — rather than a pause — in June.

But like Daly, Mester thought the Fed was making progress in its fight against inflation and that rate tightening had to be slowed at some point to preserve growth.

The economy, measured by real gross domestic product, grew by an annualized 2% in the first quarter of this year, the Commerce Department said last week in a report that also signaled that the Fed's rate hikes had not triggered a recession as yet.

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Treasury Official Visiting US Border With Mexico to Discuss Fentanyl Trade - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - US Under Secretary of the Treasury Brian Nelson is visiting the US border with Mexico as part of the agency's work to combat trafficking of fentanyl, the Treasury Department said in a statement on Monday.

"Nelson will travel to the US southwest border region from July 10-12 as part of the Treasury Department's work to combat the illicit fentanyl trade," the statement said.

While visiting Laredo, Texas, Nelson will receive briefings from local Customs and Border Protection officials, the statement said.

In San Antonio, Texas, Nelson will co-host, along with other government representatives under the auspices of the public-private information exchange Financial Crimes Enforcement Network

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(FinCEN), the statement said.
"FinCEN Exchanges enable the private sector to better identify risks and provide FinCEN and law enforcement with critical information to disrupt money laundering, narcotics financing, and other financial crimes," the statement added.

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US Pushes Back Against Erdogan Bid to Tie Turkey's EU Entry to Sweden's NATO Accession

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - The United States maintains its support for Turkey's bid to join the EU but has turned its attention towards Sweden's move to join NATO, a White House National Security Council spokesperson said on Monday.
Earlier, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan suggested that the European Union should permit Ankara to join the bloc before Turkey allows Sweden to join NATO. Erdogan said he conveyed the idea to President Joe Biden.
"The US has always supported Turkey's EU membership aspirations and continues to do so. Turkey's membership application and process is a matter between the EU and Turkey. Our focus is on Sweden, which is ready to join the NATO Alliance," the spokesperson said as quoted by a White House pool reporter on Twitter.
NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg held a meeting on Monday between Erdogan and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson on Sweden's membership in the Alliance with an eye towards the two sides reaching a political decision on the matter before the NATO summit.
NATO's annual two-day summit is set to commence on Tuesday in Vilnius, where leaders are slated to discuss Sweden's ascension to the Alliance in addition to the issues of defense spending, Ukraine's NATO prospects, and strengthening the alliance's eastern flank.

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US Treasury Chief Says Made Progress Deepening Communication With China During Visit

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Monday that she believes the United States and China made progress in deepening bilateral communication during her recent visit to Beijing.
"During my visit, I believe we made progress in deepening communication between our countries," Yellen said in a statement.
Yellen was in Beijing for two days of meetings with Chinese officials and members of the US business community in China.
Yellen said she had constructive and frank conversations during her meetings with Chinese officials.
According to Yellen, she raised issues of concern during her meetings with Chinese officials,

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including the importance of avoiding miscommunication in their national security actions, but they also discussed ways to cooperate on global challenges.

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US Marines Without Leader for 1st Time in 164 Years Due to Senator Hold on Nominations

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - The US Marines Corps will be without a leader for the first time in 164 years because Senator Tommy Tuberville has put a hold on the confirmation procedure for a successor to current commander Gen. David Berger.

Earlier on Monday, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin relinquished Berger of office during a retirement ceremony at the Marine Barracks in Washington.

However, the outgoing commander has no one to hand over his post as Tuberville continues to block all nominations since February in protest over the Defense Department's new policies regarding abortion.

On February 16, the Defense Department released new policies to ensure access to non-covered reproductive health care, which would allow military personnel to request administrative absence for such services, including elective abortions and in vitro fertilization.

In response, Tuberville said he would hold all civilian, flag, and general officer nominations unless Austin goes through Congress to secure abortion access for service members, according to media reports.

During his speech at the retirement ceremony, Austin pointed out that smooth and timely transitions of confirmed leadership are central to the defense of the United States and crucial for US military readiness.

