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8/9/23 Wednesday

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Declassified Files Reveal Manhattan Project Chief Hid Radioactivity Dangers From Public

A research group specializing in once-secret files has published a new dossier revealing that the director of the United States' top secret effort to build an atomic bomb lied to lawmakers and the public about the dangers posed by radioactive materials.

The files were released on Monday by the National Security Archive, a private research organization based at George Washington University in Washington, DC.

The findings show US Army Gen. Leslie Groves, who oversaw the Manhattan Project, lied to Congress and the American public about the harmful effects of radiation exposure. They also reveal J. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the Los Alamos lab at the center of the project and the subject of a recently released major motion film, knew about Groves' deception and did nothing to correct it.

At first, Groves claimed the radioactive materials were harmless out of simple ignorance, but later it became deliberate deception, the files show.

One file in the dossier is dated September 1, 1945 - about three weeks after the second of two atom bombs was dropped on Japan, killing more than 110,000 people and bringing an abrupt end to the Second World War.

Titled "Calculated Biological Effects of Atomic Explosion in Hiroshima and Nagasaki," the two Japanese cities targeted, the memo revealedsome of the bomb victims had not died from the air blast or the heat of the explosion, but from poisoning caused by radioactive fallout. Those victims died not when the bombs exploded, but days or weeks later.

The day prior, Groves told reporters that radiation had caused no deaths, dismissing reports in Asian newspapers as "propaganda." While the Imperial Japanese government had announced its surrender on August 15, the war was not formally concluded until the peace treaty was signed on September 2.

In another document, George Kistiakowsky, the Los Alamos scientist who authored the September 1 report, sent a memo to Oppenheimer that same day, revealing that he hesitated to pass the study along because of Groves' press comments.

Later reports from November of that year described further cases of radiation sickness among Japanese victims. One report by the Manhattan Project's chief medical officer, Stafford Warren, dated November 27described thousands of cases in Japanese hospitals that were consistent with the effects of radiation poisoning, which US scientists had already closely documented up-close after several of their own suffered catastrophic irradiation and died while developing the atom bomb.

The report was addressed to Groves, who three days later, told the Senate Special Committee on Atomic Energy when asked about "radioactive residue" in Hiroshima and Nagasaki: "There is none. That is a very positive 'none.'"

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Groves acknowledged many had died from radiation exposure, but claimed it was from the time the bomb went off and not from fallout. In a shutter-inducing moment of the testimony, he claimed radiation victims would die “without undue suffering. In fact, they say it is a very pleasant way to die.”

Other documents show that while the atom bomb was still in development, the scientists already feared a toxic “cloud” of “radioactive dust” could be stirred up by the weapon’s explosion and loiter in the air for “hours after the detonation.” They urged Groves to evacuate the test site prior to the Trinity blast that July, but Groves dismissed their fears, accusing them of being “a Hearst propagandist” - that is, a writer for a notorious muckraking newspaper.

Indeed, the July 16, 1945, Trinity blast sent just such a toxic cloud across the New Mexico Jornada del Muerto plains, dousing communities of Hispanic and Apache farmers who have become known as the Tularosa Downwinders.

They have suffered high rates of radiation-related illnesses, such as leukemia and other forms of cancer, and had to fight the federal government for compensation.

Five days after the Trinity test, on July 21, 1945, Warren wrote in a document included in the dossier that “the dust outfall from the various portions of the cloud was potentially a very serious hazard over a band almost 30 miles wide extending almost 90 miles northeast of the site,” adding that there was still “a tremendous amount of radioactive dust floating in the air.”

However, nine days later, Groves told US Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Marshall that “no damaging effects are anticipated on the ground from radioactive materials” by using the weapon.

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‘Prepare for the Worst’: China Diversifying Gold, Currency Reserves as US Dollar Becomes Riskier Bet

Experts told Sputnik that China’s binge on non-dollar currency reserves, including record amounts of gold bullion, is being driven by how unstable the US dollar has become. Countries like Russia, which hold few dollar reserves, present a safer bet for investors and traders alike.

China has continued its steady march toward de-dollarizing its economy, revealing on Monday that July had been the ninth straight month of gold purchases and that its foreign currency reserves were even higher than Western experts had predicted.

The People’s Bank of China, the socialist state’s central bank, said that last month it purchased some 23 tons, or 740,000 troy ounces, of gold bullion. That brings its total stockpile to its highest-ever weight of 2,137 tons. Roughly 188 tons of that has been added amid the shopping spree that began last November.

In addition, the PBOC said China’s foreign currency reserves rose by $11.3 billion in July, racing $3.02 trillion - higher than Western experts reportedly believed.

Chris Devonshire-Ellis, Chairman of Dezan Shira & Associates who has a thirty-year investment and business career in China, Russia and Asia, told Sputnik on Wednesday that China was

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motivated primarily by economic stability, which the politicization of the US national debt has threatened.

“It is clear that China is diversifying its portfolio and adding in more 'solidity' to its reserves. Gold reserves have always been a reliable hedge in turbulent times,” he said.

“There are a couple of issues with this: they can't reduce their US debt holdings by significant amounts at any one time as this would depress the remaining values and upset the global US dollar trade balance - but they can do this gradually. It appears to be a long-term strategy and could take a couple of decades to convert their US debt into other commodities under normal conditions.”

“That assumes things remain as normal - but these are turbulent times. The US will hit its debt ceiling again next year, they could default. They've already recently had their credit risk rating downgraded by Moody's,which raises the cost of American borrowing,” Devonshire-Ellis pointed out.

He noted that Russia by comparison has very little foreign debt, practically no US dollar reserves, and that the ruble has “settled into a reasonable and sustainable trade valuation that assists its internal productivity and its exports,” the latter of which accumulates foreign currencies other than the dollar or euro.

“So China is taking a 'hope for the best' strategy in hoping the US doesn't default soon because I think they are not ready to absorb such a blow, but at the same time a 'prepare for the worst' strategy in continuing a conversion of US, and to some extent EU, debt and currencies into alternatives - including reserves of many other currencies (including their own RMB yuan in addition to the Indian rupee, Japanese yen, UAE dirham and Russian ruble) as well as currencies from lesser traded money such as the Brazilian rial, Mexican peso, certain African currencies as well as Central Asian monies,” the expert explained.

“Gold acts as a hedge against, and to support these - if required. The Chinese can stabilize these smaller currencies with their gold reserves. So could Russia.”

“The Chinese aren't so concerned about what happens in the US economy, they are not so invested. But they are concerned about economies closer to China and with those that possess important supply chain relations (such as Brazil, Central Asia, Russia, the Middle East and Africa) both now and looking ahead. I think the gold reserves are being acquired to protect those rather than the USD relationship.”

Paul Goncharoff, a management consultant at the Moscow-based Dezan Shira & Associates, told Sputnik that international trust in the US dollar has “evaporated,” sending essentially all nations outside the Group of Seven scrambling for better places to secure their assets.

Goncharoff recalled the observation by Russian communist leader Vladimir Lenin prior to the 1917 Revolution: There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen.”

“We are in the process of going through such turbulent weeks and months. China was one of the largest holders of dollar-denominated US Treasury bonds. In the past 12 months alone, they managed to offload $100 billion worth. A significant amount has been spent buying gold as a means to get out of the potential-but-realistic threat of the weaponized US dollar. Their gold purchases have been in small batches here and there, but over the year they have added up significantly. Note that this has been going on for several years and seems to be accelerating now.”

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“The biggest risk China faces is the freezing of their USD assets, which mirrors the risk sentiments among most, if not all, of the non-G7 aligned countries on the planet,” he explained. “China has little choice but to continue dumping USD holdings, and shifting to actual physical gold held inside China or other similar marketable commodities while keeping an eye on when or if the USA will impose primary sanctions as they did with Russia and SWIFT. China certainly has currency holdings in rubles, rupees, riyals, and so on, but they are volatile and still influenced by the vagaries of the US Fed, so to preserve value (note that the USD has lost 97% of its value these past 100 years), gold remains a secure and viable means to preserve value, especially in 'interesting times.'”

“The disadvantage of the yuan when compared to the USD is that, quite simply, it is not the default reserve currency of the world. That being said, the ‘exorbitant privilege’ that the USD as the primary reserve has enjoyed these past 70+ years has been sorely abused and has beaten all known records for debt and deficit spending. If push comes to shove and an inflection point happens when there is a global rush to offload US Treasury paper, all will suffer without exception. It would be a truly existential systemic crisis.”

“Nonetheless, China is in a relatively strong position to support the yuan when one considers that the fabric of the Chinese economic system is just about entirely production-based and not a service economy. This is the foundation for longevity and sustainability, tied together with a Belt and Road, regardless of what may or may not occur with currencies going forward.”

Goncharoff noted that the trend is so wide, it even includes US European allies like Poland, which increased its gold reserves by 14.8 tons this past Spring.

“The de-dollarization trend is unstoppable as trust has evaporated. It is also felt that, by nature, any fiat currency remaining apolitical given the grievous political damage done globally through sanctions, freezes, and similar measures is unlikely. The sad reality remains that this is not going to change in the foreseeable future, hence the centuries-tested fallback to gold.”

