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‘He’s Screwed’: Biden Official Tells Hersh ‘Cluster Bombs Have Zero Chance’ of Helping Ukraine

Last week, the Biden administration announced it was sending 155-millimeter artillery shells containing cluster munitions to Ukraine, which then revealed it had already been supplied with the anti-personnel weapons. The devices are banned from war by international treaty, of which Washington and Kiev are two of the few holdouts from signing.

In a new article on the political sausage-making inside US President Joe Biden’s foreign policy apparatus, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh said the administration was frankly aware of the futility and desperation behind its supplying cluster munitions to Ukraine.

In addition to noting that Biden’s decision, long postponed, has drawn considerable resistance both internationally and inside his own Democratic Party, Hersh pointed out that the US military admits it’s likely that between 5% and 14% of the bomblets won’t explode due to their age. Since they have no self-destruct device, unexploded bomblets will effectively become landmines and pose a danger to the civilian population long after the conclusion of the present conflict.

“Biden’s principal issue in the war is that he’s screwed,” an anonymous Biden administration official told Hersh.

“We didn’t give Ukraine cluster bombs earlier in the war, but we’re giving them cluster bombs now because that’s all we got left in the cupboard. Aren’t these the bombs that are banned all over the world because they kill kids? But the Ukrainians tell us they are not planning to drop them on civilians. And then the administration claims that the Russians have used them first in the war, which is just a lie,” the official told him.

“In any case,” the official continued, “cluster bombs have zero chance of changing the course of the war.”

Hersh said the biggest concern is that soon, Ukraine’s counteroffensivewill totally exhaust itself and Russia will launch an inevitable counter-strike later this summer.

“What happens then?” the official asked Hersh. “The US has painted itself in a corner by calling for NATO to do something. Will NATO respond by sending the brigades now training in Poland and Romania on an airborne assault? We knew more about the German army in Normandy in World War II than we know about the Russian army in Ukraine.”

The Russian government has sharply denounced the US arming Ukraine with such weapons, with Moscow’s envoy in Washington, Anatoly Antonov, saying that “the current level of American provocations is really off scale, bringing humanity closer to a new world war."

Cluster bombs were first developed by Nazi Germany during World War II, although all major powers in the war developed their own similar devices. They became notorious during and after the US war in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, where enormous numbers of cluster bombs were used against communist forces.

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In Laos, more than one-third of the country's farmland remains unusable half a century after the war ended, because it remains contaminated by unexploded US cluster bomblets. In 2016, then-US President Barack Obama said he regretted the bombing campaign and pledged $90 million to help Vientiane clear out the bomblets, but he stopped short of offering an apology. Cluster munitions have also been used in numerous other conflicts, including in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Western Sahara, and Yugoslavia.

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Lunar Mapping Project Reveals 'Man in the Moon' 200 Million Years Older Than Thought

A new model for lunar mapping has revealed that the craters making up the famous "Man in the Moon" illusion are considerably older than previously believed.

The moon's surface isn't nearly as geologically active as the Earth's, despite their similarities in formation, so the craters left by asteroids that have bombarded it over the last 4.5 billion years have taken much longer to erode than they would down here on the planet.

Previously, astronomers estimated the age of the surface by "crater counting," or tallying up all of the impacts they could find and then estimating how long it would have taken to accumulate them. However, the returning of physical samples from the lunar surface has created problems for that method.

Three programs have returned samples of lunar rock and dust from the moon to the Earth for humans to study: six of the United States' manned Apollo missions in the 1960s and 70s, three of the Soviet Union's unmanned Luna probes in the 1970s, and most recently, China's Chang'e-5 unmanned rover in 2020.

Like here on Earth, lunar rocks can be dated by measuring the quantity of certain radioactive isotopes of potassium, argon, and uranium. In their research, the scientists painstakingly went through all of the lunar samples, corresponding the result of the radioactive dating of the rocks with the sites where they were collected, effectively correcting the errors in estimation from earlier studies.

The project began in 2014 and involved using data from India's Chandrayaan-1 orbiter, which mapped most of the lunar surface in 3D in 2008, to verify the rock samples were all of lunar origin and not pieces of asteroid deposited there by an impact.

"Looking at the signs of these impacts on the moon shows what Earth would be like without the geological churning of plate tectonics which took place here on Earth. What we have done is to show that large portions of the lunar crust are around 200 million years older than had been thought," researcher Stephanie Werner, a geologist at the University of Oslo's Centre for Planetary Habitability and contributor to the study, said in a statement.

One of those areas was Mare Imbrium, a vast lava plain that forms the "right eye" of the "man in the moon," an illusion of a human face formed by a grouping of craters and ridges on the side of the moon that faces the Earth. Samples of this crater were brought back by Apollo 15 in August 1971.

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The scientists found that while earlier estimates had pegged Mare Imbrium as being 3.9 billion years old, it is in fact 4.1 billion years old - 200 million years older than previously thought.
“This is an important difference,” Werner said. “It allows us to push back in time an intense period of bombardment from space, which we now know took place before extensive volcanic activity that formed the ‘Man in the Moon’ patterns - the mare volcanic plains including Mare Imbrium. As this happened on the moon, the Earth was almost certain to have also suffered this earlier bombardment too.”
Their research has been accepted for publication in the Planetary Science Journal.

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‘A Form of Suicide’: Germany’s Economic Woes Created by Its Own Sanctions Policy

Germany’s economic woes are likely to continue through the end of the year, according to economic research center ZEW, thanks to rising interest rates in the Eurozone and the US and weak export markets.
“The industrial sectors are likely to bear the brunt of the anticipated economic downturn, with profit expectations for these export-oriented industries experiencing a substantial decline once again,” said ZEW President Achim Wambach.
The economy is already in a technical recession. Earlier this week, the Federal Statistical Office revealed that Germany's annual inflation jumped from 6.1% in May to 6.4% in June and the Bundesbank, Germany’s central bank, said it doesn’t expect inflation to return to 2% until at least 2025.
On Thursday, Siemens AG announced a €1 billion ($1.1 billion) investment for an “industrial metaverse” in the Nuremberg industrial region and a new Technology Campus in Erlangen. It’s part of Chancellor Olaf Schoz’s effort to attract businesses back into Germany.
Jacques Sapir, Director of Studies at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris, told Sputnik on Thursday that as Europe’s largest industrial economy, Germany's economic health conditions that of the continent, meaning others in the Eurozone could be in for some trouble, and also that Berlin’s ability to lean on its partners is rapidly waning.
“Germany is both an important supplier for other European countries and an important buyer. A lasting recession in the German economy will certainly have significant effects on France, Italy, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands. If this recession lasts until next spring, the economies of the countries mentioned will also go into depression, which in turn will affect the German economy even more. France has so far maintained weak growth, but growth nonetheless. If the recession persists in Germany, the French economic situation will be affected and it could tip into recession at the end of the year,” he explained.
“The reaction of foreign investors is determined by two factors: the profitability of the investment and the degree of risk incurred by this investment. However, today, investments are much less profitable in Germany due to a rise in production costs, mainly but not solely linked to the rise in energy prices, and the weak vitality of the internal market due to the compression of real wages

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due to inflation," he explained. "To this must be added a rise in risks, whether political (the government is made up of an unstable alliance between several parties) or economic (no one knows what the economic future of Germany will be). These different factors combine to discourage some foreign investors from settling in Germany."

Sapir noted that Germany avoided the major energy crisis that many had predicted for the winter of 2022-23, both because the weather was mild, but also because Berlin shelled out the equivalent of 7% of its gross domestic product (GDP) to insulate German firms from the crisis - a larger amount than it spent on the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 and 2021.

"Germany was able to count on the solidarity of its partners, particularly France and Italy, which provided it with gas and electricity," he added. "But to say that Germany escaped a major crisis does not mean that there was not an energy crisis in Germany. This affected households, through substantial price increases, but also businesses."

"When we look at the economic results of last winter, we see that the most energy-intensive companies have suffered. For the coming winter, these different factors are likely to no longer be present, or to be present only to a lesser extent. A second very mild winter is unlikely, and the German government will struggle to keep spending so high. Even European solidarity is not obvious because the economies of neighboring countries will be in a much worse state than last winter and will have a hard time helping Germany in the same way. However, building the infrastructure necessary to ensure that Germany is completely safe from a major energy crisis will take time. It will not be completed before the end of 2025 or even the beginning of 2026. The coming winter therefore promises to be difficult for Germany."

Sapir noted that Berlin's problem today "is really the same as it was in World War II" - it lacks raw materials like hydrocarbons and rare earth metals - although this time the crisis is of its own creation.

"The sanctions policy is, from the German point of view, a form of suicide. But, one can wonder if the German political class is not suicidal. The attitude of Germany on the question of nuclear energy raises this question: Germany is doing everything it can to dissuade other countries, including France, from adopting major nuclear programs. However, without these programs, how does it want these countries to be able to sell it the missing electricity?"

"Germany is both an important supplier for other European countries and an important buyer. A lasting recession in the German economy will certainly have significant effects on France, Italy, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands. If this recession lasts until next spring, the economies of the countries mentioned will also go into depression, which in turn will affect the German economy even more. France has so far maintained weak growth, but growth nonetheless. If the recession persists in Germany, the French economic situation will be affected and it could tip into recession at the end of the year."

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‘Double Strike’ Paralyzes Hollywood After Screen Actors Guild Negotiations Collapse

After negotiations on a new contract collapsed early Thursday, the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) union, which represents some 170,000 TV and movie actors, will go on strike at midnight. It is the first major strike by actors in four decades, and the first during a writers' strike in six.

The labor union’s national board voted on Thursday morning to authorize a strike several hours after talks with The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, which bargains on behalf of Hollywood companies, collapsed.

The previous three-year contract expired on Wednesday at midnight after having been extended from June 30 to allow for more time to complete the talks.

Among their demands are ensuring living wages for workaday actors, protecting members from having their likenesses used in productions in which they had no part, controlling how artificial intelligence is used in the industry, and higher streaming residuals as more productions go straight to streaming services.

According to Eleven Films, some 95% of the union’s members make less than $25,000 per year.

“If we don’t stand tall right now, we are all going to be in jeopardy of being replaced by machines,” said SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher.

“The eyes of labor are upon us. What is happening to us is happening across all fields of labor. When employers make Wall Street and greed their priority and forget the essential contributors that make the machine run, we have a problem. This is a very seminal hour for us. I went in in earnest, thinking we would be able to avert a strike. The gravity of this moment is not lost on me, our negotiating committee or our national board.”