On May 30, President Joe Biden nominated Gen. Eric Smith to lead the Marine Corps to succeed Berger, but Smith will be appointed on a temporary basis given Tubeville's blocking actions.

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GOP Presidential Candidate Ramaswamy Says Will Give 10% Commission on Campaign Donations

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - Republican presidential candidate for 2024 Vivek Ramaswamy said on Monday that his campaign will offer a 10% commission to anyone who fundraises on its behalf, framing the move as a challenge to the traditional election fundraising system.

"Today we're launching the Vivek Kitchen Cabinet: starting today, anyone can fundraise for the Vivek 2024 campaign and make a 10% commission. If someone else is getting rich on this, it might as well be you," Ramaswamy said in a statement via Twitter.

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The new fundraising model is intended to break up the “small oligopoly” of political fundraisers currently profiting off of elections in the United States, Ramaswamy said.

Members of the program will earn 10% per donation made through a unique fundraising link, according to Ramaswamy’s campaign website. The program also offers additional incentives, such as exclusive campaign materials and a personal call with Ramaswamy, the website said.

The website notes that the fundraising services must be provided by a US citizen operating as an independent contractor and in compliance with federal campaign finance laws.

Ramaswamy is currently aiming for the Republican Party’s nomination for the 2024 US presidential election, sharing the field with candidates including former US President Donald Trump, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former US Vice President Mike Pence.

Ramaswamy is the only Republican who can challenge Trump in terms of favorability among the party’s voters, as well as potentially outperform Trump in favorability among independent and Democratic voters, Democracy Institute director Patrick Basham told Sputnik, citing the think tank’s polling.

Ramaswamy may become a contender for Trump’s running mate should he maintain such ratings, Basham added.

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US Banks With $100Bln in Assets or More Will Need Higher Capital Buffers - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - US banks with $100 billion or more in assets will need higher capital buffers to protect them against failure and to be in line with global banking safety rules agreed in the aftermath of the financial crisis, the Federal Reserve’s Vice-Chair for Supervision Michael Barr said Monday.

"Higher capital requirements are coming for the biggest banks with $100 billion in assets, versus the previous such threshold of $700 billion," Barr said. "We will pursue changes to regulation and supervision over coming months. "Any changes agreed to will take at least several years, which is why it is so important to begin now. Everyone in America depends on a safe and stable financial system."

Banking overhauls in the United States had been made more urgent by a crisis that erupted in March when Americans pulled out deposits quickly from several banks, triggering a liquidity crunch that led to the collapse - and eventual rescue by the US government - of a few lenders.

Barr oversaw a review of the crisis that cited serious lapses on the Fed’s part aside from reckless risk-taking by some banks. Over the past four months, the vice-chair for supervision at the central bank has made numerous announcements aimed at plugging the loopholes that led to that crisis.

"The new rules will mean the biggest banks need an extra $2 of capital for every $100 of risk-weighted assets," Barr said. "By strengthening capital standards, we are ensuring that businesses have credit to grow and hire workers, and deal with the ups and downs in the economy. Stronger capital standards mean workers can depend on getting their paychecks and families can save and borrow to plan for the future."

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Aside from being safe for their depositors, he said US banks also had to be in line with the Basel III accord, a framework on international standards for bank capital adequacy, stress testing, and liquidity requirements developed in the aftermath of the 2007–08 financial crisis.

"An important aspect of my proposals will be to implement the changes to the risk-based capital requirements, referred to as the Basel III endgame, which are intended to ensure that our minimum capital requirements require banks to hold adequate capital against their risk-taking," Barr said.

While recent stress tests at banks showed existing capital buffers to be strong, the tests themselves had to evolve to better capture risk, Barr added.

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Tech Giants' Business Models Cause Harmful Content Proliferation on Their Platforms-Report

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) – Business models of big tech companies such as Google and Meta (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) facilitate the proliferation of harmful content on their platforms, Amnesty International said on Monday.