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FBI Agents Shoot, Kill Utah Man Reportedly Planning Threats Against Biden

A man was shot and killed during a confrontation with FBI agents in a central Utah city on Wednesday morning, the federal law enforcement agency said.

According to local reports, a spokesperson for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) told reporters the incident occurred while agents were serving a warrant in the city of Provo, south of Salt Lake City.

“The incident began when special agents attempted to serve arrest and search warrants at a residence,” the spokesperson said. “The subject is deceased. The FBI takes all shooting incidents involving our agents or task force members seriously.”

However, more information was obtained by US media through informal anonymous tips. Two officials “briefed on the case” claimed the raid was in connection to alleged threats made against US President Joe Biden “and others.”

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The anonymous officials said the investigation began in April and included the US Secret Service, which provides the security detail for the head of state and other senior leaders. The man was being investigated for making threatening posts online, which they later came to believe he was preparing to translate into physical action.

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Wang Yi to Visit Three Southeast Asian States After South China Sea Showdown With Philippine Navy

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi will visit three Southeast Asian nations next week, the ministry said on Wednesday. The trip comes amid a feud with the Philippines over a submerged coral reef in the South China Sea, but also moves toward increased regional economic integration.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Wang's visit to Singapore, Malaysia, and Cambodia next week aims to "strengthen strategic communication with the three Southeast Asian countries."

"China is also willing to work with the three countries … to promote economic recovery, maintain peace and tranquility, and deepen exchanges and mutual learning, as well as making greater contributions to peace, stability, development and prosperity for the region and the world," the ministry added.

The three nations are all members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a 10-nation bloc that doesn't include China but with which it has a close relationship. Since 2020, ASEAN has been China's biggest trading partner, and nearly every member state is also both part of China's Belt and Road Initiative and a signatory to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). That trade bloc is the world's largest, encompassing roughly 30% of the world's population and 30% of its gross domestic product.

However, the visit comes just days after China and another ASEAN member, the Philippines, clashed over control of a submerged coral reef in the South China Sea.

Over the weekend, Chinese Coast Guard ships used their water cannons to drive off a pair of Philippine Navy supply ships near Second Thomas Shoal, located about 121 miles west of the Philippine island of Palawan. The ships were attempting to resupply a contingent of troops posted on the rusting derelict hull of what had once been the BRP Sierra Madre, a World War II-era transport ship that Manila deliberately grounded on the reef in 1999 in order to raise it above the high tide line.

Manila protested, calling China's actions provocative, while Beijing said its forces acted in a legal and orderly manner to defend their claims over the reef. The US has thrown its weight behind Manila, with which it has a mutual defense treaty.

However, China and the Philippines aren't the only countries with overlapping claims on the myriad of islands and reefs in the South China Sea: so do Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei.

For nearly two decades, China and ASEAN have worked to make a document for governing interactions in the waterway to avoid escalation. Last month in Jakarta, the 11 nations held their

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second reading of the so-called Code of Conduct, and the working group pledged to complete the work within three years.

"The situation in the South China Sea actually affects the future regional security and economic development of the entire Asia-Pacific region," Zhu Feng, an international relations professor at Nanjing University, was quoted as saying in Chinese media.

"It's in the common interests of ASEAN whether the overall integration and regional cooperation can be effectively maintained, and the security and military confrontation between China and the United States in the South China Sea can be prevented from escalating," he added.

Other dynamics are likely also at play in Wang's trip, however. Late last month, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia rolled out a new program allowing citizens of any of the countries to make payments using any of the four nations' currencies using a QR-code-based digital wallet. It's a major move toward regional economic integration that foregoes exchanges through either the US dollar or Chinese yuan.

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Videos: Wildfires Destroy Historic Hawaii Towns as Islands Dodge Hurricane Hit

Hawaiian authorities would have been breathing a sigh of relief on Wednesday as a tropical cyclone missed the archipelago, but raging wildfires have annihilated a historic city, whipped into a conflagration by the nearby storm's winds.

Fires are nothing new to the Aloha State, which sits atop a series of active volcanoes in the Pacific. However, these flames weren't sparked by glowing hot magma near the towering volcanic peaks, but among the dry upland brush.

Wildfires on Hawaii tend to be rare, confined to the dry side of an island, which are often covered in grassy prairies. Such is the case in western Maui, where the fires have been the most destructive.

Richard Bissen, who serves as the mayor of Maui, told media Wednesday that officials have confirmed at least six deaths as a result of the wildfires. He noted the death toll may increase as search and rescue efforts are ongoing.

Hawaii Governor Sylvia Luke has declared a state of emergency in response to the outbreak of flames, which spread rapidly due to high winds and dry conditions. Bizarrely, US President Joe Biden erroneously told US media he had already made a similar declaration when he had not.

In the Kula upland area near the island's center, fires have consumed about 1.5 square miles of land and forced 80 people from their homes, two of which were destroyed.

The devastation was much worse on the island's far western rim, where much of the historic town of Lahaina had been consumed by flames on Wednesday.

"Do NOT go to Lahaina Town," the County of Maui government posted on social media, adding that all roads into and out of the town had been closed. The town of 13,000 dates to the 18th century and once served as the capital of the Kingdom of Hawaii after Kamehameha the Great conquered the other islands and united the archipelago under his rule.

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The flames were being fanned by outer winds from Hurricane Dora, which passed some 500 miles south of the islands. Winds of 70 miles per hour spread the flames rapidly and poured smoke across the island, obscuring both the actively burning places and the escape routes from the advancing flames.

Ironically, Hawaii has long been considered to have "good luck" when it comes to hurricanes, as the island chain has a reputation of cyclones veering away before landing a direct hit.

The winds also prevented authorities from using much of their firefighting repertoire, including the dropping of water on the fires.

The first footage from the aftermath in Lahaina on Wednesday morning showed the town basically wiped off the face of the Earth.

According to the US Coast Guard, 12 people were rescued from the waters off Lahaina, having fled to the sea to escape the flames.

Local authorities indicated that at least two people were being treated in a Honolulu hospital some 90 miles away, including an elderly woman and a firefighter.

Fires were also reported on other islands, too. On the Big Island, also known as Hawaii, Mayor Mitch Roth told the media there was "minimal damage" to any homes. On Oahu, where the capital and largest city of Honolulu is located, the high winds had downed power lines, leaving at least 14,500 people without power on Wednesday, and caused other traffic problems as well.

Wildfires have grown worse around the globe in recent years, with the summer of 2023 being especially bad. Fires raging in Italy, Greece, Canada, and the United States have devastated huge swaths of land and encroached upon urban areas. The fires in northern Canada are so intense, they have already exceeded the country's entire annual carbon dioxide output last year, and amount to 25% of global carbon emissions by themselves.

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Ecuadorian Presidential Candidate Fernando Villavicencio Killed Moments After Quito Rally

The fatal Wednesday shooting comes 11 days before Ecuador was set to hold its presidential election on August 20. Early elections were called in May by Ecuadorian President Guillermo Lasso to avoid his forced removal by the nation's legislature.

Fernando Villavicencio, a presidential candidate in Ecuador's August election, was killed late Wednesday, moments after leaving a campaign rally in Quito. He was 59.

The fatal shooting was said to have taken place at about 6:20 p.m. local time, just 50 meters from the entrance of the rally venue in the Ecuadorian capital. Eyewitnesses said three shots were heard before Villavicencio was seen falling to the ground.

Local media reports have indicated that several individuals sustained injuries from the shooting; however, it's unclear what the severity of the injuries range. The gunmen have reportedly not been detained.

Photos from the scene captured multiple rally attendees seeking shelter in the immediate aftermath of the shooting.

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The assassination was initially confirmed by friend and campaign adviser Carlos Figueroa before Ecuadorian President Guillermo Lasso issued a statement on the incident.
"Outraged and shocked by the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio," Lasso write on a social media post. "My solidarity and condolences to his wife and daughters. For his memory and for his fight, I assure you that this crime will not go unpunished."
"Organized crime has come a long way, but the full weight of the law is going to fall on them," he added.
The president noted that a security meeting was being called to assess the situation.
The Organization of American States issued a statement after news of the shooting broke, calling on all presidential candidates to "strengthen their security measures and call upon the authorities to provide the necessary support to guarantee the integrity of the participants in the electoral process."
The security of the candidates is fundamental to maintaining confidence in the democratic system and ensuring that the voices of all citizens can be heard freely and without fear," the statement added.
Villavicencio, once a member of Ecuador's National Assembly, was one of eight presidential candidates registered to take part in the country's August 20 election. Not considered a top contender, he was polling at 7.5% among voters.
A recent poll found that the leading contender in the election was Luisa Gonzalez, who clinched the backing of former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa. Gonzalez is holding 29.3% of the voters.
Early elections in Ecuador were called in May after Lasso announced he was dissolving the National Assembly as part of a larger effort to avoid an impeachment vote. At the time, Lasso was facing charges of corruption and embezzlement.

