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At Least 53 Dead in Hawaii After Wildfire Swept Through Historic Maui Town

A swiftly moving wildfire in western Maui on Wednesday has left devastation in its wake, including claiming dozens of lives and annihilating a historic town.

A release issued by Maui County officials revealed late Thursday that the death toll has risen to at least 53 as an additional 17 deaths were confirmed amid raging fires in the Lahaina Town. At least 30 people were also injured, including many who jumped into the harbor to avoid the rapidly advancing flames.

"The status of all three fires remains unchanged from the last update at 10:30 a.m. this morning," officials noted in reference to the Lahaina, Pulehu and Upcountry Maui fires.

The fire also destroyed some 271 structures, including nearly the entire town of Lahaina. Photos from the aftermath showed a smoldering ruin of a town. Lahaina was a popular tourist destination, with parts of the town dating to the 18th century, when for a time it was the capital of the Kingdom of Hawaii.

The fire advanced rapidly across Maui's dry western uplands on Wednesday, fanned by winds of over 60 miles per hour created by the outermost disturbances of Hurricane Dora, which passed several hundred miles to the south. The incredible winds frustrated efforts to fight the fires as well as for residents and tourists to flee from the flames, with smoke billowing horizontally instead of up into the sky.

"That wind speed, how rapidly that fire moved, that was not anticipated," Maj. Gen. Kenneth Hara of the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency told reporters.

Meanwhile, authorities are struggling to house thousands of tourists and locals who evacuated from the area. An update by Hawaii Lt. Gov. Sylvia Luke, US Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-HI) and other local leaders on Wednesday night said more than 11,000 tourists had been flown out of Maui and another 600 were being housed at Maui's Kahului airport. The convention center has also been set up to accommodate visitors needing shelter, but local media reported it wasn't being used much.

"The hotels that had occupancy this morning, most of them don't have that occupancy. That tells us that people are going straight from the airport and finding their accommodations and transportation," James Tokioka, director of the Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, told reporters.

State Department of Transportation Director Ed Sniffen added that airlines had worked with Maui visitors to get them off the island, with both Hawaii Airlines and Southwest Airlines dropping their fares and keeping their airport desks open until 2 am on Thursday.

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FBI Memo Linking Catholic Faith to 'Extremists' Drafted by Several Offices - GOP Lawmakers

House GOP lawmakers have blasted the FBI director for “inconsistencies” in his testimony after he claimed that a report from the bureau’s Richmond, Virginia, field office identifying “radical traditionalist Catholic ideology” as a potential source of “violent extremism” was an isolated incident. They say that new evidence suggests otherwise.

In a Wednesday letter to FBI Director Christopher Wray that was published by US media, US Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH), who chairs the House Judiciary Committee, and Rep. Mike Johnson (R-LA), who chairs the Subcommittee on the Constitution and Limited Government, requested a slew of bureau documents related to communications between FBI field offices in Richmond, Virginia; Portland, Oregon; and Los Angeles, California.

“From information recently produced to the Committee, we now know that the FBI relied on information from around the country - including a liaison contact in the FBI’s Portland Field Office and reporting from the FBI’s Los Angeles Field Office - to develop its assessment,” they wrote.

“This new information suggests that the FBI’s use of its law enforcement capabilities to intrude on American’s First Amendment rights is more widespread than initially suspected and reveals inconsistencies with your previous testimony before the Committee,” they lawmakers said.

“Given this startling new information, we write to request additional information to advance our oversight.”

They noted that in his testimony before the committee last month, Wray claimed that a January 2023 memo on the potential of right-wing activists motivated by “radical traditionalist Catholic ideology” to pose a violent threat to certain minority groups had been the sole product of the field office in Richmond, the Virginia state capital.

The memo, which was leaked to the press in February, said the office had received a tip from a local informant leading them to believe in an “increasingly observed interest of racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) in radical-traditionalist Catholic (RTC) ideology.” This, they said, was especially associated with the sect of Catholics who rejected the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 and with "white supremacist ideology."

This threat, they said, "presents opportunities for threat mitigation through the exploration of new avenues for tripwire and source development."

Notably, the unredacted parts of the document do not contain the words “potential terrorists,” as reported in some parts of the American press.

In response to the lawmakers’ letter, the FBI gave a statement to US media on Wednesday doubling down on Wray’s testimony, saying the lawmakers had become confused by similar terminologies used by multiple FBI field offices.