“The surveillance-based business models of Big Tech companies such as Google and Meta are the root cause of harmful content proliferation on their platforms,” Amnesty International said in its new report.

This business model is based on algorithms that amplify hateful and harmful content, which can result in offline violence, it added.

The report noted that Meta’s algorithmic amplification played a role in fueling hate speech which led to violations against the Rohingya in 2017.

“Posts on Meta’s platform, Facebook, inciting discrimination against the Rohingya were prevalent and rampant before and during the 2017 atrocities and helped to normalize their dehumanization as an ethnic group in extremely violent and hateful terms, facilitating the rapid spread of Rohingya hatred across the country,” the report said.

The virality of these posts created a sense of urgency and hysteria and a sense of perceived threat of the Rohingya, it added.

Civil society experts began delivering their concerns over the situation in 2012, however, the company failed to address them, according to the report.

“The content moderation algorithms and measures that Meta employs, whilst useful in picking up some forms of hateful speech and content, do not prevent the algorithmic amplification of such content. Further, Meta does not invest equitably in content moderation across jurisdictions and languages around the world,” the report said.

Amnesty International called on state authorities to ban targeted advertising on the basis of invasive tracking practices and to regulate technology companies to ensure that their content-shaping algorithms are used properly.

On the other side, Google, Meta, and other companies should cease the invasive collection of personal data, stop using tracing-based advertising and begin protecting their customers’

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privacy, the report said.

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Zuckerberg Says Social Media Platform 'Threads' Reached 100Mln Users Over Weekend

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - Social media platform Threads (owned by Meta, banned in Russia) reached 100 million users just days after its launch, Meta chief Mark Zuckerberg said on Monday.

"Threads reached 100 million sign ups over the weekend. That's mostly organic demand and we haven't even turned on many promotions yet. Can't believe it's only been 5 days!" Zuckerberg said in a statement via Threads.

The launch of Threads, styled as a rival platform to Twitter, comes amid discussions about a potential physical fight between Zuckerberg and Twitter head Elon Musk.

However, Twitter threatened to sue Meta over its launch of Threads, which it claims is a copycat application. Twitter accuses Meta of hiring dozens of former Twitter employees in possession of trade secrets and other sensitive information to help develop the rival app.

Competition is welcome but "cheating" is not, Musk said in a statement on the situation.

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Serious Breakthrough in Negotiations Needed to 'Sustainably' End Yemen War - UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, July 10 (Sputnik) - Negotiations to "sustainably" end the war in Yemen continue but more substantial discussions are needed to achieve a breakthrough, UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg said on Monday.

"This period of relative calm has opened the door for serious discussions with Yemeni actors on the way forward toward ending the conflict. Discussions are ongoing, but - if we are to sustainably end the war - these talks have to reach a serious breakthrough," Grundberg said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

The United Nations is grateful to regional actors such as Saudi Arabia or Oman for their support of the discussions, Grundberg added.

Yemen has remained engulfed in an armed conflict between government forces and Houthi rebels since 2014, with the situation worsening the following year after a Saudi-led coalition entered the conflict by conducting operations against the Houthis.

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Biden Easygoing in Public, But No Aide Safe From His Fury Behind Closed Doors - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden looks easygoing during his public appearances, but his aides fear his quick-trigger temper resulting in frequent outbursts and making some of them avoid tete-a-tete meetings with him, Axios reported on Monday, citing Biden's former and current aides.

Biden's reprimands include: "God dammit, how the f**k don't you know this?!," "Don't f**king bullsh*t me!" and "Get the f**k out of here!," according to the report.

Some aides even take a colleague as a "shield" against the president's fury, the report said.

"No one is safe," an administration official told the news outlet, meaning that both senior and lower-level aides may draw the ire of the president.

Biden tends to grill aides on topics until it is clear they don't know the answer to a question, the report said. Being yelled at by the president has turned into a sort of internal initiation ceremony, and if Biden does not yell at someone, it could mean he doesn't respect them, the report added.