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Special Counsel's Deep Dive - Cartoon

To date, two indictments were brought before former US President Donald Trump by special counsel Jack Smith over the mishandling of classified documents at the Mar-a-Lago Florida estate and election interference. A third indictment - the first of the trio that was filed - is tied to hush money payments from the Trump camp during the 2016 election.
The office of special counsel Jack Smith issued a search warrant on former US President Donald Trump's Twitter account earlier this year in search of evidence documenting "criminal offenses," it was disclosed on Wednesday.
The revelation was made through a court decision made by a federal appeals court in Washington, DC, that reaffirmed a lower ruling holding Twitter in contempt for failing to initially comply with the order. It also fined the social media platform some $350,000.
Although the decision did not specify exactly what officials were looking for when the order was issued in January, it does mark the first instance in which prosecutors sought to directly review the former president's communications.

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Trump at the time was not made aware of the warrant; however, he did not miss the opportunity to blast the move on Wednesday, writing on Truth Social that US President Joe Biden is "going crazy trying to infringe on my campaign for president."

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Half of Americans Have Tried Marijuana - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - Fifty percent of Americans say they have smoked marijuana and 17% are current users, according to a Gallup poll released Thursday.

Both figures from Gallup's annual consumption habits poll conducted last month only mark slight increases from responses over the past few years, but are nevertheless record highs.

They mark significant increases since Gallup began tracking data decades ago, however. Only 4% of Americans reported having tried marijuana in 1969. The figure increased to 24% in the next decade and eventually stalled at under 40% in the 1980s before increasing again in 2015.

Current use of marijuana is highest among adults aged 18-34 (29%) and lowest among those aged 55 and order (9%). A third of Americans say they are "not too" concerned about the effects of marijuana on regular users, while 19% say they are "very" concerned.

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UPDATE - US Consumer Prices Grew a Modest 0.2% in July, Reducing Odds of Fed Rate Hike

(Adds details, comments and context in paras 4-8)

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices grew by a modest 0.2% in July for a year-on-year expansion of 3.2%, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that suggested the Federal Reserve might not impose another rate hike immediately to bring inflation back to its long-term target of 2%.

The Fed is scheduled to decide on interest rates at its policy meeting on September 20 and immediate projections of economists after the release of the Labor Department's Consumer Price Index, or CPI, report suggested the central bank will leave rates unchanged after last month's increase of 25 basis points.

"The market was pricing in a 13% chance of a Fed hike at the September meeting," economist Adam Button said on the ForexLive forum, where at least 85% of economists ruled out the immediate likelihood of a rate hike.

That economists' projection ran contrary to the speech by Fed Governor Michelle Bowman earlier this week that US interest rates, already at a 22-year high, might need to rise further as inflation remains above tolerable levels for most Americans.

"We have made progress in lowering inflation over the past year, but inflation is still significantly above the FOMC's two percent target, and the labor market continues to be tight, with job

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openings still far exceeding the number of available workers," Bowman said in a speech on Monday, referring to the policy-making Federal Open Market Committee of the central bank. "I expect that additional increases will likely be needed to lower inflation to the FOMC's goal."

In June, the CPI rose 3.0% year-on-year for its smallest expansion in two years. Economists had forecast a 3.3% growth for July, making the 3.2% reported by the Labor Department benign.

The Fed has identified runaway jobs growth and correspondingly higher wages — as well as trillions of dollars of relief spending over the 2020 coronavirus outbreak — as among reasons for inflation hitting 40-year highs of more than 9% a year in June 2022. While the pandemic spending is over, jobs and wage growth have continued to fuel inflation, prompting the Fed to keep adding to interest rates.

The Fed, hoping to bring inflation back to the pre-pandemic level of 2%, has embarked on a year-and-half of monetary tightening that has seen it hike rates by 525 basis points from a previous 25.

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US, UK, Canada Sanction Lebanese Central Bank Ex-Governor, Associates - Treasury

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - The United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada imposed coordinated sanctions on former Lebanese central bank governor Riad Salameh, his family members, and a former assistant on Thursday, according to a US Treasury release.

"By using his position to enrich himself, his family, and his associates in apparent contravention of Lebanese law, Salameh contributed to Lebanon's endemic corruption and perpetuated the perception that elites in Lebanon need not abide by the same rules that apply to all Lebanese people," Brian E. Nelson, under secretary of the US Treasury's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, said in the release. "We are joining the United Kingdom and Canada in imposing sanctions on the former governor because he used his position to place his personal financial interests and ambitions above those of the people he served, even as the economic crisis in Lebanon worsened."

The treasury alleged that Salameh abused his position at Lebanon's central bank, Banque du Liban, to funnel hundreds of millions of dollars through layered shell companies and laundered the funds through investments in European real estate. It also sanctioned four of his close associates – his brother Raja Salameh, son Nady Salameh, former partner Anna Kosakova, and former primary assistant Marianne Hoayek – who allegedly helped him facilitate and conceal various corrupt self-enrichment schemes.

Canada and the UK did not sanction his son Nady. Canada also did not sanction Kosakova.

The sanctions followed Salameh's retirement last month after he spent 30 years at the helm of Banque du Liban. While lauded internationally for bringing post-war economic stability to Lebanon, the rosy views of Salameh shifted in recent years, especially following the catastrophic implosion of the local economy, banking system, and currency. Salameh has been accused of masterminding a Ponzi scheme, essentially funding his corruption by attracting deposits in local banks with above-average interest rates.

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There are also ongoing law enforcement investigations in Lebanon, France, Germany, and Luxembourg into Salameh for possible money laundering and embezzlement of public funds.

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US Extends License Allowing Limited Transactions With Russia's Central Bank - Treasury

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has extended a general license that allows limited transactions with Russia's Central Bank, National Wealth Fund and Finance Ministry through November 8, the Treasury Department said in a notice on its website on Thursday.

"US persons ... are authorized to pay taxes, fees, or import duties, and purchase or receive permits, licenses, registrations, or certifications, to the extent such transactions are prohibited by Directive 4 under Executive Order 14024, Prohibitions Related to Transactions Involving the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, the National Wealth Fund of the Russian Federation, and the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation, provided such transactions are ordinarily incident and necessary to the day-to-day operations in the Russian Federation of such US persons or entities, through 12:01 a.m. eastern standard time, November 8, 2023," the notice stated.

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US Sanctions Lebanon's Former Central Bank Chief Riad Salameh – Treasury

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on Lebanon's former Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control said on Thursday.

The sanctions list also includes Salameh's family members and his former aide Marianne Hoayek.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Critical Mineral Shortage Puts US Energy Security at Risk

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - The US should develop new clean energy technologies to reduce reliance on critical minerals amid looming shortages and China's supply chain dominance, while boosting emergency reserves in the meantime, experts told Sputnik.

Last week, the US Department of Energy (DOE) in a new assessment expanded its list of critical materials, defined as those indispensable to the clean energy transition with high supply risks, adding six new elements in 2023. The DOE warned that the list will only grow bigger amid the global race to net-zero emissions and underscored the importance to energy security of establishing reliant and robust critical mineral supply chains.

Nickel, platinum, and silicon carbide join lithium and magnesium as critical in the medium term (2025-2035), while graphite, terbium, and iridium join cobalt, gallium, dysprosium and neodymium as elements considered critical in both the short and medium term (from now until 2035).

The DOE raised the status of copper and aluminum from non-critical to "near critical" in the medium term largely due to their importance to electrification across a wide spectrum.

The report, citing International Energy Agency (IEA) data, said critical mineral demand will have to grow by up to 600% by 2040 if the world is to achieve net-zero by 2050. The demand for critical minerals is being driven by a surge in the adoption of electric vehicles, which the IEA says could account for 60% of all auto sales by 2030.

The swift growth in EV sales and green electricity networks boosted demand for vital components such as lithium-ion batteries and rare earth magnets, the report noted.

The report was released just as the US-China trade war escalated even further, with Beijing's export controls on gallium going into effect, unveiled last month in retaliation to Washington's restrictions on Chinese technology.

The US, and many Western allies, have invested heavily in trying to achieve supply chain independence from China. The Biden administration intensified efforts last week in discussions with Mongolian officials about "creative ways" to extract rare earth minerals from the landlocked country, which neighbors both China and Russia.

LONG ROAD AHEAD

The US faces a daunting task in breaking its mineral dependence on China. For example, China is the leading producing nation for 30 of fifty minerals the US Geological Survey classified

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as critical to the economy with vulnerable supply chains.

Jonathan Poston, a business strategy consultant for Artax Consulting, shed more light on the implications involving China's dominance of key critical minerals, most particularly, rare earth elements.

"Rare earth elements are a group of 17 elements that are essential for a wide range of clean energy technologies, including magnets, batteries, and catalysts," Poston told Sputnik. "China is the world's leading producer of rare earth elements, along with graphite - critical to lithium-ion batteries - and there are concerns about China's control of the global supply chain."

Poston, who has taught geopolitics and trade at universities in Ecuador, Belize, and China, predicted that the US will likely boost domestic mining in a bid to close the gap, and suggested innovative substitution as another potential option.

"New technologies will also emerge that reduce the need for critical minerals, such as battery tech that doesn't use lithium-ion," Poston said.

The US will need to take a multilateral approach to the problem, he added. Resource sharing, via global alliances and joint ventures, Poston said, will become more important to secure mineral supplies.

Poston said he is also worried about cobalt, another critical mineral used in the manufacture of high-performance magnets, essential for electric vehicles and wind turbines.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), he added, is the world's leading producer of cobalt, but there are concerns about the country's political stability and human rights record.