"Director Wray’s testimony on this matter has been accurate and consistent. While the document referred to information from other field office investigations of Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist (RMVE) subjects, that does not change the fact the product was produced by a single office,” the statement said.

"To be clear, the document was a domain perspective which is an intelligence product designed to address potential threats in a particular area - in this case, the Richmond Field Office’s area of responsibility,” the bureau continued. “Because the product failed to meet FBI standards, it

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was quickly removed from all FBI systems and a review was launched to determine how it was produced in the first place."
The situation has revived anger at the FBI for its wiretapping activities and profiling of religious groups, for which the bureau became notorious after spying on American Muslims in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.
However, conservatives especially have accused the FBI of political bias for years, pointing to its investigation of Donald Trump's presidential campaign in the months preceding the 2016 presidential election and its August 2022 raid on Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate to serve a search and seizure warrant for hundreds of classified files Trump did not return to the National Archives after leaving office. The former president is facing dozens of criminal charges related to alleged mishandling of the secret files.

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US Reaches Deal to Trade Frozen Oil Money for Americans in Iranian Custody

Washington and Tehran have reached a deal to exchange prisoners held in Iranian jails for frozen assets, Iranian diplomats confirmed to Sputnik on Thursday.
"As part of a humanitarian cooperation agreement mediated by a third-party government, Iran and the United States have agreed to reciprocally release and pardon five prisoners. The transfer of these prisoners to out of prison marks a significant initial step in the implementation of this agreement," the Iranian mission to the United Nations told Sputnik on Thursday, following reports of the deal in US media.
A spokesperson for the US National Security Council confirmed to US media that the five Iranian prisoners had been transferred from prison to house arrest.
"It is a positive step that they were released from prison and sent to home detention," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said. "But this is just the beginning of the process that I hope and expect will lead to their return home to the US."
He added that Iran will not be receiving any sanctions relief as a result of the deal.
According to "several people familiar with the deal" who spoke with US media, Washington will also allow the transfer of some $6 billion in oil revenues presently held in a South Korean bank, but frozen due to US sanctions. The arrangement is similar to one reached by then-US President Barack Obama in 2016.
The deal was reportedly more than two years in the making, and officials noted they were not yet completed.
The release of all Americans in Iranian custody was one of the few key sticking points remaining in the more-than-two-year quest by the Biden administration to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).
However, it wasn't the only point: Iran has also reportedly demanded its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) be removed from the US State Department's list of terrorist organizations - a move the US has so far refused. Reports last year suggested Tehran had dropped the demand, but no firm confirmation has been made.

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The JCPOA was reached in 2015 and removed US sanctions in exchange for Iran accepting strict limits to its nuclear program, sufficient only for electrical generation and research. However, in 2018, the US unilaterally abrogated the deal and reimposed sanctions, accusing Iran of secretly pursuing nuclear weapons - claims for which it has never presented evidence.

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US Inflation Increased in July for First Time in 13 Months

The rate of US inflation increased in July for the first time in more than a year, despite the Federal Reserve's steady march into the highest interest rates in decades. However, some economists are pointing to other data in the new economic report that they say is more promising.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics' (BLS) Consumer Price Index (CPI) report released on Thursday, the aggregate cost of consumer goods rose by 3.2% in July 2023 as compared to July 2022. With June's 3% increase a month prior, it was the first time in 13 months that inflation tacked upward.

At its meeting last month, the Federal Reserve, the US' central bank, increased interest rates by a moderate amount which nonetheless brought them to their highest point in 22 years. With the bank's goal of US inflation being reduced to no higher than 2%, the immediate expectation of upward-creeping inflation would likely be that more rate hikes are on the way as well. However, some financial experts are noting that things are more complex than that.

"There are a lot of seeds in this report that suggest more disinflation to come," Laura Rosner-Warburton, a senior economist at research firm MacroPolicy Perspectives, told US media. "It probably means that we are at - or very close to - the peak on interest rates."

Other economists who spoke with US media pointed to the "core" inflation index, one of the many other data points included in the BLS report. This metric removes food and fuel prices from the calculations, since those commodities tend to be more capricious with their prices than other goods. For July, the core inflation was 4.7%, a slight decrease from the 4.8% seen in June.

In addition, the Federal Reserve Board of Governors won't be meeting in August; their next meeting is scheduled for September 20, meaning another CPI report will have been released by the time they decide on a course of action.