Some aides, however, argue that the president's style reflects his high expectations for his staff. The report also mentioned Biden's demand for aides to ditch complicated and acronym-filled language when they brief him.

Some Biden aides believe it would be better for Biden to occasionally display his temper in public to dispel voters' concerns that the president is disengaged and too old for the office, the report said.

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US Allows LPG Export Transactions With Venezuela's PdVSA Through July 10 - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is allowing transactions involving the export of liquified petroleum gas (LPG) to the Venezuelan government or its state-owned energy company Petroleos de Venezuela S.A. (PdVSA) through July 10 of next year, the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said on Monday.

"All transactions related to the exportation or re-exportation, directly or indirectly, of liquefied petroleum gas to Venezuela, involving the Government of Venezuela, Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PdVSA), or any entity in which PdVSA owns, directly or indirectly, a 50 percent or greater interest … are authorized through 12:01 a.m. eastern daylight time, July 10, 2024," OFAC said in notice on its website.

The general license does not authorize any payment-in-kind of petroleum or petroleum products, nor does it authorize any other transactions otherwise prohibited by Venezuela Sanctions Regulations.

The general license took effect as of Monday.

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Former USA Gymnastics Physician Larry Nassar Stabbed in Prison - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) – Former USA Gymnastics physician Larry Nassar, convicted of sexually assaulting numerous team members, has been stabbed while serving his prison sentence, ABC News reported on Monday.

Nassar is in a stable condition after the incident, the report said, citing law enforcement sources.

The report also said the incident occurred overnight.

In December 2017, Nassar was sentenced to 60 years in prison after being convicted on child pornography charges.

The following year, Nassar later received two more sentences of 40 to 175 years and 40 to 125 years in state prison for being convicted of sexual assault charges.

Nassar was one of the team doctors of the US women's national gymnastics team for 18 years and had access to hundreds of girls and young women. More than 260 women and girls have claimed they were assaulted by him.

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Trudeau Says Canada to 'Stand Very Strongly' Against Use of Cluster Ammunition

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Sputnik) – Canada will remain committed to banning the use of cluster ammunition and will "stand very strongly" against its use, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Monday.

Last week, the US unveiled a new military assistance package for Ukraine that includes cluster munitions. The weapons are banned by the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which has been ratified by 123 countries, excluding the US and Ukraine.

"Canada was one of the countries that led on the banning of cluster munitions around the world, and we will continue to stand very strongly that they should not be used," Trudeau said during a joint press conference with his Latvian counterpart, Krisjanis Karins

Trudeau continued by saying that Canada fully understands the need for ammunition for the Ukrainian military to fight back against Russia's special military operation and noted that NATO member states are working "very hard" on delivering said military assistance to Kiev.

Canada's stance on the issue is related to the country's adherence to the 2010 Convention on Cluster Munitions which prohibits the production, use, transfer, and stockpiling of cluster munitions. Ottawa became a signatory party to the treaty in 2015.

Several NATO states and other partners including Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, and New Zealand have rejected the use and deliveries of cluster munitions to Ukraine after Washington announced his intention to do so.

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

(Adds details in para 3-5, Background in paras 6)

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.

Accordingly, Canada will begin procuring pre-position critical weapon systems, enablers, and supplies while increasing support for intelligence, cyber, and space operations in fulfillment of its pledges made under the Canada-Latvia Joint Declaration of 2022.

The statement added that the funds are proof of Canada's commitment to NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) on the eastern flank, further noting that it would be paired with the deployment of up to 1200 additional Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel in support of Operation Reassurance in Latvia.

With the deployment of additional military personnel to Latvia, Canada aims at raising the number of permanently deployed CAF personnel to nearly 2200 troops.

Launched in 2017, Canadian-led Operation Reassurance is Ottawa's most significant military deployment outside its sovereign territory with some 1100 military personnel involved. It takes part in land, sea, and air deterrence operations in both Central and Eastern Europe.

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