California's Mountain Pass, owned by MP Materials, is the only operational integrated rare earth mining facility in the United States. The company currently ships the concentrate to China for refinement and final processing.

This entails the complex process of separating neodymium and praseodymium, a critical step in producing magnets. According to Benchmark Mineral Intelligence, China refines nearly 90% of the world's neodymium and praseodymium.

MP Materials in recent weeks has finally begun processing rare earths on its own, with the hopes of delivering to GM finished electric motor magnets by the end of 2023.

As the US develops plans and long-term solutions to the critical minerals dilemma, some have called for immediate action, especially after data on US reliance on China was released and amid rising concerns about energy security.

Brookings Institution scholar Michael O'Hanlon, a member of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board, told Sputnik the US strategic minerals and materials reserves declined 90% since the Cold War ended. O'Hanlon said Washington could "beef it up" as the United States struggles to establish diversified supply chains.

The mission of the stockpile is to "decrease and preclude dependence upon foreign sources or single points of failure for strategic materials in times of national emergency," according to the Pentagon's strategic materials team.

The stockpile was valued at $42 billion in 1952, $21 billion in 1989, and reduced to $888 million by 2022, according to the Congressional Research Service. However, lawmakers concerned about the deficit with China, earmarked funding to bolster reserves in the 2023 budget.

The Defense Department said the stockpile currently stores 47 commodities - including cobalt, platinum, palladium, iridium, and zinc, along with other base and precious metals.

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Salvadoran National Security Advisor 'Double Agent', Has Been Arrested – President Bukele

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - The President of El Salvador Nayib Bukele said the country's National Security Advisor Alejandro Muyshondt had been arrested after investigations discovered he worked as a "double agent" for former President Mauricio Funes, exiled in Nicaragua and wanted by Salvadoran authorities for several crimes.

In a lengthy Tweet to the Salvadoran public, Bukele stressed that all the information he was sharing had been declassified by him, under his authority and according to the country's legislation.

"As for the ex-national security advisor Alejandro Muysondt, he has been arrested and will be delivered to the tribunals over several crimes, amongst them that of favoring the evasion and disclosure of secret documents by an official employee in favor of former President Mauricio Funes among others," Bukele said via Twitter on Wednesday.

The President noted that after launching the country's new anti-corruption initiative earlier in June which allowed to effectively seize all the assets of another former President, Alfredo Cristiani, the office of the National Security Advisor was one of the few who accessed elements of proofs about ongoing investigations.

However, the investigations carried by the State Intelligence Agency (OIE) found that Muyshondt was a "double agent" since 2019, Bukele said, adding that he worked for former Funes with whom he leaked classified documents and, in several instances, altered versions of them to then share them with journalists, nationals of multiple countries, and a foreign government whose name was not disclosed.

"There also are direct proofs that the national security advisor helped former president Funes to evade justice and avoid being captured," Bukele continued.

Moreover, after a representative of the OIE who also worked as an informant for Funes, informed Muyshondt about an imminent investigation against his person, the national security advisor leaked compromising information about a lawmaker of the ruling party, Erick Garcia, notably about his acquisition of drugs from a drug-trafficker.

Bukele said that an investigation conducted by the Attorney General Office determined that Garcia had indeed defrauded public trust, while others of his possible crimes were still being investigated.

"Proofs are sufficient to prosecute the lawmaker over ideological falsehood, to strip him of parliamentary immunity, and to suspended him from his position as a lawmaker" he continued.

The Salvadoran president noted that an investigation was also initiated against Muyshondt's alternate deputy and candidate for alternate deputy to the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN), Nidia Turcios.

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The US, and many Western allies, have invested heavily in trying to achieve supply chain independence from China. The Biden administration intensified efforts last week in discussions with Mongolian officials about "creative ways" to extract rare earth minerals from the landlocked country, which neighbors both China and Russia.

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The US will need to take a multilateral approach to the problem, he added. Resource sharing, via global alliances and joint ventures, Poston said, will become more important to secure mineral supplies.

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Beijing 'Very Disappointed' With New Restrictions on US Investments in China - Embassy

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - Beijing is very disappointed the Biden administration moved forward with plans to roll out new restrictions on US economic investment in China, Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu told Sputnik in a statement.

"Despite China's repeated expression of deep concerns, the US went ahead with new

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investment restrictions. The Chinese side is very disappointed at this," Liu said on Wednesday. "The economic and trade relationship between China and the U.S. is mutually beneficial in nature. Two-way investment is an important area of bilateral trade."

Earlier today, the White House announced that President Joe Biden is signing an executive order that authorizes the Secretary of the Treasury to regulate certain US investments into Chinese entities engaged in activities involving national security sensitive technologies in three sectors: semiconductors and microelectronics, quantum information technologies, and certain artificial intelligence systems.

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US President Denies Sitting In on His Son Hunter's Business Dealings Via Speaker Phone

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden denied that he sat in on his son Hunter Biden's business dealings through speakerphone while employed by the Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

"I never talked business with anybody," Biden said on Wednesday when asked about Hunter Biden's business associate Devon Archer's testimony to Congress.

Biden claimed the accusation is not true and described the reporter's question as "lousy."

Last week, Archer told the US House Oversight Committee that then-vice president Joe Biden was often put on speakerphone by Hunter Biden and his Burisma business associates. However, Archer made clear to the committee that Joe Biden never discussed business on those occasions.

According to Archer, he recalled Hunter Biden put his father Joe Biden on speakerphone with Burisma executives about 20 times, including during dinners in Paris and Beijing.

Earlier on Wednesday, House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer revealed a third batch of financial documents related to this matter that showed evidence that the Biden family received millions of dollars from foreign businessmen in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan during Joe Biden’s vice presidency in 2014.

Two previous packages of financial documents were released in March and May. They highlighted Biden’s family use of the Robinson Walker, LLC account to receive money from a certain Chinese entity and dealings in Romania as well as the family’s partnership with Chinese entities closely tied to the Chinese Communist Party.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

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US-CHINA RELATIONS

* US President Joe Biden signed an executive order on Wednesday to restrict US investments in certain technology sectors operating in the People's Republic of China (PRC), senior administration officials said.

* Biden signed an executive order to restrict US technology investments in China following consultations with allies and industry leaders, a senior administration official said.

PAKISTAN DEVELOPMENTS

* Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Shariz on Wednesday initiated the procedure for dissolving the National Assembly, the lower house of the country's parliament, Pakistan's Geo TV reported.

* The United States allegedly pressured the Pakistani government to oust ex-prime minister Imran Khan over his neutral stance on Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the Intercept reported, citing a classified Pakistani cable document it obtained.

* State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday that allegations accusing the United States of interfering in internal decisions about Pakistan's leadership are false.

NIGER TENSIONS

* The United States is considering a number of policy options should the situation in Niger deteriorate, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

* The French military has rejected the Nigerien rebels' demand to leave the African country, Antinekar Al-Hassan, the political adviser of ousted Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum, told Sputnik.

* The rebels who seized power in Niger refuse to negotiate, Al-Hassan told Sputnik.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST BELARUS

* The Canadian government has imposed sanctions on nine individuals and seven entities in Belarus, including the defense ministry and the head of Belarusian state television to mark the third anniversary of the 2020 presidential election, Global Affairs Canada said on Wednesday.

* The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control targeted eight individuals, five entities and one aircraft with Belarus-related sanctions to mark the three-year anniversary of the 2020 Belarusian presidential election that was followed by protests.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Ukrainian military on Wednesday attempted to attack Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant's (ZNPP) spent nuclear fuel storage facility with a drone, the Russian security forces told Sputnik.

* A Ukrainian military strike drone moving in the direction of the ZNPP was intercepted in Enerhodar, the Russian security agencies told Sputnik.

* Poland is planning to establish a regular Polish-Ukrainian union for subsequent occupation of Western Ukraine and has announced its intention to build "the strongest army" in Europe, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

EXPLOSION IN RUSSIA

* The number of people injured as a result of an explosion at a plant in the city of Sergiyev Posad in the Moscow Region has increased to 60, Dmitry Akulov, the Sergiyev Posad district's

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head, said on Wednesday.
* A woman injured in an explosion at a plant in the Russian city of Sergiyev Posad in the Moscow Region has died in hospital, the regional administration said.

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UPDATE At Least 6 People Confirmed Dead as Result of Wildfires in Hawaii - Maui Mayor

(includes additional information, correction in lede)
WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) -At least six people are confirmed to be dead as a result of wildfires in Hawaii and amid the ongoing search and rescue, Mayor of Maui County Richard Bissen told reporters on Wednesday.
"I'm sad to report that just before coming on this, it was confirmed we've had six fatalities that we were able to confirm and we are still in a search and rescue mode," Bissen said.
Lieutenant Governor Sylvia Luke said that an emergency proclamation was signed to discourage tourists from going to Maui.
"Today we signed another emergency proclamation that will discourage tourists from going to Maui," Luke said. " Even as of this morning, planes are landing on Maui with tourists. This is not a safe place to be. In certain parts of Maui. We have shelters that are overrun. We have resources that are being taxed."