The most recent economic report from the US Department of Commerce also gave strong prospects for the coming economic quarter, showing that the US economy has continued to increase at a respectable amount in 2023. However, many investors are continuing to brace for a recessionthat virtually all economists agree is likely in the next year, at least in part due to the high interest rates.

The other wild card is Moody's decision earlier this month to downgrade the US federal government's credit rating from AAA to AA+, the second time it has done so.

The international ratings agency specifically cited political instability around the debt ceiling and the willingness of US lawmakers to risk a default by making a debt ceiling increase conditional

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on certain policy demands. The decision will make it harder for the federal government to procure loans and could discourage foreign investment, among other effects.

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'Height of Hypocrisy': Report Details Extensive List of Gifts Given to Clarence Thomas

Gifts given to the US Supreme Court justice were from “friends” that include a real estate billionaire, a billionaire entrepreneur and an oil baron. All of the individuals became friends with the justice after he ascended to the Supreme Court.

A new report by the nonprofit organization ProPublica recently revealed US Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas’ extensive history and ties with the ultrawealthy, raising new questions over the figure's unreported luxury gifts.

The report states Thomas received numerous gifts during his three decades as a justice, including 38 destination vacations (including a yacht voyage around the Bahamas), 26 private jet flights, eight helicopter flights, a dozen VIP passes to costly sporting events, two stays at luxury resorts in Florida and Jamaica, and an open invitation to an “uber-exclusive golf club that overlooks the Atlantic coast.”

Thomas received such gifts since 1991, the report finds, and they total somewhere in the millions, though it is difficult to estimate, for example: a five-hour round trip flight on a 737 from Washington, DC, to South Florida, which Thomas received from one powerful friend, is estimated to cost $130,000.

Citing ethics experts, the report points out Thomas’ failure to disclose his luxurious gifts such as airfare, sports tickets, and yacht sailing appears to have violated the law, though staying in the homes of personal friends is an apparent nonissue, even if they are multimillion-dollar mansions.

“In my career I don’t remember ever seeing this degree of largesse given to anybody,” said Jeremy Fogel, a former federal judge who served for years on the judicial committee that reviews judges’ financial disclosures. “I think it’s unprecedented.”

Friends of Thomas who provided the gifts include Harlan Crow, a Texas real estate billionaire who gifted the justice vacations, private jet flights, a house for the Thomas’ mother, and private boarding school tuition for Thomas’ grandnephew. The friendship between Crow and Thomas has been reported on previously.

“[The Crows] are among our dearest friends,” Thomas said in defense of his actions in April. “As friends do, we have joined them on a number of family trips.”

A report in early July by a New York journal revealed the justice’s friendship with wealthy businessmen whom he met through the Horatio Alger Association, which claims to be “one of the nation's largest need-based privately-funded college scholarship providers.” The association is based in Alexandria, Virginia.

Those men include David Sokol, a former top executive at Berkshire Hathaway, and H. Wayne Huizenga, a billionaire businessman who founded AutoNation, Waste Management Inc., helped

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build Blockbuster, and was the owner or co-owner of several sports teams. Huizenga died in 2018.

It was through this association Thomas met these men, and it was Thomas who gave the association access to the Supreme Court in order to host events; in fact, the events required access of $1,500 or more in donations per person, even though the judiciary's code of conduct explicitly discourages federal judges from using their power to fundraise for "outside" organizations.

The report also identified Thomas' other influential friend as oil baron Paul "Tony" Novelly. According to former yacht employees which includes a captain, Thomas joined Novelly on his yacht in the Bahamas multiple times in recent years.

A chauffeur also confirmed his Bahamas-based company picked Thomas up from the billionaire's private jet and drove him to the marina, where one of Novelly's yachts—a 126-foot luxury vessel with a full bar, dining areas and accommodations for 10 guests—was docked.

The report further revealed Novelly's family donated at least $500,000 to conservative causes and Republican candidates in federal elections.

"It's just the height of hypocrisy to wear the robes and live the lifestyle of a billionaire," said Don Fox, a former general counsel of the US Office of Government Ethics and the senior ethics official in the executive branch.

Fox added he gives all political appointees - Democrats and Republicans, the same advice: Your wealthy friends are only those you met before you were appointed, and "you don't get to acquire any new ones."