“It came with great sadness that we came to this crossroads, but we had no choice,” she continued. “We are the victims here. We are being victimized by a very greedy entity. I am shocked by the way the people we have been in business with are treating us. I cannot believe it, how far apart we are on so many things, how they plead poverty while giving millions of dollars to their CEOs. Shame on them! They are on the wrong side of history!”

Disney CEO Bob Iger called the strike “very disturbing,” rejecting the union’s demands as “not realistic” in the current media environment.

"We’ve talked about disruptive forces on this business and all the challenges we’re facing, the recovery from COVID which is ongoing, it’s not completely back,” Iger told US media. “This is the worst time in the world to add to that disruption."

The actors’ strike comes as the Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike enters its third month. Some 9,000 television and film writers have been on the picket lines since early May, with demands over many similar issues, including how the rise of streaming services has sharply cut into the work they receive.

Not since 1960 have the actors and screenwriters been on strike at the same time, effectively paralyzing the US film and television industry.

Observers have been calling it a “double strike” although the SAG-AFTRA strike is not a solidarity action, as most solidarity strikes are banned under US law. However, many individual actors have marched the picket with the writers in a show of support.

The picket line outside Netflix headquarters in Los Gatos, California, was ecstatic at the news of a SAG-AFTRA strike, chanting “hey hey, ho ho, corporate greed has got to go!”

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Recent reports in US media have revealed the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), who represent Warner Bros Discovery, Apple, Netflix, Amazon, Disney, Paramount and others, are determined to “break the WGA,” as one studio exec put it.
“The endgame is to allow things to drag on until union members start losing their apartments and losing their houses,” a studio executive told one entertainment industry-focused outlet, which noted that several other sources reiterated the statement.
The AMPTP later issued a statement refuting the reports, saying “these anonymous people are not speaking on behalf of the AMPTP or member companies, who are committed to reaching a deal and getting our industry back to work.”

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Cluster Munitions Transfer Shows How US, Ukraine Have Grown Desperate Amid Conflict

On Friday, US President Joe Biden confirmed his administration would send Ukraine cluster munitions as part of a new $800 million military aid package. Cluster munitions are banned by more than 120 countries, including most NATO members.
The US' decision to deploy cluster munitions to Ukraine highlights Washington's constant "double standard" on weapons use, activist and political commentator Phil Kelly has said.
“[The transfer of cluster munitions shows] the double standards that the United States and its Western puppets engage in. We often hear the phrase international rules-based order. That has no standing in reality,” Kelly told Radio Sputnik’s Political Misfits.
“It is a meaningless phrase concocted by the United States which basically means that when other countries commit a crime, [they can] be held accountable for crimes against humanity or war crimes but we cannot because we set the rules that we operate with.”
The decision by the Biden administration shows that the situation is getting desperate for Ukraine and its NATO backers.
“The sheer lack of information we are getting about [the Ukrainian counteroffensive] shows that it has been an absolute catastrophic failure,” Kelly said. “So supplying these munitions also displays sheer desperation. [...] Europe's own arsenals are so depleted, the Salvation Army could probably march upon Paris and conquer mainland Europe without a shot being fired.”
To underline his point, Kelly pointed to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s increasing attempts to draw NATO forces into a war with Russia.
“[Ukraine] is also burning through its human resources. That's why Zelensky is not just asking for German tanks, American tanks and F-16s. He is starting to talk about sending the sons and daughters of European nations to come fight in Ukraine. They are losing a generation in a war it cannot win," Kelly said.
Kelly said that fighting a losing conflict is “great news if you are an arms manufacturer in the US, [but] it’s not such great news if you are a Ukrainian looking to attain a livable future.”
“They really are burning their future and if we are not careful we are going to be dragged into the abyss with them,” he added.

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At the heart of the conflict, Kelly says, is the arrogance the West operated with after the end of the Cold War: “the West, rather than reflect and think how the world could move forward, there was a turbocharged arrogance on steroids."

“[They are] finding out that there are leaders across the world, whether that be [President] Lula [da Silva] in Brazil or President Xi [Jinping] in China, that are standing up to the arrogance and the aggressiveness of Western leaders and pushing back. So history didn’t end when the Soviet Union collapsed, the West is starting to learn this.”

Kelly pointed to increasing talk of de-dollarization and a growing desire to see the end of US hegemony around the world, adding that he hopes “that will be the lesson that will dawn upon leaders in Europe and Washington DC.”

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Everything You Need to Know About Cluster Bombs US Will Send to Ukraine

US President Joe Biden confirmed on Friday that the US will deliver cluster munitions, also called cluster bombs, to Ukraine for use against Russia during its special military operation. The move comes despite the US' past condemnation of the weaponry's use.

In general, cluster munitions refer to any kind of shell that opens in the air and releases a number of smaller explosives, called “bomblets” over a larger area. They can be made to be fired by artillery, naval guns, rocket launchers, or dropped from a plane.

Their use is condemned by many international human rights organizations since some of the bomblets dropped by cluster munitions, as high as 40% of them, fail to explode when fired. As such, the bomblets fall to the ground and act as landmines, capable of killing civilians for years or decades later.

What Type of Cluster Munitions Will the US Send?

The specific type of cluster munitions being sent to Ukraine are from a stockpile of Dual-Purpose Improved Conventional Munitions, or DPICMs, that the US military previously pledged to destroy. They can be fired from 155mm Howitzers and carry 88 bomblets inside their containers, each with a 10 square meters lethal range. A single canister can cover a 30,000-square-meter area.

While Pentagon Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder told reporters on Thursday that the weapons have less than a 2.35% unexploded ordnance rate, the supervisory organization contends the weapons are over 20 years old and have a notoriously high rate of unexploded ordnance.

What's the History of US Policy Regarding Cluster Munitions?

The United States has, at times, talked about ending its use of cluster munitions. A 2008 Defense Department directive signed by former US President George W. Bush instructed the military to remove all but a tiny fraction of its cluster munition arsenal by 2018 until safer versions, with an unexploded ordnance rate of under 1%, could be created. After the Pentagon failed to develop reliable cluster munitions despite investing millions of dollars, then-President Donald Trump rescinded the Bush-era order in 2017.

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The order kept in place a provision that prohibited the export of cluster munitions with an unexploded ordnance rate over 1% but provided an exception if the president determines there is an “extraordinary need” for them and the receiving country pledges not to use them in civilian areas.

While cluster munitions were used as far back as World War II, the United States infamously used them extensively during the Vietnam War, including in secret illegal operations in Laos. Around 20,000 people, 40% of them children, have been killed or injured in Laos from unexploded cluster bomblets since the war ended.

Cluster munitions were also used by the United States in Cambodia, Grenada, Lebanon, Libya, Iran, Afghanistan and during both Iraq wars, where they killed civilians and US military personnel.

Does the US Still Use Cluster Bombs?

The last confirmed use of cluster munitions by the United States occurred in Yemen in 2009; however, they were last used in large numbers by the US government during the invasion of Iraq and in Afghanistan.

There have also been reports the US continued to make cluster munitions until 2016, and evidence that the Saudi-led coalition used cluster munitions supplied by the United States in its war against Houthi forces in Yemen.

Have Cluster Munitions Been Used In Ukraine Already?

Ukraine first used cluster munitions in 2014 against people of Donbass. According to the UN, Ukrainian forces used cluster munitions in highly populated areas in and around Donetsk less than a month after signing the 2014 Minsk Agreement. Ukraine denied the accusations at the time.

According to the United Nations, Ukraine also utilized cluster bombs over civilian areas in and around the city of Izium over multiple days in 2022 while it was under Russian control. Despite clear evidence and more than 100 interviewed witnesses who confirmed it, Ukraine issued a short statement denying it used cluster munitions in and around the area without addressing the evidence.

Why Are Cluster Munitions Being Sent Now?

It's suggested cluster munitions are part of the US military aid package largely because the much-hyped Ukrainian counteroffensive has been viewed as an overwhelming dud to date. Ukraine and the United States hyped the offensive for months but after several delays, it has failed to create any major advances more than a month into the operation.

The NATO summit meeting in Vilnius will take place on July 11-12. There, the United States and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who has been invited to the summit, are expected to pressure NATO allies to provide more aid and weapons to Ukraine.

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Rare Granite Mass Found Under Lunar Surface, Upending Understanding of Earth's Satellite

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While the moon is the only celestial body that humans have set foot on, there is still a lot we do not know about its composition and history.

A massive blob of granite has been discovered under the surface of the moon, upending scientists' understanding of our closest celestial neighbor.

The traces of granite, which would be common on Earth, is evidence of a type of volcanic activity not previously thought to be on the moon, and scientists aren't sure yet how it got there.

Analysis of the site suggests the rock formed from solidified magma, also known as a batholith, that formed roughly 3.5 billion years ago.

Large bodies of granite on Earth are used to feed volcanoes, like the large system that feeds volcanoes in the Northwest region of the United States today.

But what puzzles scientists is that the conditions necessary to create granite do not exist on the moon. On Earth, granite formation requires a large amount of water and plate tectonics which help the material from Earth's crust melt and be recycled since granite - unlike other volcanic materials - requires multiple re-meltings of basaltic rock.

But since the moon doesn't have liquid water or plate tectonics, scientists are stumped on what created the granite.

The granite blob was discovered by two Chinese orbiters, Chang'e 1 and Chang'e 2. They detected a spot under a suspected volcano dubbed Compton-Belkovich, near the moon's north pole on the far side, using their microwave sensor. The data was made publicly available and researchers at the Southern Methodist University were able to analyze it.

"What we found was that one of these suspected volcanoes, known as Compton-Belkovich, was absolutely glowing at microwave wavelengths," planetary scientist Matthew Siegler says. "What this means is that it is hot, not necessarily at the surface, as you would see in the infrared, but under the surface."

The area is roughly 20 times hotter than the average for the lunar highlands.

The Compton-Belkovich area is also notable because it has a large amount of thorium, which is a byproduct of radioactive decay, creating heat. Siegler and his team argue the heat anomaly can be explained by radioactive elements in the granite matrix.

The team say this is evidence of a magma plumbing system under the lunar surface that would be much larger than expected.

However, to create such a system would require one of three things - all of which are inconsistent with current models of the moon: a large mantle plume that feeds magma from inside the moon; an anomalous pocket of water in the area; or a patch of elements creating enough radioactive material to facilitate the heating and re-melting of basaltic rocks.

"Was there water on the moon – at least in this one spot?" Siegler wonders. "Or was it just especially hot?"

The team's findings were published in the journal Nature.

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MTG Admits She's 'Enjoying' Free Agency After House Freedom Caucus Ouster

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The House Freedom Caucus is an influential conservative wing of the Republican party that has often clashed with party leadership. However, the group is also known for its secrecy as it has not released a full list of its membership.

US Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) told media outlets on Wednesday that she's enjoying being a “free agent” after being kicked out of the House Freedom Caucus.

Greene was reportedly voted out of the group last week, but no group members confirmed the news until Wednesday when fellow Representative and Freedom Caucus member Ken Buck from Colorado confirmed the ousting, adding that the vote was the result of her feuding with other members.

“She's not a member of the Freedom Caucus, and she shouldn't be in the future,” Buck told US media. "She has consistently attacked other members of the Freedom Caucus in an irresponsible way, and as a result of that she was kicked out of the Freedom Caucus.”

For Greene’s part, she seems happy being outside of the Freedom Caucus. When asked if she would be interested in returning to it at some point, Greene replied: “I think I enjoy being a free agent a lot better.”

Greene infamously called Rep. Lauren Boebert, also from Colorado, a “b—h” on the House floor and repeated the insult when asked about it by journalists.

Another sticking point between the Freedom Caucus and Greene was her support of House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, who Greene noted in the media will be hosting a fundraiser for her in Washington, DC, next week.

The House Freedom Caucus has consistently clashed with party leadership and nearly derailed McCarthy’s appointment as Speaker. Greene was an early supporter of McCarthy’s speakership, which took 15 votes before being confirmed. She also supported McCarthy’s debt ceiling deal with President Joe Biden.

Greene and McCarthy have not always seen eye-to-eye. Currently, Greene is threatening to kill a defense bill the house speaker is trying to get through the lower congressional chamber. Greene wants the bill's proposed $300 billion in aid to Ukraine to be separated from the bill, adding that it may be a "sticking point" for her.

US media reported on Tuesday that some members of the caucus felt Greene was avoiding Freedom Caucus chairman Rep. Scott Perry (R-PA) in a bid to avoid being kicked out. At that time, Greene insisted she was not told if she had been kicked out or not.

“No, I haven’t talked with [Perry] about any of that,” Greene said. “I’m mostly focused on the work I’m doing and serving my district, not interested in any drama.”

Greene is the first member to be kicked out of the Freedom Caucus since its formation in 2015.

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Multiple Heat Records May Fall This Week as Dangerous US Weather Scorches Millions

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Scientists predicted earlier this year that 2023 would bring record temperatures due to a combination of El Niño and man-made global warming conditions. July 3, 2023, marked the hottest day globally in recorded history.

The US National Weather Service (NWS) issued heat alerts for more than 112 million people in 15 states on Thursday, covering roughly a third of the United States population.

The heat wave is likely to break long-held records in multiple cities, including Phoenix, Arizona, and Las Vegas, Nevada. The primary driver of the heat is a high pressure aloft, often called a heat dome, which is settling in place over the Southwest but will affect a much larger area of the United States.

The NWS has stated that in the Southwest, there is no end in sight for the heat wave. "Unfortunately, the long term outlook for the [Southwest] region shows a continued heat wave through this weekend and into next week," the NWS said.

Alerts are in place for nearly all of Texas, California, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Missouri, Nevada and Arizona. Southern Florida is also under a heat advisory warning.

Some concerning records are in danger of falling. Phoenix is on track to break or tie its record of 18 straight days at or above 110 degrees Fahrenheit (43.3C) and may also break 120F (48.8C), only the fourth time since the city started keeping reliable records in the 1920s. The city's all-time high of 122F (50C) is also at risk of falling.

Meanwhile, Las Vegas may break its record of 117F (47.2C) as the NWS warns the city is entering a period of "extreme" heat risk.

Death Valley, which already holds the title for the hottest place on Earth, is expected to reach between 129 and 132F (53.8 - 55.5C) The area holds the distinction of recording the hottest air on Earth when it reached 134.1F (56.7C) in 1913.

Residents in the Gulf states may also be disappointed to learn that the ocean waters will not provide much relief from the heat. Temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico this month have been in the mid-to-upper 90s. Normally, Gulf temperatures hover in the 80s during this time of year.

Heat waves are not expected to become less frequent anytime soon. El Niño, the heating phase of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO), is expected to continue through the winter and into 2024.

Combined with human-made climate change, it is expected to push global temperatures into previously uncharted territory. Scientists have also predicted that extreme El Niño and La Nina (the cooling phase of the ENSO) events will increase through the 21st century, from one every 20 years to one every decade.

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Scientists Discover Evidence of Ancient Glaciers in South Africa

Scientists already believe the Earth was completely or mostly covered in ice 650 million years ago. Now, they have found evidence there may have been a much earlier ice age, roughly 2.9 billion years ago.

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Scientists have discovered evidence that glaciers may have been present in South Africa 2.9 billion years ago, indicating there may have been a global glacial period earlier than previously thought.

A team of scientists led by University of Johannesburg archaean geologist Axel Hofmann analyzed bed rocks under the world's largest goldmine near South Africa's east coast. The layers of rocks, dubbed the Pongola Supergroup, are unique in that they have been barely disturbed since they formed billions of years ago.

"This is one of the few areas which remain fairly intact and unchanged from the early Earth," University of Oregon geologist Ilya Bindeman explained.

In order to get a better picture of what conditions the sediment samples were formed in, researchers examined the levels of different types of oxygen isotopes found in specimen at the site. Oxygen isotopes are a type of oxygen that vary in atomic weight based on the number of neutrons in the element's nucleus.

The study found that samples of sandstone and shale from the area exhibited lower levels of oxygen-18 and higher levels of oxygen-17, indicating the rocks formed under cold conditions.

"This means ice," Bindeman explained. "Couple that geochemical evidence with the moraine evidence, and it means glaciers – the oldest glaciers yet found on Earth.

This would indicate a gradual climatic cooling of surface environments on Earth and points to glaciers in South Africa billions of years ago. Scientists know of at least two periods in which the Earth completely or nearly froze over, the most recent being 650 million years ago in a period called the Marinoan glaciation. But researchers are still unsure if the Earth was a frozen wasteland at the time, or if it had habitable areas near the equator and other warm spots.

If the evidence in South Africa confirms another glacial period, it will be the earliest known glacial period in Earth's history. But the researchers also pointed to another possibility: continental shift. If South Africa was closer to the Earth's poles, that could also explain the evidence of glaciers.

"Either possibility is scientifically interesting," says Hofmann.

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Leaked Audio Reveals Marianne Williamson's Struggles to Fund 2024 Campaign

Marianne Williamson announced her campaign for the Democratic nomination for president in March, positioning herself as an outsider candidate to the left of US President Joe Biden.

Leaked audio from a campaign Zoom call has revealed that Marianne Williamson's primary campaign is struggling financially, a crippling issue that has found the 2024 contender putting part of the blame on Democratic insiders.

The two-hour Zoom call between Williamson and various campaign volunteers and staff was leaked to US media. In the audio, Williamson reportedly warns that she cannot continue to fund her campaign as she has thus far.

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“I have put my own money in, and I don’t have the money to continue putting it in at the level I have,” Williamson said during the call. “Cause remember I’m not making a living while I’m doing this.

Williamson is later heard agreeing with a staffer who suggested that insiders with the Democratic National Committee (DNC) are working “to undermine her campaign.” She also goes on to state that “the DNC, Biden, whomever” are working to limit her reach on TikTok, where she has over 86,000 followers.

The best-selling author and spiritual guru also blamed the press’ focus on the internal turmoil of her campaign as one reason donations may have slowed.

A former field director for the Williamson campaign, who was among six staffers that left the campaign last week, took to social media to accuse the presidential hopeful of running a campaign more akin to a book tour than an attempt to win the White House. Among the field directors' accusations was that Williamson is not focused on getting on the ballot in any state.

The departure of the field director and other staffers who made up the entirety of the campaign’s operations in South Carolina came just hours after Williamson announced her third campaign manager since she launched her bid in March.

Williamson and staffers have denied that the goal of her campaign is to sell more books, noting that her upcoming book was contracted before her unsuccessful 2020 presidential bid.

The 2024 candidate did note that a recent fundraiser in Chicago netted close to $20,000 for the campaign but said a similar campaign in Los Angeles was not seeing as much success.

When asked about fellow Democratic nominee hopeful Robert F Kennedy Jr., who announced he raised $6 million in his first financial disclosure, Williamson called him the “bright, new, shiny object."

“Everybody’s throwing money at Bobby," she stressed.

According to a June poll, incumbent President Joe Biden leads the Democratic primary poll at 65%, Kennedy is a distant second at 14% whereas Williamson is polling at 4%.

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Crossing the Line - Cartoon
By - Ted Rall

The US Secret Service’s investigation into the mystery cocaine found at the White House earlier this month concluded with no suspects and no strong leads as to who brought the illegal substance onto the grounds.

“Without physical evidence, the investigation will not be able to single out a person of interest from the hundreds of individuals who passed through the vestibule where the cocaine was discovered,” a summary from the Secret Service read.

The release states the bag was tested for DNA and fingerprints at two different forensic labs, but both came up empty. The Secret Service also stated video surveillance of the area did not provide any leads.

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The White House was quick to point out the Biden family was away at Camp David when the cocaine was found. However, the Secret Service investigation went back several days, opening up the possibility that the cocaine was left behind days before, when the Biden family would have been in the White House.
The White House has scoffed at any suggestion that the cocaine could have belonged to a member of the first family, noting that the area is “heavily trafficked.”
President Joe Biden’s son, Hunter Biden, has recorded himself using what appears to be crack cocaine on multiple occasions, including inside a drug rehab facility. Those videos came to light after he left his laptop at a computer repair shop.

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Majority of Americans Still View Southern Border as Serious Issue – Poll

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – The majority of Americans see the situation at the US-Mexican border as a "crisis" or a "major problem," according to a Gallup poll released Friday.
The overall results of the poll – 39% of respondents seeing the situation as a "crisis," 33% a "major problem," 22% a "minor problem," and 5% "not a problem" – are essentially the same as those recorded by Gallup in 2019.
However, they marked a partisan shift, with fewer Democrats – a drop of 20 percentage points to 17% – and more Republicans – a 13 percentage point increase to 65% – seeing the situation as a crisis. However, the majority in each key political party still view the border as a crisis or a major problem.
However, 78% of Americans are sympathetic to migrants going to the US border to seek entry – more than the 64% who expressed sympathy toward those who crossed the border illegally.
The poll was conducted June 1-22, a few weeks after the Biden administration lifted the Title 42 emergency regulations implemented during the pandemic that enabled border control to immediately deport people illegally entering the country rather than allow them an asylum hearing.