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Biden to Ask Congress for About $10Bln in Additional Ukraine Funding on Thursday- Source

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Thursday is expected to ask Congress for approximately $10 billion or more in additional funding for Ukraine, a source

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familiar with the matter confirmed to Sputnik on Wednesday.

Politico reported that Biden is planning to formally ask Congress on Thursday for some $10 billion in supplemental funding to continue assistance to Ukraine next year.

"I believe this is accurate, and the amount is expected to be north of $10 billion," the source said.

Earlier on Wednesday, a White House National Security Council spokesperson, in response to reports about the expected request, told Sputnik they don't have anything to announce at this time.

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Biden Signs Order to Regulate US Investment in Sensitive Chinese Tech - Admin. Official

(Update: adds details in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed an executive order on Wednesday to regulate investments in certain technology sectors operating in the People's Republic of China (PRC), senior administration officials said on Wednesday.

"Today, President Biden is expected to sign an executive order that authorizes the Secretary of the Treasury to regulate certain US investments into PRC entities engaged in activities involving national security sensitive technologies in three sectors," a senior administration official said.

The three sectors include: semiconductors and microelectronics, quantum information technologies and artificial intelligence systems, the officials said.

The US Treasury Department is releasing a notice of proposed rulemaking in conjunction with the executive order to help facilitate a carefully tailored approach with stakeholders, the officials said.

The measures were developed following consultations with allies, Congress and industry, the officials added.

The Treasury Secretary will have the authority to investigate and penalize violations of the executive order, the officials said. Industry will have great incentive to comply with the regulations, the officials also said.

The Biden administration will continue to consult with allies and partners on the matter in the days ahead, the officials said.

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Biden Ordered Curbs on China Tech Investment After Talks With Allies, Industry - Official

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed an executive order to restrict US tech investments in China following consultations with allies and industry, a senior administration official said on Wednesday.

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"President Biden is signing this executive order after a thoughtful, deliberate assessment, which included extensive consultation with our allies and partners, Congress, industry, and other stakeholders," the official told reporters.

The United States held dozens of engagements with hundreds of interested parties across the world, and key allies and partners have recognized the shared importance of the issue, the official added.

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FBI Says Agents Shot and Killed Man During Raid in Utah Who Threatened Biden

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - The FBI is reviewing a fatal agent-involved shooting that took place during a raid on Wednesday morning in the state of Utah when they were attempting to serve arrest and search warrants, an FBI spokesperson told Sputnik.

According to a complaint the US Attorney's Office provided to Sputnik on this matter, the man killed during the FBI raid is Craig Deleeuw Robertson, who faced three criminal charges for allegedly making threats to kill President Joe Biden, New York County District Attorney Alvin Bragg, and two FBI agents.

"The FBI is reviewing an agent-involved shooting which occurred around 6:15 a.m. on Wednesday, August 9, 2023 in Provo, Utah," the FBI spokesperson said. "The incident began when special agents attempted to serve arrest and search warrants at a residence. The subject is deceased."

The US Secret Service in a separate statement said it is aware of the FBI investigation involving "an individual in Utah who has exhibited threats towards a Secret Service protectee," and referred any further related questions to the FBI and Justice Department on this matter.

The complaint accuses Robertson of threatening to injure Bragg, and harm or murder Biden and two unnamed FBI agents cited in the court documents.

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The complaint accuses Robertson of violating federal law with his threats.

Robertson, according to court documents, made a threat on Monday against Biden stating, "I HEAR BIDEN IS COMING TO UTAH. DIGGING OUT MY OLD GHILLE SUIT AND CLEANING THE DUST OFF THE M24 SNIPER RIFLE. WELCOM, BUFFOON-IN-CHIEF!"

FBI agents began to conduct physical surveillance on Robertson in mid-March, according to the complaint. An FBI agent described Robertson as a heavy-set white man, approximately 70 to 75 years old, who had also been seen wearing a hat with the word "Trump" on the front, the complaint stated.

Federal agents were tipped off about Robertson's threats by several unnamed social media companies, the complaint stated. Court documents also showed Robertson made several other posts on social media about threats to other state and federal officials.

In his social media profile, Robertson identified himself as a Vietnam war veteran.

US media reported that the investigation began in April and the US Secret Service was notified in June.

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US Fines Twitter $350,000 for Delay in Providing Trump Records to Justice Dept. - Filing

(Update: adds Trump reaction in paras 5-7)

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - The United States is fining the social media company formerly known as Twitter $350,000 for delaying the provision of records pertaining to former US President Donald Trump to the Justice Department, the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia said in an opinion released Wednesday.

A US district court issued a search warrant in a criminal case, ordering Twitter (now known as X) to provide information to the government on Trump's account, the filing said. Twitter delayed the production of the information while unsuccessfully litigating a nondisclosure order restricting them from talking about the warrant, the filing said.

"Although Twitter ultimately complied with the warrant, the company did not fully produce the requested information until three days after a court-ordered deadline. The district court thus held Twitter in contempt and imposed a $350,000 sanction for its delay," the filing said. "We affirm the district court in all respects."

The filing comes following an indictment against Trump on four charges related to Special Counsel Jack Smith's probe of alleged efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 US presidential election. The case involving Twitter stems from Smith's investigation, the filing said.

In response to the filing, Trump accused the Justice Department of attempting to derail his 2024 presidential campaign.

"Just found out that Crooked Joe Biden's DOJ [Department of Justice] secretly attacked my Twitter account, making it a point not to let me know about this major 'hit' on my civil rights," Trump said in a statement via Truth Social.

Trump has frequently characterized legal action against him as a weaponization of the US justice and defended his political speech as protected under the First Amendment of the US

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Constitution.

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State Dept. Says Allegations US Pressured Pakistani Gov't to Oust Khan Are 'False'

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday that allegations accusing the United States of interfering in internal decisions about Pakistan's leadership are false.

Earlier in the day, the Intercept reported, citing a classified Pakistani cable document it obtained, that the United States allegedly pressured the Pakistani government to oust ex-prime minister Imran Khan over his neutral stance on Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

"As the former Pakistani ambassador to the United States himself has stated, the allegations that the United States has interfered in internal decisions about the leadership of Pakistan are false," Miller said during a press briefing regarding the secret Pakistani cable. "As we've stated, they're false. they've always been false and they remain false."

The Intercept report said, citing the classified Pakistani government document, that US officials in a meeting on March 7, 2022, warned bilateral relations with Pakistan would not improve if Imran Khan remained in power.

US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu and then-Pakistani ambassador to the US Asad Majeed Khan took part in the meeting.

Lu, the report said, warned that if the situation wasn't resolved, Pakistan would be isolated by its Western allies.

"I think if the no-confidence vote against the Prime Minister succeeds, all will be forgiven in Washington because the Russia visit is being looked at as a decision by the Prime Minister," Lu said according to the document. "Otherwise...I think it will be tough going ahead."

In October 2022, Pakistan's election commission stripped Khan of his parliamentary mandate as well as the right to be elected and appointed to both the country's federal and regional legislatures for five years, after finding him guilty of selling 52 valuables stored in the Toshakhana, Pakistan's national treasury, and concealing information about gifts he received personally. In April 2022, then-opposition leader and current Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said Khan had sold state treasures in Dubai worth a total of 140 million Pakistani rupees ($500,000).

On Saturday, media reported that an Islamabad court has sentenced Imran Khan to three years in prison after finding him guilty of corrupt practices in the Toshakhana case. On May 9, Khan was taken into custody on corruption charges after an Islamabad High Court (IHC) hearing in the Al-Qadir Trust case, where he had gone to seek bail in several cases filed against him. Following his arrest, his supporters launched mass protests across the country, resulting in violent clashes with police and attacks on government and military facilities. At least eight people died and about 290 were injured during the protests.

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

Biden to Ask Congress for Billions of Dollars in More Ukraine Aid on Thursday - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration plans to turn to Congress again as early as tomorrow to ask for billions of dollars in additional security and other assistance for Ukraine, Politico reported on Wednesday, citing two people in the know.

The request for more money for Ukraine is expected to include a request for assistance to Taiwan and money to replenish shrinking disaster relief funds, the report said.

While the amount of the request is unknown, US media reported on Tuesday that the White House is expected to ask Congress as soon as this week for up to $10 billion in supplemental funding to continue providing assistance to Ukraine in 2024.

The United States has provided more than $100 billion in security, economic and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since the beginning of Russia's special military operation in February 2022.

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Sudan Wants UN Special Representative Perthes to Quit His Position - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, August 9 (Sputnik) - Khartoum wants UN Special Representative for Sudan Volker Perthes to quit his job, Sudanese Ambassador to the United Nations Al-Harith Idriss Al-Harith Mohamed said on Wednesday.

"Yes," Mohamed said during a briefing in response to a question whether he is against Perthes remaining in his job.

The Sudanese ambassador said Perthes stated publicly on television that the Sudanese government is incapable of maintaining the country's unity and that it had lost trust with regional countries and actors.

"I wrote to the UN Secretary-General that this is real 'politicking' and please, use your good offices to salvage the legacy of Sudan," Mohamed said.

However, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said Perthes continues to be the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General dealing with Sudan and the United Nations expects him to provide further briefings to the UN Security Council when he needs to.