Sokol has hosted Thomas and his wife, Virginia Thomas, nearly every summer for a decade, including gifting the couple (at least five times) tickets to college football games, which Thomas did not report on his yearly financial forms. Gifts worth more than $415 must be disclosed, according to judiciary disclosure rules.

Sokol also flew with Thomas by private jet to his Paintbrush Ranch outside of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, a ranch worth tens of millions. He has also hosted the couple at his $20.1 million mansion in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

"We have never once discussed any pending court matter," Sokol told the outlet of his relationship with Thomas. "Our conversations have always revolved around helping young people, sports, and family matters."

"As to the use of private aviation," he added. "I believe that given security concerns all of the Supreme Court justices should either fly privately or on governmental aircraft."

However, the businessman and his wife have donated more than $1 million to Republican politicians and groups since 1990, and have made some small contributions to Democratic groups as well. Last October, the report reveals, he made a reference to a pending Supreme Court case while making a speech to a group of former Horatio Alger scholarship recipients.

The speech was reportedly awkward, and some of those in attendance were "appalled" by what Sokol had said: he apparently minimized the devastating history of American slavery and systemic racism.

He also criticized US President Joe Biden's student loan forgiveness plan, adding it would "get overturned" by SCOTUS. A prediction which ultimately came true this most recent summer, with help from Thomas who voted in the majority against the plan.

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Rare Ancient Whale Discovered in Egypt, Named After King Tut for Its Age & Size

The ancient whale was small, measuring about 8 feet (2.5 meters) in length and weighing around 412 pounds (167 kilograms).
Scientists have discovered a rare species of whale from a 41-million-year-old fossil they unearthed in Egypt, one potentially considered the smallest to ever swim throughout our globe's oceans.
The fossil, since named Tutcetus rayanensis (the King Tut whale), is the smallest cetacean ever found, and belongs to the family Basilosauridae, an early group of whales that existed from the middle Eocene to the late Oligocene Epoch.
The fossil was initially found five years ago in the Fayum Depression—or Fayoum Oasis, one of several mega-deserts located in the Western Desert of Egypt.
Scientists chose to name the whale after the ancient Egyptian pharaoh Tutanhamun on account of its young age. Based on the small whale's fossils, which included its skull, jaw, teeth and fragments of the vertebrae, officials discovered the creature was just reaching adulthood when it had died, similar to King Tut, who was believed to be aged 18 or 19 when he died.
"We were lucky to have a complete set of T. rayanensis' lower teeth and discovered that it was almost-mature but still subadult," said Abdullah Gohar, a study co-author from the Mansoura University in Egypt. "Its teeth had very smooth enamel, which is an indication of very soft feeding mainly on fish, squids, octopus and other not-fast-moving prey."
"T. rayanensis lived fast and died fast," Gohar added. "This could also be an adaptation to climate change."
Researchers believe the whale's miniature size and short life cycle could have been its body's response to the Lutetian Thermal Maximum; a global warming event that happened about 42 million years ago. Animals tend to develop into smaller sizes in warmer climates, as food sources become scarce.
[Basilosaurids] developed fish-like characteristics, such as a streamlined body, a strong tail, flippers and a tail fin, and had the last hind limbs visible enough to be recognized as 'legs,' which were not used for walking but possibly for mating," Hesham Sallam, a team leader from the American University in Cairo (AUC), said in a statement.
Sallam added that the discovery was "remarkable" and "documents one of the first phases of the transition to a fully aquatic lifestyle".
The study's findings were published on Thursday in the journalCommunications Biology.

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Eyes to the Skies! 'Perfect' Conditions to View the Perseid Meteor Shower This Weekend