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Blinken, Indonesian Counterpart Discuss ASEAN, Myanmar, Afghanistan at Strategic Dialogue

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Indonesian counterpart, Retno L.P. Marsudi, discussed bilateral and multilateral issues, including ASEAN, Myanmar, and Afghanistan, during the Second Ministerial Strategic Dialogue in Jakarta, according to a joint statement published on Friday.
"At the 2023 U.S.-Indonesia Ministerial Strategic Dialogue, Secretary Blinken and Minister

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Retno discussed progress in the bilateral relationship. In terms of political cooperation, both sides exchanged views on innovative means to elevate bilateral relations and build institutional connections," the statement said.

The two talked about economic cooperation, strengthening supply chains, advancing energy transition, and furthering maritime, health, and defense cooperation between the two countries. They also addressed regional and multilateral issues of common concern and interest, including Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship, as well as the situation in Myanmar and Afghanistan.

The two ministers also welcomed a framework arrangement between the US Department of Defense and the Indonesian Ministry of Defense on research, recovery, identification, and repatriation of the remains of American soldiers from World War II in the Regency of Morotai Islands of Indonesia, the statement added.

"Finally, Secretary Blinken and Minister Retno appreciated the ongoing discussions to increase visa validity and stay permits for U.S. and Indonesian diplomats and official passport holders, respectively for five years," the statement said.

They also agreed to explore the possibility of further expanding bilateral partnership ahead of the upcoming 75th anniversary of establishing of bilateral relations in 2024, it added.

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Biden Admin. to Erase $39Bln in Student Debt After Administrative Fixes - Education Chief

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will wipe out $39 billion worth of student debt for 804,000 borrowers exploiting fixes that more accurately count monthly payments under income-driven repayment plans, US Education Secretary Miguel Cardona announced on Friday.

"For far too long, borrowers fell through the cracks of a broken system that failed to keep accurate track of their progress towards forgiveness," Cardona said in a statement, as quoted by Fox Business. "Today, the Biden-Harris Administration is taking another historic step to right these wrongs and announcing $39 billion in debt relief for another 804,000 borrowers."

Borrowers are eligible for relief if they have accumulated the equivalent of either 20 or 25 years of qualifying months, the statement added.

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

Responding to the ruling, Biden said he would pursue other paths to provide student debt relief to as many borrowers as possible as quickly as possible.

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US, Allies Military Activity Contradict De-escalation on Korean Peninsula - Russian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 14 (Sputnik) - Military activity led by the United States and its allies near North Korea contradict any kinds of de-escalations, the Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Anna Evstigneeva said at a Security Council meeting.

"It is clear that the military activity of the US and their allies in the region, by definition contradicts the goal of decreasing the escalation of tensions there," Evstigneeva said on Thursday.

Tokyo and Seoul are just blindly following the United States and lack independent assessment, she added.

The United States, led by the US Ambassador and UN Security Council Advisor Jeffrey DeLaurentis, said that it hopes that North Korea is ready for diplomacy without conditions, judging based on the North Korea's in-person attendance of the UNSC meeting.

KCNA also confirmed Pyongyang test-fired the new-type Hwasong-18 intercontinental ballistic missile on Wednesday, which reached the maximum altitude of 6,648.4 kilometers (4,131 miles) and flew a distance of 1,001.2 kilometers for 4,491 seconds.

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US, Japan, Allies in Joint Statement After UNSC Meeting Urge N. Korea to Return to Talks

UNITED NATIONS, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United States, Japan, South Korea and other countries in a joint statement called on North Korea to remain committed to diplomacy and on the UNSC to take its obligations seriously.

"We remain committed to diplomacy, as this is the only path toward a sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula. We stand ready to engage in diplomacy without conditions and urged the DPRK to return to dialogue," US Ambassador Jeffrey DeLaurentis said in a joint statement on behalf of several states. "The Security Council must take seriously its responsibility to counter these activities, which threaten international peace and security and undermine the global Non Proliferation regime."

DeLaurentis read the joint statement at a UN Security Council stakeout on behalf of the US, Albania, Ecuador, France, Japan, Malta, South Korea, Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom.

KCNA earlier confirmed Pyongyang test-fired the new-type Hwasong-18 intercontinental ballistic missile on Wednesday, which reached the maximum altitude of 6,648.4 kilometers (4,131 miles) and flew a distance of 1,001.2 kilometers for 4,491 seconds.

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US Defense Chief Austin Says Has Used Cluster Munitions Himself, Aware of Risks

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said during an interview with CNN that he has personally been involved with the use of cluster munitions and understands their risks, following the United States' decision to provide the controversial munitions to Ukraine.

"I do," Austin said on Thursday, when asked if he understands cluster munitions' uses and risks. "I know how these munitions work, I actually used them in combat."

The US-provided cluster munitions - which deploy smaller bomblets that can fail to detonate, later endangering civilians - have already arrived in Ukraine, alongside cluster munitions from other countries, the Defense Department said earlier on Thursday.

President Joe Biden's decision to provide Ukraine with cluster munitions was met with criticism by US lawmakers in both major political parties as well as US allies, Russia and other countries. The Biden administration has said earlier the use of cluster munitions is tantamount to a war crime.

The last recorded use of cluster munitions by the United States was during its 2003 invasion of Iraq, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl also said on Thursday.

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Syria Grants UN Use of Border-Crossing for 6 Months to Allow for Evaluation - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 14 (Sputnik) - Syria will allow the United Nations to use its Bab al-Hawa border crossing to provide aid for six months during which time it will be possible to make a necessary evaluation and improve the so-called "extended decisions" on relevant UN resolutions, Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations Bassam Sabbagh said.

"Six months is a period that will allow all of us, Syria as a concerned party… to monitor the implementation of the [UN Security Council] resolutions. And that's why we were insisting during the negotiations about extending the mandate of the resolution about this period, which enabled us to make this evaluation, this assessment, and to seek improvements in the extended decisions," Sabbagh said on Thursday.

The United Nations and its staff should not communicate with the terrorist organizations and their affiliated illegal administrative entities in northwestern Syria, including the so-called interim government, Sabbagh added.

Earlier on Thursday, the Syrian mission sent a letter to the UN Security Council president asking that it be disseminated to all members.

The letter said Syria granted the United Nations the permission to use the Bab al-Hawa border crossing point for six months because the co-penholders have refused to amend their draft resolution on border crossings according to Russia's proposal.

Earlier this week, the UN Security Council members failed to agree on extending the use of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, which enables the delivery of aid to Syria. Russia proposed an extension of the use of this border crossing for six months but it did not garner enough votes to

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pass.

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US House Rejects NDAA Amendments to Decrease Aid to Ukraine

(Update: edits for clarity in paras 1-2, adds details in para 12)
WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives rejected several amendments to the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to block and reduce future US security assistance to Ukraine, as the lower chamber of Congress continues to develop their final version of the legislation.
House lawmakers have considered hundreds of amendments to their version of the NDAA this week, which they will need to reconcile with the Senate version. The lawmakers rejected two amendments Thursday evening to reduce support for Ukraine as part of the $886 billion defense policy bill.
The House rejected an amendment from Congressman Matt Gaetz to prohibit federal funds from being made available to provide security assistance to Ukraine. The lower chamber also rejected an amendment offered by Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene to remove $300 million in funding for Ukraine from the bill.
The House also rejected an amendment from Greene to block the creation of a "Center of Excellence" in Ukraine.
Additionally, the House rejected amendments from other lawmakers to require the Biden administration to provide Congress with a detailed strategy for US involvement in Ukraine and end an extension of lend-lease authority to Ukraine.
Greene has introduced amendments to the NDAA directing US President Joe Biden to exit the NATO alliance and to block the transfer of F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine, although those amendments have not yet been considered.
The White House said that Biden generally supports the NDAA's passage, but urges lawmakers to reconsider some provisions, such as increased oversight of aid to Ukraine.
US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell have expressed a desire for Congress to pass the legislation before their August recess.
The NDAA sets the agencies responsible for defense activities and their recommended funding levels, as well as policies related to how such spending can be spent.
The House on Thursday did approve an amendment to prohibit the Defense Department from reimbursing expenses for abortion services. US Senator Tommy Tuberville has placed a hold on Biden administration nominees in protest of new Pentagon abortion policies supporting the practice.
US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has discussed concerns about military readiness impacts from the holds with Tuberville and hopes he lifts the holds, according to the Defense Department.
The House may also consider an amendment from Greene later on Thursday to block the transfer of cluster munitions to Ukraine, as well as amendments addressing diversity, equity, and

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inclusion efforts within the Pentagon.

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US Hopes DPRK is Ready for Diplomacy Without Preconditions - UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes that the DPRK is prepared to engage in diplomacy without preconditions based on its in-person attendance at the UN Security Council meeting, the US Ambassador and Senior Advisor for Security Council Affairs Jeffrey DeLaurentis said on Thursday.

"We hope the DPRK's direct participation today demonstrates that it is ready to engage in meaningful diplomacy without preconditions. But if not, this council should unify as we did in 2017," Jeffrey DeLaurentis told Security Council members.

According to the UN, North Korea increased its missile launch activities in 2022-2023, firing more than 90 launches using ballistic missile technology. The United Nations is also concerned over the lack of unity within the UN Security Council.

KCNA also confirmed that Pyongyang test-fired the new-type Hwasong-18 intercontinental ballistic missile on Wednesday, which reached a maximum altitude of 6,648.4 kilometers (4,131 miles) and flew a distance of 1,001.2 kilometers for 4,491 seconds.

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Recent North Korean Missile Landed Inside Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone - UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United Nations says that the missile fired by North Korea on Wednesday landed within the Russian Federation's Exclusive Economic Zone and was possibly the longest ballistic missile launch, the UN Assistant Secretary-General, Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations Khaled Khiari said on Thursday.

"The missile was launched on a lofted trajectory from the Pyongyang area at 10:00 am local time and reportedly flew for 1,001.2 km and to an altitude of 6,648.4 km before falling into the sea, inside the Russian Federation's Exclusive Economic Zone. The flight was reportedly around 74 minutes, potentially making it the DPRK's longest ballistic missile flight duration," Khiari told Security Council members.

North Korea increased its missile launch activities in 2022-2023, firing more than 90 launches using ballistic missile technology, he added.

The UN official was also concerned over the lack of unity within the UN Security Council.

KCNA also confirmed Pyongyang test-fired the new-type Hwasong-18 intercontinental ballistic missile on Wednesday, which reached a maximum altitude of 6,648.4 kilometers (4,131 miles) and flew a distance of 1,001.2 kilometers for 4,491 seconds.