Earlier on Wednesday, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said the Sudanese government had threatened to pull the UN mission (UNITAMS) out of Sudan if Perthes briefed the UN Security Council.

In mid-April, clashes broke out between the Sudanese military and the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group, with the epicenter of the fighting located in the country's capital Khartoum. The parties to the conflict have since introduced a number of temporary nationwide ceasefires, but the conflict has not yet been settled.

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UPDATE - Canada Sanctions 9 Individuals, 7 Entities in Belarus on 2020 Election Anniversary
(Updates with more details in paras 3, 4)

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has imposed sanctions on nine individuals and seven entities in Belarus, including the Ministry of Defense and the head of Belarussian state television, to mark the third anniversary of the 2020 elections, Global Affairs Canada said on Wednesday.

"Those sanctioned consist of government officials, judges, and associates of the regime, including the head of Belarusian state television, Ivan Mikhailovich Eismant. Today's announcement also targets the Ministry of Defence of Belarus, the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus, as well as military manufacturing and technology companies," the ministry said in a statement," the ministry said in a statement.

The list of sanctioned individuals also includes Alena Litvina, Aleh Karazei, Alexei Talai, Aleksandr Krivets, Vladimir Karanik, Anna Pushkareva, Sergei Sheiman and Olga Sheiman.

Among the other sanctioned entities are the Local Charitable Foundation - named after Alexei Talai - BelOMO Holding, Oboronnye Initsiativy, 2566 Radioelectronic Armament Repair Plant JSC, and ATE-Engineering LLC.

To date, Canada has sanctioned 190 Belarussian individuals and 71 entities over alleged systematic violation of human rights in the country and for supporting Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

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Biden Admin. Launches AI Cyber Competition to Protect Critical Infrastructure -White House

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration launched a two-year artificial intelligence cyber competition to help identify and fix existing software vulnerabilities with nearly $20 million in prizes, the White House announced on Wednesday.

"The Biden-Harris Administration today launched a major two-year competition that will use artificial intelligence (AI) to protect the United States' most important software, such as code that helps run the internet and our critical infrastructure. The "AI Cyber Challenge" will challenge competitors across the United States, to identify and fix software vulnerabilities using AI," the White House said in a press release.

The challenge will be led by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and will include collaboration with a host of AI companies – Anthropic, Google, Microsoft, and OpenAI, the release said.

The organizers will determine up to 20 teams during a qualifying event in Spring 2024 which will then participate in the semifinal competition at DEF CON 2024, one of the most prestigious cybersecurity conferences, the release added.

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Up to five winners of the semifinal stage will receive monetary prizes and proceed to the finals, to be held at DEF CON 2025. In the final, the top three scoring teams will also receive additional monetary prizes, according to the release.

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US Considering Number of Policy Options on Niger - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering a number of policy options should the situation in Niger deteriorate, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"We are considering a number of different policy options," Miller said during a press briefing, adding that he will not preview potential actions at this moment.

The United States will continue to seek to reverse the military takeover in Niger, Miller added.

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Canada Sanctions 9 Individuals, 7 Entities in Belarus on 2020 Election Anniversary

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"Those sanctioned consist of government officials, judges, and associates of the regime, including the head of Belarusian state television, Ivan Mikhailovich Eismant. Today's announcement also targets the Ministry of Defence of Belarus, the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus, as well as military manufacturing and technology companies," the ministry said in a statement.

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US Oil Production at 3-Year High of 12.6Mln Barrels Daily - Energy Agency EIA

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - US oil production has hit three-year highs approaching 13 million barrels per day, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) announced on Wednesday.

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Oil production was projected at 12.6 million barrels daily in the most recent week to August 4, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report. The agency had not estimated such a high output since the record 13.1 million barrels produced daily prior to the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020.

The EIA's estimate was made all the more significant by the sheer drop this year in US oil rigs.

Oil services company Baker Hughes said the US rig count stood at 525 during the week to August 4, down from the 2023 high of 623 noted during the week to January 13.

In a separate monthly forecast on Tuesday, the EIA said higher-than-expected well productivity and rising crude prices will help boost US production to a record 12.8 million barrels a day in 2023, up from the previously forecast 12.6 million. The United States averaged about 11.9 million barrels per day in oil production last year.

The production ramp-up aside, the EIA said US crude stockpiles rose by nearly six million barrels last week - about a third of what they lost the prior week - despite the supposed reduction of a million barrels per day in Saudi output that should be tightening global supply.

Crude stockpiles rose by 5.851 million barrels during the week ended Aug. 4, after the historic 17.049-million plunge reported in the prior week to July 28, the weekly EIA report showed.

Industry analysts had projected a crude stockpile growth of just 0.567 million barrels for last week.

A closer examination of the EIA weekly report showed the crude build likely came from a slump in US crude exports, which stood at 2.36 million barrels last week compared with the prior week's 5.283 million.

On the gasoline inventory front, there was a draw of 2.661 million barrels versus the build of 1.48 million the week before. It was the first substantial gasoline consumption in five weeks, after a similar reduction of almost 2.6 million during the week to July 1. The forecast was for a draw of 0.008 million.

With distillate stockpiles, the decline came in at 1.706 million barrels for last week versus the prior week's draw of 0.796 million.

It was the largest weekly draw in distillates since the week ended May 5. Analysts had projected a US distillates build of 0.006 million barrels instead for last week. Distillates are refined into heating oil, diesel for trucks, buses, trains and ships and fuel for jets.

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US Allegedly Pressed Pakistani Gov't to Oust Khan Over Neutral Stance on Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - The United States allegedly pressured the Pakistani government to oust ex-prime minister Imran Khan over his neutral stance on Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the Intercept reported on Wednesday citing a classified Pakistani cable document it obtained.

The report said, citing the classified Pakistani government document, that US officials in a meeting in March 7, 2022, warned bilateral relations with Pakistan would not improve if Imran Khan remained in power.

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US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu and then-Pakistani ambassador to the US Asad Majeed Khan took part in the meeting in March.

"I think if the no-confidence vote against the Prime Minister succeeds, all will be forgiven in Washington because the Russia visit is being looked at as a decision by the Prime Minister," Lu said according to the document. "Otherwise...I think it will be tough going ahead."

The US administration had been infuriated that Imran Khan went through with a visit to Moscow regardless of Russia launching its operation in Ukraine.

Lu, the report said, warned that if the situation wasn't resolved, Pakistan would be isolated by its Western allies.

State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller, in response to this cable, said he would not comment on private diplomatic discussion but underscored that,"Nothing in these purported comments shows the United States taking a position on who the leader of Pakistan should be."

The Intercept said the secret cable was provided by an anonymous source in Pakistani's military who said he does not have any ties to former prime minister or his party.

On Saturday, media reported that an Islamabad court has sentenced Imran Khan to three years in prison after finding him guilty of corrupt practices in the Toshakhana case.

On May 9, Khan was taken into custody on corruption charges after an Islamabad High Court (IHC) hearing in the Al-Qadir Trust case, where he had gone to seek bail in several cases filed against him. Following his arrest, his supporters launched mass protests across the country, resulting in violent clashes with police and attacks on government and military facilities. At least eight people died and about 290 were injured during the protests.

In October 2022, Pakistan's election commission stripped Khan of his parliamentary mandate as well as the right to be elected and appointed to both the country's federal and regional legislatures for five years, after finding him guilty of selling 52 valuables stored in the Toshakhana, Pakistan's national treasury, and concealing information about gifts he received personally. In April 2022, then-opposition leader and current Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said Khan had sold state treasures in Dubai worth a total of 140 million Pakistani rupees ($500,000).

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US Fines Twitter $350,000 for Delay in Providing Trump Records to Justice Dept. - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - The United States has fined the social media company formerly known as Twitter $350,000 for delaying the provision of records pertaining to former President Donald Trump to the Justice Department, the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia said in an opinion released on Wednesday.

A US district court issued a search warrant in a criminal case, ordering Twitter (now known as X) to provide information to the government on Trump's account, the filing said. Twitter delayed the production of the information while unsuccessfully litigating a nondisclosure order restricting them from talking about the warrant, the filing said.

"Although Twitter ultimately complied with the warrant, the company did not fully produce the requested information until three days after a court-ordered deadline. The district court thus held

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Twitter in contempt and imposed a $350,000 sanction for its delay," the filing said. "We affirm the district court in all respects."

The filing comes following an indictment against Trump on four charges related to Special Counsel Jack Smith's probe of alleged efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 US presidential election. The case involving Twitter stems from Smith's investigation, the filing said.

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Tuberville Says Schumer Could Resolve US Military Confirmations in 'About Three Hours'

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - US Senator Tommy Tuberville said on Wednesday that Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer could confirm nominees to military positions one by one in approximately three hours if he were willing, resolving Tuberville's hold on confirming the nominees as a group.

"Remember this now: I'm holding up groups of nominations. They can take one at a time. It'll take about three hours on the floor of the Senate to get all these people confirmed," Tuberville said in an interview with Newsmax.

However, Schumer is reluctant to pursue the route because it would be an acknowledgement that the confirmations could have been cleared these past months, Tuberville said.

Tuberville placed holds on 270 nominees in protest of the Pentagon's abortion policy, which provides funding for the procedure. Defense officials are "legislating from the Pentagon" instead of through Congress as the US Constitution requires, Tuberville said.