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The Perseid meteor shower typically peaks in mid-August and is considered “the best meteor shower of the year,” per NASA. With anywhere from 50 to 100 meteors seen every hour, the shooting stars leave behind long wakes of light and color as they pass through the atmosphere.
The Perseid meteor shower is coming to skies near you, and viewing conditions are forecasted to be superb by week's end, with some researchers reportedly saying this will be the one of the best years for viewing the 'shooting stars.'
This year, the Perseid meteor shower will be most active between July 17 and August 24; however, viewing will be best this weekend on August 13 at around 04:00 EDT (0800 GMT).
And those who are prepared to stay up late, or even all night, can begin watching meteors after evening twilight ends on the 12th, at which point the showers should be “radiant,” when the constellation Perseus (the shower’s perspective point of origin) has risen about the northeastern horizon, per one outlet.
Anyone living in the Northern Hemisphere should be able to view the brilliant show, and as long as they are viewed in dark areas, a person can expect to see one meteor per minute. No special tools, such as binoculars or telescopes are needed to witness the showers; in fact, they are best viewed by the naked eye.
"Conditions this year couldn't be more perfect," said Diana Hannikainen, an editor of an astronomy magazine. "The waning crescent moon, which is only 8% illuminated, rises in the wee hours of the morning on August 13th and won't interfere with viewing. The main thing that could hamper enjoyment of the spectacle would be clouds or light pollution."
"The prime time will be just before sunrise on August 12 or 13. If you're observing in the evening, start after 10 p.m. and look towards the east or northeast. Finding the Big Dipper can be a guide to spotting some Perseids,” adds Denis Vida, of Western University in Canada.
The “shooting stars” will occasionally appear as small, quick rays, while others may be brighter, and can stream the sky for several seconds, leaving behind a brief, glowing trail.
Some meteors from the Delta Aquariid and Kappa Cygnid may appear as well, but it is possible to differentiate these meteors from Perseids by looking at their tracks: if the meteor's trail does not lead to the Perseus constellation, then it is an interloper.
The meteors are simply pieces of debris, no bigger than a pea, which hit the atmosphere at an incredible rate of roughly 37 miles per second, and glow as they burn. Their origin is the Comet Swift-Tuttle, which shed a trail of debris that our Earth passes through every summer.

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Five UN Staff Abducted in Yemen Last Year Released - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, Aug 11 (Sputnik) - Five members of UN staff have been released in Yemen after being held for 18 months, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Friday.
The five UN employees were abducted in southern Yemen in February 2022.
"The Secretary-General is delighted to learn of the release of Akm Sufiul Anam, Mazen Bawazir, Bakeel Al-Mahdi, Mohammed Al-Mulaiki and Khaled Mokhtar Sheikh, the five UNDSS

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[UN Department for Safety and Security] personnel who had been kidnapped in Yemen on 11 February 2022. Available information suggests that all five colleagues are in good health," Haq said in a statement.

Guterres is relieved that their suffering has come to an end, Haq added.

The conflict between Yemen's government forces and the Houthi rebels has been ongoing since 2014. The situation worsened in 2015 after a Saudi-led coalition joined the conflict on the side of the Yemeni government and began conducting air, land and sea operations against the Islamist rebel movement. During the conflict, separatist movements have gained strength in the southern part of the country, advocating for the secession of Yemen's southern provinces to form an independent state.

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Biden Lawyers, Special Counsel in Negotiations Over Classified Documents Probe - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - Negotiations between US President Joe Biden's legal team and Special Counsel Robert Hur who is investigating the president's handling of classified documents have been going on for a month, NBC reported on Friday, citing two unnamed sources.

The negotiations are regarding the terms of an interview with Biden and focused on basic interview logistics and the scope of the questions. Biden's legal team wants to know in advance whether questions would exceed the scope of Biden's former vice presidency, one source said.

Hur was appointed in January to lead the probe into various sets of classified documents found between November 2022 and January 2023 in an office Biden used after his vice presidency and at Biden's Delaware home. The president's lawyers have said that most of the documents were related to Biden's vice presidency and some to his tenure as a senator.

The White House and spokespeople for Biden's attorney Bob Bauer and Hur all declined to comment on the negotiations.

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Death Toll From Wildfires in Hawaii Rises to 55 – Maui County

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - The death toll from wildfires fueled by Hurricane Dora in Hawaii, primarily on the island of Maui, has risen to 55, island authorities said on Friday.

"Lahaina, Pulehu and Upcountry Fires Combined Update No. 17 at 9:15 p.m. [11:15 GMT]: As firefighting efforts continue, 2 additional fatalities have been confirmed today amid the active Lahaina fire. This brings the death toll to 55 people," Maui County authorities said in a press release.

The number of fatalities has continued to grow since Wednesday, when it was first announced

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that at least 36 people died amid the record fires.
The death toll will likely increase dramatically as local officials reportedly say that as many as 1,000 people remain unaccounted for, though Maui Police Chief John Pelletier said late Thursday that officials cannot confirm the exact number of people missing.
Strong winds from Hurricane Dora spread the devastating fires on the island of Maui. It is now the deadliest US wildfire since 2018.