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US Govt. Asks Court to Deny Trump's Request to Delay Classified Documents Trial - Filing

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The US government asked a court to deny former President Donald Trump's and his assistant co-defendant Waltine Nauta's motion to reschedule the trial over alleged mishandling of classified documents until after the 2024 presidential election, according to a court filing.

"There is no basis in law or fact for proceeding in such an indeterminate and open-ended fashion, and the Defendants provide none," the government said in a reply to the motion on Thursday. "[T]he Court should reject Defendants' invitation to defer consideration of a trial date, and should set jury selection to begin on December 11, 2023."

The government pointed out in its reply that Trump's and Nauta's claims that they cannot receive a fair trial prior to the conclusion of the next presidential election and request to not even consider a new trial date until some unspecified later time have no basis in law, the filing said.

Trump's lawyers filed a motion to delay his trial on July 11, saying that during the upcoming presidential cycle, there will be no conducive circumstances to select jurors and secure a fair and impartial adjudication.

The lawyers also said that the Trump campaign requires a "tremendous amount" of time and energy and that is why he and Nauta would be busy until the election day of November 5, 2024.

In June, prosecutors 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 representations.

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Lack of Unity in UNSC Over Situation in North Korean Peninsula is Alarming - UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, July 14 (Sputnik) - The missing unity in the United Nations Security Council about the situation in the North Korean Peninsula is concerning, the UN Assistant Secretary-General, Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Khaled Khiari said on Thursday.

"However, the lack of unity and action in the Security Council does little to slow the negative trajectory on the Korean Peninsula. The status quo is alarming and unsustainable," Khiari told Security Council members.

North Korea increased its missile launch activities in 2022-2023, firing more than 90 launches using ballistic missile technology, he added.

Russia and China, as members of the Security Council, argue that sanctions against North Korea should be lowered and that they are not effective.

The Wednesday launch marks the first in nearly a month after North Korea last fired off a

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missile in mid-June.
The missile was launched on a lofted trajectory from the Pyongyang area at 10:00 am local time and reportedly flew for 1,001.2 km and to an altitude of 6,648.4 km before falling into the sea, inside the Russian Federation's Exclusive Economic Zone. The flight was reportedly around 7 4 minutes, potentially making it the DPRK's longest ballistic missile flight duration.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) -

BLACK SEA INITIATIVE
* Moscow is considering the option to suspend participation in the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, until the conditions concerning Russia are fulfilled, President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday.
* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expects to hold talks with Putin before the July 17 expiration deadline of the Black Sea Initiative, Turkey's ruling party AKP said.
* The European Commission is ready to explore all solutions when it comes to the extension of the Black Sea Initiative, an EU spokesperson said.

WESTERN MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE
* US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley will host another meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group on July 18 with nearly 50 participants from around the world, Pentagon press secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.
* The conditions on the battlefield in Ukraine are not "ideal" for using F-16 fighter jets at present given that Russia continues to possess air defense capabilities, Joint Staff Director for Operations Lt. Gen. Douglas Sims II said.
* The cluster munitions provided by the United States and other countries to Ukraine are currently in the country, Sims said.
* Supplies of new weapons to Ukraine will only deteriorate the situation there and aggravate the ongoing conflict, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.
* Western missiles and tanks supplied to Ukraine cause damage but do not pose a critical threat in the combat zone, Putin said.

SYRIA DEVELOPMENTS
* The United States and the Russian military are having conversations every day about the proper way to conduct operations in and around one another in Syria, Joint Staff Director for Operations Lt. Gen. Douglas A. Sims II said on Thursday.
* The United States is not going to change its air force composition in the skies over Syria following a number of incidents with Russian jets, Sims said.
* The coalition led by the United States breached deconfliction protocols 13 times in Syria over

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the past 24 hours, Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria deputy chief Rear Adm. Oleg Gurinov said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Ukraine has a right to have security guarantees but they should not create security threats to other nations, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday.
* Ukraine's possible membership in NATO will create a security threat for Russia and will not increase security of Ukraine itself, Putin said.
* US President Joe Biden said he does not believe that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine can go on for years.

RUSSIAN ECONOMY

* Oil production in Russia in May remained at the level of 9.6 million barrels per day, according to a new report by OPEC released on Thursday.
* Russia's public debt amounted to $347.7 billion as of July 1, having decreased by $33 billion or by 8.7% since the beginning of the year, the Russian Central Bank said.

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No Injuries, Public Safety Concerns Following Texas Pipeline Explosion - Sheriff's Office

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - There are no injuries or concerns for public safety following a pipeline explosion that caused a large fire in a private oil field in Texas, a Brazoria County Sheriff's Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Thursday.

"No injuries reported, no concern for citizens," the spokesperson said.

Local broadcaster KHOU, citing authorities, said a ruptured pipeline in Brazoria County, Texas, caused a huge fire on a private oil field.

According to the report, the pipeline is owned by INEOS Oligomers.

Authorities have not disclosed whether gas or oil is burning, the report said.

The Brazoria County Fire Marshall did not immediately respond to Sputnik's request for comment.

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Federal Reserve 'Superhawk' James Bullard to Leave US Central Bank on August 14

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis President James Bullard announced on Thursday that he was resigning to pursue a career in education.

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"It has been both a privilege and an honor to be part of the St. Louis Fed for the last 33 years, including serving as its president for the last 15 years," Bullard said in a statement announcing he would step down effective August 14.

Bullard will become the inaugural dean of the Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr. School of Business at Purdue University in Indiana immediately after his resignation, the statement said.

Jim McKelvey, chair of the bank's board of directors, said the outgoing president will leave an indelible legacy from his stewardship of the Missouri chapter of the Federal Reserve.

Kathleen O'Neill Paese, first vice president at the bank, would fill in as interim president and COO, the statement said.

Bullard emerged as the Fed's most aggressive voice in using interest rate hikes to blunt inflation as US prices hit four-decade highs a year ago in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic measures and the trillions of dollars of relief spending.

Bullard issued lengthy but well-articulated essays and data sheets with solid empirical evidence to make the case why interest rates should go as high as inflation, emphasizing that a defeat for the US central bank would mean a defeat for the average American it was mandated to protect.

"We're trying to have this disinflationary pressure and that's supposed to come through higher rates," Bullard said in a Financial Times interview published in May. "Maybe this will fuel a slower disinflation or even a little bit more inflation going forward than what we intend."

Bullard's stance earned him the moniker of a Fed "superhawk," making him equally admired and loathed in US markets as his calls for ever-higher interest rates often led to sharp selloffs in stocks and other risk assets.

US inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, stood at a four-decade high of 9.1% per year in June 2022. This week, the reading for June showed the index up just 3% year-on-year - just 100 basis points above the Fed's long-term target of 2%.

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Central Asia Countries Asking For Help to Mitigate Risks From US Sanctions - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - Central Asian countries are asking the United States to help mitigate economic risks associated to anti-Russia sanctions, US Deputy Assistant Secretary Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Elizabeth Horst said on Thursday.

"What they're asking for us is support on sanctions, helping them find a way that they can resist both pressures and giving them an alternative," Horst said during a congressional hearing. "We have engaged very much with them on sanctions, particularly in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as a way to not crush their own economies, when they're at risk"

The United States and European Union have imposed hundreds of sanctions against Russian government officials, entities and business leaders after Moscow carried out its special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022.

Most recently, the European Union officially released its 11th package of sanctions against Russia targeting a list of individuals, banks and companies involved in the production and maintenance of weapons.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the Russian market did not collapse after the exit of foreign companies and imposition of Western sanctions

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India Diversifying Away from Russian Defense Industry Faster Than Expected - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is helping India lessen its reliance on Russia's defense industry faster than expected, US Deputy Assistant Secretary Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Elizabeth Horst said on Thursday.

"We're going to help India diversify away from Russia's defense industry...We're moving faster than you would expect, but it's probably never as fast as people want it to be," Horst said during a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with President Joe Biden at the White House last month to discuss various matters, including expanding the trade, defense, and security partnership.

In light of the Modi-Biden meeting, a US official said that India is actively diversifying away from Russian military equipment.

The two leaders announced a series of deliverables following the meeting, which included India's commitment to purchase American-made MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones.

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US Expects 90% Chance Of El Nino Persistence Into Northern Hemisphere Winter - NOAA

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – The United States expects a 90% chance of El Nino weather phenomenon persistence into the Northern Hemisphere winter this year, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Chief Scientist Sarah Kapnick said on Thursday.

“The July 2023 outlook gives over a 90% chance that El Nino is persisting into the Northern Hemisphere winter. The range of possibilities for the end of the year include an 81% chance of at least a moderate strength event,” Kapnick told reporters, referring to the outlook NOAA issued earlier in the day.

She pointed out that a chance of a strong El Nino is “around 50%”, and there is a 20% possibility that this phenomenon would reach the historic high levels of 1997-1999 and 2015-2016.

“A historic El Nino is defined as five consecutive three-month periods with ocean temperatures at least 0.5 degrees Celcius above average in the Central and Eastern Pacific Ocean,” Kapnick explained.

US Special Envoy for Global Food Security Cary Fowler stressed that El Nino typically leads to

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global reductions in economic growth. He also noted that country-level impacts that can persist for years.

"You also typically see global declines in production of some of the major staple crops – wheat, rice, maize," he said, adding that reductions could reach up to 4.5%.

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) warned earlier in July that conditions for the El Nino weather phenomenon have developed in the tropical Pacific for the first time in seven years, likely leading to a rise in global temperatures and disruptive weather and climate patterns.

El Nino is a global weather phenomenon that is a naturally occurring climate pattern associated with warming ocean surface temperatures in the central and eastern tropical Pacific Ocean. It usually occurs every two to seven years and causes heavy rains in parts of southern South America, the southern United States, the Horn of Africa, and Central Asia. It can also cause severe droughts in Australia, Indonesia, parts of southern Asia, Central America and northern South America.

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Hollywood Actors Union Says Unanimously Agreed to Start Strike Beginning at Midnight

(Adds details in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The Screen Actors Guild (SAG-AFTRA), the union that represents American TV and film actors, has decided to join Hollywood screenwriters in striking against studios and streamers, representatives from the guild said on Thursday.

The move comes after the group's negotiations with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) broke down on Wednesday.

"Because the AMPTP remains unwilling to offer a fair deal on key issues essential to protecting the livelihoods of working actors and performers SAG-AFTRA's national board unanimously voted to issue a strike order against the studios and streamers," the union's chief negotiator, Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, said at a press conference.

When asked how long she thought the historic strike is expected to last, SAG-AFTRA president Fran Drescher placed the onus squarely on the shoulders of Hollywood.

"That's up to [AMPTP]; we're open to talking to them tonight," Drescher said.