Tuberville's holds have been criticized by a number of Biden administration officials and military groups, who have warned about potential impacts on military readiness.

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Global Affairs Canada Says Cannot Unequivocally Prove Lawmaker Chong Targeted by China

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - Global Affairs Canada said on Wednesday that its Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) tasked with monitoring foreign threats was unable to unequivocally prove Chinese involvement in a recent operation against Conservative lawmaker Michael Chong.

"An analysis by the RRM to determine the possibility of state involvement revealed that, while China's role in the information operation is highly probable, unequivocal proof that China ordered and directed the operation is not possible to determine due to the covert nature of how social media networks are leveraged in this type of information campaign," the ministry said in a statement.

The RRM detected an information operation against Chong that took place on the social-media platform WeChat in May ahead of the June 19 elections, the statement said.

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Between May 4-13, a network of WeChat news accounts spread "misleading" information and narratives on Chong's political stances, identity and relatives, but it did not represent a threat to him or his family, the statement said.

Global Affairs Canada worked jointly with several other departments through the month of June and July to review the information and make relevant assessments, the statement added.

Canada's RRM is part of a broader structure established in 2018 at the Charlevoix, Quebec G7 Summit, comprising all its member states. They most notably lead and support operations to counter state-sponsored disinformation threatening democracy.

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White House Cites 'Active Ongoing Investigation' in Navy Spy Cases – Kirby

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) – The White House declined to comment on Wednesday on the two California-based Navy sailors charged with providing sensitive military information to China, citing an "active ongoing investigation."

"This is an active ongoing investigation and under DoD's jurisdiction here, so I really think it wouldn't be appropriate for us to comment on the specifics of these two cases from the National Security Council," National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said at a press briefing on Wednesday.

Last Thursday, in two separate cases, Petty Officer 2nd class Wei Jinchao was charged with espionage and Petty Officer Zhao Wenheng charged with transmitting information to a Chinese intelligence officer.

Both have pleaded not guilty and have been denied bail. Wei's next court date is August 21 and Zhao's is September 26.

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Kirby Downplays Reports of Saudi-Israeli Peace Deal, Says Discussions Ongoing

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) – White House National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby confirmed on Wednesday that talks with Saudi Arabia on normalizing the kingdom's relations with Israel are still ongoing, but refuted media reports claiming that the parties are close to reaching a deal on the issue.

"I think the reporting has left some people with the impression that the discussions are farther along and closer to some sense of certainty than they actually are," Kirby said during a press briefing, when asked about a Wall Street Journal report published earlier in the day.

Earlier on Wednesday, The Wall Street Journal reported that the Biden administration and Saudi Arabia have come to a broad agreement on a deal that would entail Riyadh's recognition of Israel in exchange for concessions to the Palestinians, US security guarantees, and civilian

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nuclear technology.

Kirby pointed out that there is still no agreed framework to codify the normalization of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

At the same time, Kirby confirmed the presence of a “broad agreement” between Washington and Riyadh about the continuation of talks and keeping the dialogue on the issue open.

The US launched a process to normalize relations between Israel and the Arab world in 2020. As a result of these efforts, in September 2020, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed a set of documents known as the Abraham Accords and were joined by Morocco in December of that year. In January 2021, Sudan also signed the declarative section of the Accords but did not sign the relevant document with Israel, unlike other states, due to disagreements between the Sudanese military and civilian leadership over the issue.

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White House Expects Pakistan to Remain Counterterrorism Partner - Kirby

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - The White House expects that Pakistan will remain a counterterrorism partner, despite its growing political and security concerns amid former Prime Minister Imran Khan’s controversial three-year prison sentence, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We're obviously concerned about any actions, particularly violent actions, that can contribute to instability in Pakistan," Kirby said at a press briefing. "We're watching it with concern of course, but Pakistan is a partner, particularly when it comes to the counterterrorism threat in that part of the world, and we have every expectation that they will remain so."

Khan was arrested after the court handed down a sentence last Saturday in his corruption trial and is currently in prison. He has also been disqualified from running for office for five years.

The cricket-star-turned-politician has denied wrongdoing, accusing the current government led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of colluding with the military to keep him out of office. He has lodged an appeal against his sentence with the Supreme Court.

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US Sen. Feinstein Hospitalized Following Fall at Home - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - US Sen. Dianne Feinstein was hospitalized and cleared for release after falling at her home in San Francisco, the senator’s office said on Wednesday.

"Senator Feinstein briefly went to the hospital yesterday afternoon as a precaution after a minor fall in her home. All of her scans were clear and she returned home," Feinstein’s office said in a statement.

The hospitalization comes following Feinstein’s months-long absence from Congress earlier

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this year due to a bout of shingles and other complications, including encephalitis. The health problems could have resulted in memory or language problems, according to US media reports.
Feinstein's colleagues and aides in Congress have reportedly begun questioning her cognitive faculties, with some calling publicly for her to exit office.
Feinstein, 90, announced in February that she will not run for reelection in 2024, after serving more than three decades in the upper chamber of Congress.

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Russia Calls on UN to Act Impartially in Sudan, Respect Khartoum's Views - Deputy Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, August 9 (Sputnik) - Russia calls on the United Nations to respect the position of the Sudanese people and regrets the attempts to create "artificial competition" in negotiations to settle the conflict there, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the world body Anna Evstigneeva said on Wednesday.
"We call on the United Nations to act impartially to respect the views of Khartoum and the sovereignty of the country," Evstigneeva said during a meeting of the UN Security Council. "We note with regret the continuing efforts to create an artificial competition in mediation efforts."
Evstigneeva said applying pressure is "useless" without a clear strategy on how the international community can provide support to Sudan to emerge from the current impasse.
In mid-April, clashes broke out between the Sudanese military and the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group, with the epicenter of the fighting being in the capital Khartoum. The parties to the conflict have since introduced a number of temporary nationwide ceasefires, but a settlement has not yet being reached.

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Time is of Essence in Finding Peace in Sudan or Bad Consequences - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, August 9 (Sputnik) - A negotiated solution to end the crisis in Sudan is urgently needed or continued war threatens to destroy the country, Assistant UN Secretary-General for Africa Martha Ama Akyaa Pobee said on Wednesday.
"There needs to be a negotiated solution to end this war as soon as possible," Pobee said during a meeting of the UN Security Council. "There is no other alternative. Calls by some to continue the war in order to achieve a military victory will only contribute to destroying the country."
Pobee emphasized that the longer it takes to achieve peace, the more Sudan will become fragmented.
In mid-April, clashes broke out between the Sudanese military and the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group, with the epicenter of fighting in the capital of Khartoum. The parties to the

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Liberal Donors More Likely to be Tapped by Trudeau as Judges - Watchdog

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - Over 75% of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's judicial appointees with a previous history of donating to political parties were donors to the Liberal Party, Canada's Investigative Journalism Foundation said on Wednesday.

"An eight-month investigation by National Post and the Investigative Journalism Foundation (IJF) of 1,308 judicial and tribunal appointments by the Liberal government since 2016 shows an overwhelming majority – 76.3 per cent – of appointees who had previously made political donations had given to the Liberal Party of Canada," the IJF said.

In contrast, Conservative Party donors make up just 22.9% of the appointees who donated.

"Moreover, the number of Conservative donors appointed to the judiciary has dropped significantly since the Liberals came to power, whereas the number of NDP donors more than doubled between 2016 and 2022, the year the NDP entered an agreement to support the Liberals," the nonprofit said.

The investigation sheds light on what they say is the politicization of the Canadian judicial apparatus and appointment process, one for which the Liberals had heavily criticized the Conservatives during the latter's tenure, even promising a reform of the systems after Trudeau's Liberal victory in 2016.

Nonetheless, there is no legislation that prohibits judges or tribunal members from making donations to a political party prior to their appointment, the IJF said. The selection process is thus mostly political in nature since the ultimate decision belongs to the federal government, the nonprofit said, citing legal scholars.

Canadian law states that the federal government is tasked with the appointment of members for provincial superior and appeal courts, the Tax Court of Canada, the Federal Court of Appeal, the Supreme Court of Canada, and several other courts that deal with immigration and trade, among others.

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US Designates 3 Sinaloa Cartel Members For Illicit Drugs Trafficking - Treasury

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) – The United States sanctioned three members of the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel for illicit fentanyl and other drugs trafficking, the Department of the Treasury said on Wednesday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated

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three Sinaloa Cartel members involved in the illicit trafficking of fentanyl and other deadly drugs," the statement said.

Washington imposed sanctions against two brothers, Alfonso and Rene Arzate Garcia for their role in managing drug trafficking operations in the Mexican city of Tijuana and the surrounding municipalities. They were also involved in importing large quantities of illicit drugs, including fentanyl, into the United States, the statement noted. US authorities also accused them of kidnappings and executions.

The United States also sanctioned Rafael Guadalupe Felix Nuñez, who is characterized as a "powerful and violent Sinaloa Cartel leader" in the large Mexican port of Manzanillo. "In addition to being a North American entry point, the port of Manzanillo is also a strategic transport hub for drugs ultimately destined for the United States," the statement said.

As a result of sanctions, all US-controlled assets and property of designated individuals must be blocked, it added.