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Death Toll Rises to 53 in Active Hawaii Fires - Maui County

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - At least 53 people have died as a result of ongoing wildfires in Hawaii, Maui County said in a press release.
"Lahaina, Pulehu and Upcountry Maui Fires Combined Update No. 15 at 1:10 p.m. (HST): As firefighting efforts continue, 17 additional fatalities have been confirmed today amid the active Lahaina fire. This brings the death toll to 53 people," the release said on Thursday. "The status of all three fires remains unchanged from the last update at 10:30 a.m. this morning."
Strong winds from Hurricane Dora spread devastating fires on the island of Maui. It is now the deadliest US wildfire since 2018.

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Boeing Receives $94Mln Contract to Modernize Two 777 Aircraft for India - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - Boeing has been awarded a more than $94 million US Air Force contract to modernize two Boeing 777 aircraft for India, the Defense Department announced.
"The Boeing Company [of] Oklahoma City, Oklahoma was awarded a $94,099,251 ...contract for integration and installation of modernization on two Boeing 777 aircraft," the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.
The contract provides for aircraft modernization technology, the release said.
"Work will be performed at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and Ardmore, Arkansas and is expected to be completed by November 9, 2027," the release added.
The contract involves Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to India and will be overseen by the Air Force Life Cycle Management Center at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in the US state of , Ohio, according to the release.

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

Hawaii Gov. Says Amount of People Killed in Fires Expected to Rise 'Significantly'-Reports

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - Hawaii Governor Josh Green says that the death toll resulting from the wildfires currently devastating the state's Maui Island and Big Island is expected to rise significantly, CNN reported on Thursday.

"I'll tell you, by the time this disaster is all described, I'm sure there will be dozens of people that lost their lives and billions of dollars of property that was destroyed," Green told CNN.

Green added that he expects the numbers to rise well into the forties by the end of Thursday and that most of the buildings in the affected areas are completely gone.

Strong winds from Hurricane Dora have spread devastating fires on the island of Maui.

The official death toll currently stands at 36 making this the deadliest US wildfire since 2018.

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Trump Says Special Counsel Smith 'Lunatic' For Trial Date Request

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said in a statement that Special Counsel Jack Smith is a lunatic for requesting a trial against Trump start on January 2 for charges linked to his alleged role in efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 US presidential election.

"Deranged Jack Smith has just asked for a trial on the Biden Indictment to take place on January 2nd... Only an out of touch lunatic would ask for such a date, ONE DAY into the new year, and maximum Election Interference with IOWA!" Trump said on Thursday.

Earlier on Thursday, Smith requested to hold a trial against Trump starting on January 2, 2024.

Trump said the trial "should never take place" due to his First Amendment rights under the US Constitution. The trial should happen, if at all, after the election, he added.

Trump has repeatedly condemned criminal proceedings against him weaponization of the US justice system ahead of the 2024 US presidential election, in which he is vying for the Republican Party nomination.

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US Congressman Questions New Aid to Ukraine Amid Lack of Accurate Accounting - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Matt Rosendale in a statement questioned the Biden administration's request for billions of dollars in new assistance for Ukraine amid a lack of accurate accounting for funds already provided to Kiev.

"We still don't have an accurate accounting of the $113 billion we have already sent to Ukraine.

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With the disaster that is taking place on our southern border, why are we even considering this?" Rosendale said on Thursday, in response to the funding request.

Earlier on Thursday, the White House Office of Management and Budget released a supplemental funding request to Congress for $40 billion, including $24 billion in additional assistance for Ukraine. The request also includes funding for disaster relief and World Bank programs.

A CNN poll published last week found that a majority of Americans, 55%, oppose Congress authorizing additional funding to support Ukraine in its conflict with Russia.

White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby, when asked about the poll and funding request, said the American people "understand" the stakes of supporting Ukraine.

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US Told Niger Rebels They Will Be Held Accountable for What Happens to Bazoum - Blinken

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has made it clear to the rebel military leaders in Niger that they will be held accountable if anything happens to ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said at a presser.

Blinken's remarks came after the rebels in Niger told US Acting Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland that they would kill deposed Bazoum if Niger's neighbors intervene in the country.

"We've also made clear to the military leaders that we will hold them responsible [for Bazoum]," Blinken said on Thursday.

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Biden Should Avoid Spending More on Ukraine Aid, Seek to Improve US Security - Lawmaker

(Updates with details in paras 3,4; background in para 5)

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden should focus on supporting efforts to improve security within the United States rather than on spending more funding on a proxy war in Ukraine, US Congressman Paul Gosar said in a statement to Sputnik on Thursday.