SAG-AFTRA will be issuing a notice order to union members sometime on Thursday outlining exactly what actors are prohibited from doing as part of the strike. It is expected to cover any type of project promotion made under TV Theatrical agreements, including festivals, panels, and premieres.

The strike is slated to begin at midnight tonight, and actors will be on picket lines Friday morning.

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

US Has 'Moment of Opportunity' to Expand Ties With Central Asian Countries - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The United States has a moment of opportunity to expand its relations with countries in Central Asia and offer an alternative to their dealings with China and Russia, US Deputy Assistant Secretary Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Elizabeth Horst said on Thursday.

"We have a moment of opportunity with Central Asia right now," Horst said during a congressional hearing. "This is a time when they have shown remarkable independence, and the message that we offer as an alternative to both Russia and also China is one that's really resonating."

Horst noted that the United States has been able to offer a number of countries in South Asia an alternative to what China offers on certain economic projects.

Last month, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev said the United States and the United Kingdom seek to destabilize the situation in Central Asia in order to justify the expansion of NATO's military presence in the region.

The purpose is allegedly to create ploys to expand NATO's military presence in the region and this can be done by taking advantage of the security risks emanating from Afghanistan, Patrushev said.

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Biden Signs Order Augmenting Operation Atlantic Resolve With 3,000 Troops - Pentagon

(Updates with more details in paras 5-8)

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed an Executive Order augmenting Operation Atlantic Resolve in Europe with 3,000 reserve personnel, Joint Staff Director for Operations Lt. Gen. Douglas A. Sims said on Thursday.

"Today, the president signed an Executive Order approving the mobilization of select reserve forces… with no more than 3,000 personnel augmenting the armed forces in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve," Sims said.

Operation Atlantic Resolve, which provides combat-credible forces to Europe, will also be newly designated as a contingency operation, Sims said.

The action reaffirms the United States' commitment to the defense of NATO's eastern flank amid Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Sims said.

Designating Operation Atlantic Resolve as a contingency operation unlocks capabilities and authorities that enable the US to provide better support and sustainment for its forces, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said during the briefing.

The Defense Department can now call on the 3,000 reserve personnel to support the operation, Ryder said.

The move does not change current US force posture levels in Europe, the US European

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Command said in a statement.
The authorities ensure the long-term resilience of US European Command's heightened level of presence and operations, the statement said.

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US to Be 'Overjoyed' if Black Sea Grain Initiative Extended - Special Envoy

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes that the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, will be extended before it expires next week, US Special Envoy for Global Food Security Cary Fowler said on Thursday.
"We would be overjoyed for the Black Sea Grain Initiative to be extended," Fowler said during a press briefing.
Fowler said it would be "quite unfortunate" not to expend the agreement just ahead of the harvesting season in Ukraine.
On July 22, 2022, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and the United Nations reached an agreement to provide a humanitarian maritime corridor for food and fertilizer exports from Ukrainian Black Sea ports. The United Nations committed to facilitating Russia's food and fertilizer exports amid Western sanctions.
Moscow has since agreed to several extensions of the agreement, which is due to expire on July 17, but complained that the obligations toward Russia have not been fulfilled. In addition, Russia has said most of the grain goes to Western countries and only a very small amount reaches the countries with greatest need in the Third World.
In early June, the Russian Defense Ministry said a Ukrainian sabotage group had blown up the Tolyatti-Odessa ammonia pipeline in the Kharkiv Region. The Kremlin said the attack would complicate an extension of the grain agreement.
Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin has said he believes the agreement will be terminated on July 18.

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Hollywood Actors Union Says Unanimously Agreed to Start Strike Beginning at Midnight

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The Screen Actors Guild (SAG-AFTRA), the union that represents American TV and film actors, has decided to join Hollywood screenwriters in striking against studios and streamers, representatives from the guild said on Thursday.
The move comes after the group's negotiations with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) broke down on Wednesday.
"Because the AMPTP remains unwilling to offer a fair deal on key issues essential to protecting the livelihoods of working actors and performers SAG-AFTRA's national board unanimously

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voted to issue a strike order against the studios and streamers," the union's chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland said at a press conference.
The strike is slated to begin at midnight tonight, and actors will join picket lines on Wednesday morning.

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US Defense Chief Holds Call With Senator Tuberville Over Defense Nominee Holds - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin held a call with US Senator Tommy Tuberville to discuss the secretary's concerns about a hold placed by the lawmaker on defense nominees requiring the Senate's confirmation, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.
"Today, at Secretary Austin's request, he did briefly speak with Senator Tuberville to discuss the unprecedented blanket hold the senator has placed on hundreds of general officer and flag officer nominees at the Department of Defense," Ryder said during a press briefing.
Tuberville imposed the hold on Biden administration nominees due to new Pentagon abortion policies. The hold has left the US Marine Corps without a confirmed leader for the first time in 164 years.
Austin explained to Tuberville the impact the holds are having on military readiness, Ryder said. Austin's hope is that Tuberville lifts his holds, Ryder said.
The two officials agreed to speak again next week, Ryder added.
Earlier on Thursday, US President Joe Biden said he would only consider speaking to Tuberville about the issue if he truly believed the senator's mind could be changed. It is the responsibility of the Republican Party to take a stand against Tuberville, Biden said.

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Austin, Milley to Host Ukraine Defense Contact Group Virtual Meeting on July 18 – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley will host another meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group on July 18 with nearly 50 participants from around the world, Pentagon press secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.
"[O]n July 18, Secretary Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley will host a virtual meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group that will be joined by ministers of defense and chiefs of defense from nearly 50 nations from around the world," Ryder said during a press briefing.

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Conditions for Using F-16 Jets in Ukraine 'Not Ideal' Right Now - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The conditions on the battlefield in Ukraine are not "ideal" for using F-16 fighter jets at present given that Russia continues to possess air defense capabilities, Joint Staff Director for Operations Lt. Gen. Douglas Sims II said on Thursday.
"The conditions right now, for the employment of the F-16s are probably not ideal. The Russians still possess some air defense capability. They have air capability and the number of F-16s to be provided may not be perfect for what's going on right now," Sims said during a press briefing.

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US, Russian Military Have Daily Conversations About Operations in Syria – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – The United States and the Russian military are having conversations every day about the proper way to conduct operations in and around one another in Syria, Joint Staff Director for Operations Lt. Gen. Douglas A. Sims II said on Thursday.
"There are agreements and conversations every day between our forces and the Russians about the proper way to conduct operations in and around one another [in Syria]," Sims said during a press briefing.

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US Won't Need to Change Air Composition in Syria Amid Incidents With Russians - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – The United States is not going to change its air force composition in the skies over Syria following a number of incidents with Russian jets, Joint Staff Director for Operations Lt. Gen. Douglas A. Sims II said on Thursday.
"The short answer would be no," Sims said when asked whether the Pentagon intends to change its air composition in Syria amid the incidents.

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Pentagon Says US, Other Foreign Cluster Munitions Presently in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - Cluster munitions provided by the United States and other countries are currently in Ukraine, Joint Staff Director for Operations Lt. Gen. Douglas A. Sims said on Thursday.

"There are cluster munitions in Ukraine at this time," Sims said during a press briefing.

There were cluster munitions in Ukraine provided by third-party countries prior to the US' delivery of the weapons, Sims added.

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Biden Signs Order Augmenting Operation Atlantic Resolve With 3,000 Troops - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed an Executive Order augmenting Operation Atlantic Resolve in Europe with 3,000 reserve personnel, Joint Staff Director for Operations Lt. Gen. Douglas A. Sims said on Thursday.

"Today, the president signed an Executive Order approving the mobilization of select reserve forces… with no more than 3,000 personnel augmenting the armed forces in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve," Sims said.

Operation Atlantic Resolve, which provides combat-credible forces to Europe, will also be newly designated as a contingency operation, Sims added.

The action reaffirms the US' commitment to defense of NATO's eastern flank amid Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Sims said.

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Biden to Host Israeli President Herzog on July 18 - Whit House

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will host Israeli President Isaac Herzog at the White House on July 18, where the two leaders will hold talks highlighting the two countries' enduring partnership, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"President Biden looks forward to welcoming Israeli President Isaac Herzog to the White House on July 18. As Israel celebrates its 75th anniversary, the visit will highlight our enduring partnership and friendship. President Biden will reaffirm the ironclad commitment of the United States to Israel's security," Jean-Pierre said in a release.

The two leaders will also discuss opportunities to deepen Israel's regional integration and create a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East, Jean-Pierre added. Russia's military relationship with Iran, along with Iran's actions in the region are also on the docket for discussion.

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Vice President Kamala Harris is slated to meet with Herzog on July 19 at the White House, and Herzog will meet additionally with a range of interagency officials before delivering a Joint Address to Congress, she added.

Herzog's visit, which marks the 75th anniversary of Israel's 1948 founding, comes before crucial elections in Israel next month.

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Pentagon Chief Struggles With Sen. Tuberville on Military Promotions Hold - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - Republican Sen. Tommy Tuberville declined to a call from US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to attempt to convince him to stop his blockade of hundreds of military promotions stuck in Congress, CNN reported on Thursday.

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden said he would talk to Tuberville if there was any possibility he'd change his "ridiculous" position. Tuberville is jeopardizing US security with his actions, the president argued. He said it is the responsibility of the Republican Party to stand up against Tuberville.

According to CNN, more than 200 military promotions are stuck in limbo because of Tuberville's blockade, which is being done because of his opposition to the Pentagon's abolition policies.

Tuberville told reporters he has not been able to take Austin's call because he has been too busy.

Moreover, Tuberville said he will not give in to pressure from his Republican colleagues as well.

Tuberville told Fox News he'd eventually talk to Austin, who he hasn't spoken to in five months.

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Yellen to Visit India for G20 Gathering, Vietnam for Meetings on Bilateral Ties - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen is travelling to Asia from July 13-21 to visit India for the G20 meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors and Vietnam for bilateral engagements, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

"While at the G20, Secretary Yellen will continue to build momentum for the collective effort that she helped launched last October to evolve the multilateral development banks to better meet global challenges while delivering on core development goals," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The G20 gathering focuses on issues pertaining to the global economy and health.

Yellen will emphasize the need for concrete progress on global challenges, including on debt and the evolution of the multilateral development banks, the statement said.

In India, Yellen is also scheduled to talk with the country's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, the statement said.

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In Hanoi, Yellen will focus on deepening the bilateral economic relationship with Vietnam and bolstering "economic resilience," but will also discuss issues related to climate change and a transition to clean energy, the statement said.

The treasury secretary will also talk about currency issues in light of the fact that Vietnam has maintained a constructive dialogue with the Treasury Department and worked to address concerns about its currency practices, the statement said.