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Update: US Sanctions Eight Individuals, Five Entities, One Aircraft in Belarus – Treasury

(Updates headline and all paras, adds three paras)

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned eight individuals, five entities, and one aircraft in connection with Belarus on Wednesday, according to a release.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control is designating eight individuals and five entities identifying one aircraft as blocked property on the three-year anniversary of the Belarusian authorities' falsification of the August 2020 presidential election and their callous crackdown on the Belarusian protest movement demanding fundamental freedoms," the release stated. "This action targets several entities involved in the Belarusian regime's continued civil society repression, complicity in the Russian Federation's unjustified war in Ukraine, and enrichment of repressive Belarusian regime leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka."

The targets include three state-owned enterprises, Belavia Belarusian Airlines, Minsk Civil Aviation Plant 407, and Byelorussian Steel Works Management Company, as well as the latter's general director, Dmitriy Aleksandrovich Korchi, and Miami-based subsidiary, Bel-Kap-Steel LLC.

The sanctioned aircraft is a Canadair Regional Jet CR-200ER operated by Belavia that is used by senior officials and family members of Lukashenko.

The targets also include one government agency, the Department of Financial Investigations of the State Control Committee, and four of its senior employees, Director Igor Anatolievich Marshalov, Deputy Director Victor Frantsevich Selitskiy, Deputy Director Viktor Ivanovich Franskevich, and Senior Investigator Artem Konstantinovich Dunko.

Lastly, they include three individuals facilitating sanctions evasion in support of Lukashenka's regime, namely the two sons, Dzmitry Aliakseevich Aleksin and Vital Aliakseevich Aleksin, and

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wife, Ina Vladimirovna Aleksina, of sanctioned Belarusian businessman Aliaksey Ivanovich Aleksin. Aleksin is a Lukashenko confidante and financier.

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US Senator Paul Says Referring Fauci for Criminal Charges for Lying to Congress

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - Former National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) Director Anthony Fauci is being referred for criminal charges for lying to Congress, US Senator Rand Paul said in a letter to US Attorney General for the District of Columbia Matthew Graves.

"I write to request your office open an investigation into the testimony made to the United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions on May 11, 2021 by Dr. Anthony Fauci," the letter, dated Tuesday, said. "Dr. Fauci's testimony is inconsistent with facts that have since come to light."

Fauci told the panel that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has never funded gain-of-function research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, where some officials have concluded the COVID-19 pandemic may have originated.

Fauci was offered the opportunity to retract the statement but declined the offer and denied ever lying to Congress, the letter added.

However, Fauci sent an email in February 2020 acknowledging concerns about gain-of-function research at the China's Wuhan laboratory and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The gain-of-function research was also funded by NIAID, which is part of NIH, the letter said.

A June 2023 Government Accountability Office report found that the Wuhan Institute of Virology indeed received NIH funding, the letter added.

The letter requests that the Justice Department investigate whether Fauci violated federal laws criminalizing false statements or representations to Congress, which carries a sentence of up to five years in prison.

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Appeals to Burn Holy Books Issue Not Just for Islam But Religion in General - Bishop

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) – Appeals to burn copies of holy books is not an issue just for Islam but for religion in general, American Bishop Jerome (Shaw) from the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) told Sputnik.

Jerome called those burning sacred books of other religions "not religious people."

"What it shows is that the people who burn sacred books of other religions are themselves not religious," the Bishop said. "We also read of calls to 'even the odds' by also burning copies of

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the New and Old Testaments: in other words, not just Islam becomes the issue, but religion in general."

His comments come as several Quran-burning demonstrations have taken place in Denmark and Sweden in recent months.

Most Muslim countries have condemned the demonstrations, and some have summoned the Swedish and Danish ambassadors to issue letters of protest. In addition, protestors in Baghdad stormed the Swedish embassy and set it on fire last month.

Bishop Jerome also noted that these incidents are happening amid a "huge drop" in the number of practicing Christians in Europe. He expressed frustration that magnificent old churches are turning into private homes, restaurants, theaters, and other such establishments in Europe.

The Bishop stated that the growing cases of Quran burnings in European countries might also be a reaction to Europe's policies that have seen an increase in Muslim migrants.

"These Quran burnings seem to be a reaction to the European Union's 'open floodgate' policy which has led to a huge increase in the number of Muslims in formerly overwhelmingly Christian countries," the Bishop said.

According to a study from the Pew Research Center in 2017, the number of Muslims in EU countries and Norway and Switzerland increased to almost 26 million from 19 million in 2010. Another survey projected that the Muslim population in the continent would increase to 58 million by 2030.

The UK's Premiere Christianity Magazine said in July, citing the German Bishops' Conference, that over half a million people left the Catholic church in Germany last year. The report also showed that the percentage of Frenchman saying they are Catholic fell from 81% in 1986 to 47% in 2020, while those saying they had no religion grew from 16% to 40%. Italy lost 6 million worshipers in ten years, and a third of the Spanish population described themselves as atheists or agnostics, it added.

While European countries have no laws prohibiting the burning of sacred books, the Danish government recently said it would explore legal means of stopping protests involving the burning of holy texts.

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US Citizen Dorsainvil, Her Daughter 'Safely Released' After Being Kidnapped in Haiti

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - US citizen Alix Dorsainvil and her daughter have been "safely released" after being kidnapped in Haiti, the advocacy organization El Roi Haiti said on Wednesday.

"It is with a heart of gratitude and immense joy that we at El Roi Haiti confirm the safe release of our staff member and friend, Alix Dorsainvil and her child, who were held hostage in Port au Prince, Haiti," the statement said.

The organization requested that Dorsainvil is not contacted at this time in order to heal from the ordeal.

Dorsainvil and her daughter were kidnapped in late July, according to the media reports. It is

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unclear at present who were the kidnappers and what were the conditions of their release, the reports said.

Dorsainvil is the wife of El Roi Haiti founder Sandro Dorsainvil. The organization's stated goal is to strengthen families, restore relationships and build healthy communities in Haiti.

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US Targets 8 Individuals, 5 Entities, 1 Aircraft With Belarus-Related Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control on Wednesday targeted eight individuals, five entities and one aircraft with Belarus-related sanctions to mark the three-year anniversary of the 2020 Belarusian presidential election that was followed by protests.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating eight individuals and five entities identifying one aircraft as blocked property on the three-year anniversary of the Belarusian authorities' falsification of the August 2020 presidential election and their callous crackdown on the Belarusian protest movement demanding fundamental freedoms," the press release said.

The sanctions list includes Belavia Belarusian Airlines, Byelorussian Steel Works Management and Minsk Civil Aviation Plant 407. The Treasury also sanctioned Bel-Kap Steel in the United States, which is linked to Byelorussian Steel Works Management.

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New Docs Show Bidens Received Over $20Mln From Foreign Sources, Including Russia, Ukraine

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) – A third batch of financial documents released on Wednesday by House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer shows evidence that the Biden family received millions of dollars from foreign businessmen in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan during Joe Biden's vice presidency in 2014.

"During Joe Biden's vice presidency, Hunter Biden sold him as 'the brand' to reap millions from oligarchs in Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine. It appears no real services were provided other than access to the Biden network, including Joe Biden himself," Comer said in a statement released by the committee.

In February 2014, Russian billionaire Yelena Baturina transferred $3.5 million to Rosemont Seneca Thornton, a shell company used by Hunter Biden and his business partner Devon Archer to receive millions from European and Asian businessmen, according to the new documents.

In Spring 2014, Ukrainian oligarch Mykola Zlochevsky placed Archer and Biden on the Burisma

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board of directors and agreed to pay them $1 million each per year, the documents showed.

Additionally, in April 2014, Kazakh businessman Kenes Rakishev transferred $142,300 to Rosemont Seneca Bohai, another shell company linked to Hunter Biden and Archer, after meeting with Hunter at a Washington DC hotel in February 2014. On the next day, the exact amount was wired for a sportscar for Hunter Biden, according to the documents.

The committee said in a press release that to date it has identified over $20 million in payments from a variety of foreign sources to the Biden family and their business associates.

Two previous packages of financial documents were released in March and May. They highlighted Biden's family use of the Robinson Walker, LLC account to receive money from a certain Chinese entity and dealings in Romania as well as the family's partnership with Chinese entities closely tied to the Chinese Communist Party.

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Hawaii Activates National Guard to Help Battle Wildfires - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 9 (Sputnik) – Hawaii's National Guard forces have been activated to help battle wildfires raging across the island of Maui, the state's Emergency Management Agency (EMA) said on Wednesday.

"Hawaii Department of Defense has approved National Guard support for Maui County amid battle with wind-driven wildfires. Personnel are already assisting police on Maui," the EMA said in a statement.

Wildfires, fueled by winds from Hurricane Dora, have cause massive damage and prompted the evacuation of thousands of people on the island of Maui. Firefighters are also battling two wildfires on the island of Hawaiim or the Big Island, according to county officials.

"We are closely following the wildfires caused by the strong winds of Hurricane Dora," Luke said.

The proclamation authorizes the activation of the National Guard, appropriate actions by the EMA, and the expenditure of state funds for relief from conditions created by Hurricane Dora, according to the statement.

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