"Yellen will highlight this progress during her visit to Vietnam as one example of how our countries can work together to address challenges and help enhance Vietnam's financial and macroeconomic resilience," the statement added.

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G7 Foreign Ministers Condemn Recent N. Korean Missile Launches - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The foreign ministers of the Group of Seven (G7) countries condemn North Korea's recent test launches of ballistic missiles and call on Pyongyang to cease its weapons programs, the G7 foreign ministers said on Thursday.

"We, the G7 Foreign Ministers… condemn in the strongest terms North Korea's brazen launch of another Intercontinental Ballistic Missile conducted on July 12, 2023, following the launch using ballistic missile technology conducted on May 31, 2023 along with the launches of two ballistic missiles on June 15, 2023," the foreign ministers said in a statement.

The launches pose a grave threat to regional and international peace and stability, the statement said. The launches also violate UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting North Korean missile launches that use ballistic missile technology, the statement said.

The G7 foreign ministers reiterate their demand to North Korea to abandon its missile and weapons of mass destruction programs, the statement said.

The foreign ministers also urge a swift and strong response to the situation from the UN Security Council, the statement added.

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US To Provide Over $74Mln In Humanitarian Aid for Rohingya – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – The United States will provide more than $74 million in humanitarian assistance o support Rohingya in Myanmar and in Bangladesh, the Department of State said on Thursday.

"Today, Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya met with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and announced more than $74 million in additional U.S. humanitarian assistance to support humanitarian responses in the region, including nearly $61 million to support Rohingya internally displaced in Burma as well as

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Rohingya refugees and their host communities in Bangladesh," the statement said.

This new assistance will provide life-sustaining support to the nearly 980,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and to local communities that host those people. This includes provision of food, safe drinking water, health care, protection, education, shelter, and psychosocial support, according to the statement.

In Myanmar, this funding will assist in meeting the critical humanitarian needs of internally displaced people, it added.

The United States urged other countries to increase robust humanitarian support to those affected by the situation in Myanmar, the statement said.

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UPDATE - Kerry Says Won't Make Any Concessions to China During Visit

(Adds details in paras 9-10, edits throughout)

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry said during a Congressional hearing on Thursday that he is not going to China with the intention of making any concessions to Beijing.

"What we are trying to achieve now is really to establish some stability, if we can, in the relationship without conceding anything," Kerry said. "I am not going over with any concessions."

Kerry will pay an official visit to China from July 16-19 to address climate issues and promote the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28), the US State Department said Tuesday.

The United States and China are trying to find ways to cooperate to address the crisis, Kerry added.

Kerry said in mid-April that he had been invited to visit China for bilateral talks on climate change and expressed hope that the negotiations would help repair relations and allow for cooperation between the two countries on global issues.

Tensions between the United States and China soared last August after then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi traveled to Taiwan despite Beijing's warnings against the visit. Beijing condemned Pelosi's trip, which it regarded as a gesture of support for separatism, and launched large-scale military drills in the vicinity of the island.

Tensions between Washington and Beijing further escalated in February 2023, when US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called off his trip to Beijing after the Pentagon detected a Chinese balloon over US airspace. Washington insisted that the balloon had been sent over to spy on military sites, while Beijing argued it was a meteorological airship blown off course.

The UN climate conference will take place from November 30 to December 12 in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates.

During the congressional hearing, Kerry declined to characterize Chinese leader Xi Jinping as a "dictator," instead opting to call him a "decider." The statement drew criticism from Republicans, who are probing Kerry for his behind-the-scenes talks with China.

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Last month, US President Joe Biden called Xi a dictator, which reportedly caught US officials off guard and sparked condemnation by Chinese officials.

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US State Dept. Says Concerned by Alleged Threats to Integrity of Guatemala's Election

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is deeply concerned by alleged threats to the integrity and credibility of the Guatemala election following the first round of the presidential election held on June 25, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

"[T]he United States is deeply concerned by the Public Ministry's attempt to revoke the legal status of the Semilla party amidst the election process," Miller said in a statement. "These actions put at risk the legitimacy of the electoral process at the core of Guatemala's democracy, which should be advanced and upheld consistent with Guatemala's constitution and the Inter-American Democratic Charter."

At the same time, the United States welcomes the certification of the first round of election results by the Guatemalan Supreme Electoral Tribunal, which upholds the credibility and integrity of the most-observed electoral process in Guatemala's history, the statement also said.

According to the US State Department, the certification should lay the ground for a free and fair election on August 20 between Sandra Torres from the UNE party and Bernardo Arevalo from the Semilla party.

Earlier in the day, the Supreme Electoral Court of Guatemala recognized the results of the June presidential election.

An hour before the publication of the results of the first round of the presidential election, the Seventh Criminal Court of Guatemala, at the request of the prosecutor's office, temporarily deprived the Semilla Movement of its legal status. The party is reportedly suspected of forging signatures during its registration and illegally financing this process.

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Kerry Says Wont Make Any Concessions to China During Visit

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) -Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry said during a Congressional hearing on Thursday that he is not going to China with any concessions.

"What we are trying to achieve now is really to establish some stability, if we can, in the relationship without conceding anything," Kerry said. "I am not going over with any concessions."

Kerry added that what the sides are trying to do is to find ways to cooperate to address the crisis.

Kerry will pay an official visit to China from July 16-19 to address climate issues and promote

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the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28), the US State Department said Tuesday.

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Mashinsky Arrested Thursday, Will Appear in Court for Fraud Case - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - Celsius founder Alexander Mashinsky was arrested on Thursday and will appear in court later in the day to face multiple charges related to fraud, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"Mashinsky was arrested earlier today and will be presented this afternoon before US Magistrate Judge Ona T. Wang," the release said.

Mashinsky, the founder and former Chief Executive Officer of Celsius Network LLC, is charged with securities fraud, commodities fraud, and wire fraud for defrauding customers and misleading them about the company's success, profitability, and the nature of the investments Celsius made using customer funds, the release said.

Mashinsky, along with Israeli citizen and former Celsius executive Roni Cohen-Pavon, also faces charges related to conspiracy, securities fraud, market manipulation, and wire fraud for illicitly manipulating the price of CEL, Celsius's proprietary crypto token, all while secretly selling their own CEL tokens at artificially inflated prices, the release added.

Celsius announced in June 2022 that it was stopping all customer withdrawals from its platform while hundreds of thousands of Celsius customers still had about $4.7 billion worth of crypto assets on the Celsius platform, none of which they could access, the release said. Then in July 2022, Celsius filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, release added.

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Sentencing of Russian Businessman Klyushin in US Court Rescheduled for July 31 - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The sentencing in US court of Russian businessman Vladislav Klyushin has been rescheduled from July 19 to July 31, his lawyer Maksim Nemtsev told Sputnik on Thursday.

"Sentencing is [re-scheduled for] July 31. I don't know what the sentence will be. We're formulating our request [sentencing recommendation] to the court in the next couple of weeks," Nemtsev said in a statement.

Nemtsev also said that Klyushin, who is the owner of the Russian information technology firm M-13, is doing well.

A jury in Boston, Massachusetts, found Klyushin guilty on charges of conspiring to obtain unauthorized access to computers, wire fraud and securities fraud in connection with a $90 million scheme.

Klyushin was arrested in Switzerland in March of 2021 and extradited to the United States later that year.

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House Committee Underscores US Defense Department's Endemic Financial Mismanagement

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – A House Committee on Oversight and Accountability hearing on Thursday underscored endemic financial mismanagement across the US Department of Defense, which is the only major federal agency that has never received a clean audit opinion on its financial statements.

"During the most recent audit, the DoD Office of Inspector General identified 28 material weaknesses at the DoD agency-wide level. Of those 28 material weaknesses, we consider 16 to be scope-limiting, meaning that they prevent auditors from performing the necessary procedures and steps to draw a conclusion on the financial statements and the supporting information," said Brett Mansfield, deputy inspector general for audits at the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General.

"While some material weaknesses are financial in nature, such as unsupported accounting adjustments, many others also affect DoD operations; for example, government property in possession of contractors is a financial issue, but also tied to readiness and supply chain management," he added. Mansfield later testified that he estimated contractors hold approximately $3.3 trillion worth of government property worldwide.

All three witnesses testified that the department was rife with antiquated information systems that did not communicate with each other, making it impossible to conduct a thorough audit and opening the door to waste and fraud.

"I don't know of any system in DOD that works as intended," Asif Khan, director of financial management and assurance at the US Government Accountability Office testified.

North Carolina Congresswoman Virginia Foxx declared the situation to be ridiculous. "We claim to be the greatest country in the world and yet the Department of Defense cannot produce a

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clean audit. What in the heck is this?"

The DOD comprises about 15% of the federal government's total spending and about half of its discretionary spending.

"Millions of dollars should not just be lost and failing an audit should not be the norm," Congresswoman Summer Lee of Pennsylvania said. She noted that budgets for defense programs often exceeded those for social programs. She cited several examples, such as the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act authorizing $32.6 billion for shipbuilding, which exceeded the $28.7 billion spent on a national school lunch program last year, and the $1.7 trillion spent on the F-35 joint program that could eradicate student loan debt.

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Biden Reaffirms US Commitment to NATO Amid Congressional Efforts on Withdrawal

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that the United States is committed to remaining a member of NATO in the long term, amid conflicting efforts in Congress to both withdraw from the alliance and bolster the country's place in it.

"There is overwhelming support from the American people. There is overwhelming support from the members of the Congress," Biden said during a press conference, when asked about the United States' reliability as a NATO ally. "I'm saying as sure as anything can possibly be said about American foreign policy: we will stay connected to NATO."

The statement comes following the introduction of an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) by Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, which would direct Biden to withdraw the United States from NATO.

Greene has frequently criticized the Biden administration's foreign policy as well as the disparity in financial commitments by NATO members.

However, a group of US senators also introduced legislation this week to prevent the president from exiting NATO without approval from the Senate or an act of Congress.

Finnish President Sauli Niinisto, who spoke alongside Biden at the press conference, said that Finland has no reason to doubt the United States' NATO policy in the future.

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Biden Says Would Talk to US Sen. Tuberville on Nominee Holds if Position Could Change

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he would talk to US Sen. Tommy Tuberville about his hold on confirming Biden's nominees for key positions if he believed there was a chance the lawmaker's opinion could be changed.

"I'd be willing to talk to him, if I thought there was any possibility he'd change his ridiculous position," Biden said during a press conference.

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Tuberville is blocking efforts by the Senate to confirm Biden administration nominees over the Pentagon's new abortion policies.

Tuberville's actions left the US Marine Corps without a confirmed leader for the first time in 164 years.

Tuberville is jeopardizing US security with his actions, Biden said.

It is the responsibility of the Republican Party to stand up against Tuberville, Biden added.

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US Secret Service Says Closed Investigation Into Cocaine Found at White House

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – The US Secret Service announced on Thursday that it has dropped the investigation into the cocaine found at the White House due to a lack of physical evidence.

"Without physical evidence, the investigation will not be able to single out a person of interest from the hundreds of individuals who passed through the vestibule where the cocaine was discovered. At this time, the Secret Service's investigation is closed due to a lack of physical evidence," the service said in a statement.

While the lab results earlier confirmed that the found substance was cocaine, the Secret Service was not able to compare evidence against the known pool of individuals because the FBI's laboratory results did not find any latent fingerprints or DNA on the cocaine packaging, the statement explained.

On July 2, a white powdery substance was found in the White House, prompting a brief evacuation. Preliminary testing revealed the substance to be cocaine. Media reported that the substance was found in a highly-trafficked area used by both White House guests and staff, but the exact location and its potential proximity to sensitive information remain unknown at present.

US President Joe Biden's son Hunter, who has been involved in several drugs and corruption scandals, was on the White House grounds not long before the white powdery substance was found in the West Wing, media reported. Former US President Donald Trump said the found cocaine can only be for the use of either the incumbent president or his son.

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Bankrupt Crypto Firm Celsius Settles With US FTC While Co-Founders Head for Trial

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US trade regulators have reached a settlement with the bankrupt cryptocurrency platform Celsius Network to permanently ban it from handling consumers' assets after its three co-founders were charged with fraud, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) said in a statement on Thursday.

"Celsius touted a new business model but engaged in an old-fashioned swindle," FTC Bureau

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of Consumer Protection Director Samuel Levine said in the statement.

Under the settlement, Celsius pledged to refrain from offering, marketing or promoting any product or service that could be used to deposit, exchange, invest or withdraw any assets, the statement said.

Celsius also agreed to freeze $4.7 billion from its accounts to enable it to settle customer assets in bankruptcy proceedings, the statement said.

"Today's action banning Celsius from handling people's money and holding its executives accountable should make clear that emerging technologies are not above the law," the statement said.

The three executives of - co-founder and Chief Executive Alexander Mashinsky and joint co-founders Shlomi Daniel Leon and Hanoch Goldstein - have not agreed to settle charges against them, the statement said.

"The FTC's case against them will proceed in federal court," the statement added.

Celsius, which filed for bankruptcy in July 2022, marketed a variety of cryptocurrency products and services to consumers, including interest-bearing accounts, personal loans secured by their cryptocurrency deposits and a cryptocurrency exchange.

According to the FTC's complaint filed in federal court, the three executives marketed the platform as a safe place for consumers to deposit cryptocurrency, claiming in online videos and other forums that its platform was safer than banks due to much lower risk.

The FTC said Celsius and its top executives deceived users by falsely promising they could withdraw their deposits at any time, that the company maintained a $750 million insurance policy for deposits and had sufficient reserves to meet customer obligations. The company also promised rewards as high as 18% on annual percentage yield on deposits of cryptocurrency assets.

Far from securing customers' cryptocurrency deposits, Celsius took title to and misappropriated deposits totaling more than $4 billion, according to the complaint. The company used the consumer deposits to fund its operations, pay rewards to other customers, borrow from other institutions, and make high-risk investments, which even the company acknowledged often lost money.

The FTC said in the statement that Mashinsky falsely claimed in an online video in 2022 that Celsius is stronger than ever and has billions of dollars in liquidity.

In addition, Celsius falsely promised that it had "more than enough" assets to satisfy its consumer obligations only several days before freezing consumer withdrawals, the statement said.

While deceiving customers so as not to withdraw their cryptocurrencies, the three officials protected themselves by withdrawing significant sums of cryptocurrency from Celsius two months before the company filed for bankruptcy, the complaint said.

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Biden Says Russia 'Already Interfering' in US Elections, Such Actions Not Anything New

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WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - Russia is already interfering in the United States' electoral processes ahead of the 2024 US presidential election, President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

"They're already interfering in American elections, so that would not be anything new," Biden said during a press conference when asked about potential Russian election interference efforts.

Russia has repeatedly rejected accusations of meddling in US elections.

In December, the Russian Investigative Committee found that a US-led bot farm was created in Moscow to imitate Russian election interference.

In May, US Special Counsel John Durham's probe concluded that the FBI should never have launched a probe into alleged collusion between former US President Donald Trump and Russia during the 2016 election.

The FBI should have ignored raw, unanalyzed and uncorroborated intelligence that alleged connections between the Trump campaign and Russia, he said.

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IMF to Review Its Ukraine Program Later in 2023 - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) will review its program with Ukraine later in 2023, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"On Ukraine, we expect the next review later this year," Kozack told reporters.

She emphasized that Kiev met all criteria under the program for end-April and structural benchmarks for end-June. That paved the way for the IMF Executive Board's consideration of the first review, she added.

Kozack noted that the Ukrainian economy is showing "remarkable resilience," and recent economic developments point to a gradual economic recovery in 2023. However, she added, the outlook remains "highly uncertain" because of conflict-related issues.

In late June, the IMF said it approved providing Ukraine with $890 million for budget support.

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Biden Says Serious About Prisoner Exchange With Russia, Process Underway

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday he is serious about a potential prisoner swap with Russia, including with respect to Wall Street Journal correspondent Evan Gershkovich.

"I'm serious about a prisoner exchange. I'm serious about doing all we can to free Americans being illegally held in Russia or anywhere else for that matter, and that process is underway," Biden said during a joint press conference with Finnish President Sauli Niinisto, when asked to provide an update on US efforts to free Gershkovich detained in Russia.

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Biden Says Does Not Think Ukraine Conflict Can Go on for Years

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday he does not believe that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine can go on for years.
"I don't think the war can go on for years for two reasons. Number one, I don't think that the Russians could maintain the war forever in terms of their resources and capacity. Number two, I think that there is going to be a circumstance where eventually President Putin is going to decide it's not in the interest of Russia, economically, politically or otherwise, to continue this war," Biden said during a joint press conference with Finnish President Sauli Niinisto.

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Biden Says Ukraine Will Join NATO, Just a Matter of Time

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that Ukraine will join NATO and it remains only a matter of time, but no nation can join the alliance while being engaged in a military conflict.
“No one can join NATO while a war is going on, where a NATO nation is being attacked, because that guarantees that we're in a war, we're in a third world war. So that it's not about whether or not they [Ukraine] should or shouldn't join [NATO]. It's about when they can join, and they will join NATO,” Biden said during a joint press conference with Finnish President Sauli Niinisto.

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IMF to Update Russia's Economic Outlook as Impact of Ukraine Conflict Milder Than Expected

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) will update its economic outlook for Russia later in July given that the impact of the conflict in Ukraine is milder than previously expected, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.
"We will have an update about Russian growth forecast in the context of the World Economic Outlook (WEO) update, which will be published later this month," Kozack said during a press briefing.
The IMF spokesperson pointed out that the impact of the conflict in Ukraine on the Russian economy has been substantial but milder than previously expected.

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"In 2023, our last forecast had growth in the positive range of 0.7%. However, in the medium term, the Russian economy will be hampered by the departure of multinationals, the loss of human capital, its disconnection from global financial markets, reduction in its policy buffers," Kozack said.

The IMF expects that the output in Russia over the medium term will be 7% lower than the pre-conflict forecast, Kozack added.

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UN Chief Hopes Proposals Sent to Putin Will Lead to Positive Outcome for Grain Agreement

UNITED NATIONS, July 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Thursday that he hopes the proposals outlined in his letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin will help extend the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative.

"We are totally committed to make sure that we have both the efforts to make the Black Sea Initiative be extended and the efforts to guarantee the exports of Russian food and fertilizers being successful. It is in this context that as you said I sent a letter to President Putin with some concrete proposals that I hope can allow us to find a positive way forwards," Guterres said.

The UN chief made the comment during a joint press conference with Belgian Prime Minister Alexander de Croo in Brussels.

Guterres also said that he is yet to receive an answer from Putin, adding that the least the public knows about these type of negotiations the better the potential outcome.

On Wednesday, media reported that Guterres had proposed in the letter to Putin preserving the Black Sea Initiative for few more months until the European Union manages to connect a subsidiary of the Russian Agriculture Bank to the SWIFT system.

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US Secret Service Unable to Determine Suspect in White House Cocaine Probe - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The US Secret Service (USSS) was unable to determine any suspects as part of its probe into the discovery of cocaine at the White House, CNN reported on Thursday.

The USSS concluded its investigation without identifying any suspect, despite looking at surveillance footage and visitor logs, the report said, citing two sources familiar with the matter.

The USSS could not determine when or who left a small bag of cocaine in the West Wing, the report said.

A leading theory held by investigators is that a tourist may have left the cocaine in the cubby area when asked to leave their phone there, the report said.

The USSS is set to brief Congress on its investigation Thursday.

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US President Joe Biden's son Hunter, who has previously suffered from drug addiction, was on the White House grounds not long before the cocaine's discovery, media reported. Former US President Donald Trump has claimed that the cocaine could only have been for use by one of the Bidens.

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FDA Approves First Nonprescription Oral Birth Control Pill in US

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced on Thursday it has approved the first nonprescription oral birth control pill for use in the country.

In June, President Joe Biden signed an executive order allowing broader access to affordable and high-quality contraception to mark one year since the Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to abortion. The order also directs the authorities to improve access to affordable over-the-counter contraception, including emergency contraception.

"Today, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved Opill (norgestrel) tablet for nonprescription use to prevent pregnancy— the first daily oral contraceptive approved for use in the U.S. without a prescription. Approval of this progestin-only oral contraceptive pill provides an option for consumers to purchase oral contraceptive medicine without a prescription at drug stores, convenience stores and grocery stores, as well as online," the FDA said in a statement.

Opill's availability and price of the contraceptive product will be determined by the manufacturer, the statement said, adding that other oral birth control pills with different dosages will remain available through prescription.

With the approval of the nonprescription pill, individuals will now have better access to contraceptives as they will not be required to see a health professional, the statement added, noting that nearly half of the 6.1 million annual pregnancies in the US are unintended.

The FDA said that norgestrel was first approved in 1973 as a prescription drug, but demonstration was made by the applicant, HRA Pharma, that consumers were able to use it safely and effectively without assistance from a healthcare provider.

Opill shall not be used as an emergency birth control pill, nor does it prevent pregnancy after sexual intercourse, the statement added.

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