"Rather than spending a single penny more fighting a proxy war in Ukraine and killing more people, a more worthwhile effort would be if Biden would put America first by allocating resources in our country to secure the southern border, which is being invaded by seven million lawbreakers, funding law enforcement efforts to combat the violent crime and drugs destroying cities across America, or aiding our homeless population, including countless veterans, who are sleeping on sidewalks," Gosar said.

In a press release, Gosar further said the United States has no national security interest in Ukraine and no business funding an expensive proxy war there, "other than the millions of

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dollars in bribes paid by Ukraine to the Bidens."

"I have consistently opposed any taxpayer dollars to Ukraine and this time is no different: Congress should not authorize any more funding in Ukraine. We need peace, not more war," Gosar said in the release.

A recent CNN poll found that 55% of Americans believe US Congress should not authorize additional funding to support Ukraine.

Earlier on Thursday, the White House Office of Management and Budget revealed that Biden is asking Congress for some $24 billion in additional assistance for Ukraine, including $13.1 billion in further military assistance for next year.

The topline for Biden's supplemental funding request is $40 billion, according to the White House. Biden's proposal only seeks $2.65 billion for border management operations.

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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Blinken Says Release of Americans From Iran's Prison 'Positive Step'

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the release of American citizens from prison in Iran is a positive step and expressed the hope it will lead to their return home.

"It is a positive step that they were released from prison and sent to home detention. But this is just the beginning of the process that I hope and expect will lead to their return home to the US," Blinken told reporters on Thursday.

He also said Iran will not be receiving any sanctions relief.

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Blinken says Release of Americans from prison in Iran is a positive step, hopes it will lead to their return home

State Dept. Says Welcomes Release of US Citizens from Prison in Iran to House Arrest

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller in a statement to Sputnik said the United States welcomes the release of five Americans from an Iranian prison to house arrest, but continues to call on authorities to allow them to depart the country.

"While we welcome the news of these individuals' release from prison to house arrest, they should never have been imprisoned in the first place," Miller said on Thursday. "We continue to work diligently to bring these individuals home to their loved ones. They must be allowed to

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depart Iran and reunite with their loved ones as soon as possible."

Miller identified several of the detained Americans - Siamak Namazi, Morad Tahbaz, Emad Sharghi, and two individuals who at this time wish to remain private.

The State Department will remain touch with the families of US citizens involved in this matter, and will also continue to monitor their health and welfare closely, according to Miller.

The Iranian mission to the United Nations told Sputnik that the United States and Iran agreed to reciprocally release and pardon five prisoners in negotiations mediated by a third party government.

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US Senator Says Reported $6Bln Prisoner Swap With Iran 'Act of Appeasement' by Biden

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - A reported deal by President Joe Biden to unfreeze approximately $6 billion in Iran funds as part of a prisoner swap agreement is an act of appeasement to Tehran, US Senator Tom Cotton said in a statement.

On Thursday, US media reported that the Biden administration plans on releasing $6 billion in frozen oil revenues as part of a deal to free imprisoned US citizens. The White House National Security Council confirmed the release of five detainees, but did not provide information on the frozen funds.

"While we always welcome the release of American hostages – if they are in fact released after President Biden pays Iran $6 billion in ransom – this craven act of appeasement will only embolden the ayatollahs to take more hostages and use these ill-gotten gains to attack our troops, fund terrorism, and arm Russia," Cotton said in a statement.

The aforementioned cycle will continue until Biden stops "dancing to Iran's tune" and responds decisively to their actions, the statement added.

The United States and Iran agreed to reciprocally release and pardon five prisoners as part of a humanitarian cooperation agreement mediated by a third-party government, the Iranian Mission to the United Nations told Sputnik.

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Iran Mission to UN Tells Sputnik Agreed With US to Reciprocally Release,Pardon 5 Prisoners

UNITED NATIONS, August 11 (Sputnik) - US and Iran have agreed to reciprocally release and pardon five prisoners in negotiations mediated by a third party government, the Iranian mission to the United Nations told Sputnik.

"As part of a humanitarian cooperation agreement mediated by a third-party government, Iran and the United States have agreed to reciprocally release and pardon five prisoners. The transfer of these prisoners to out of prison marks a significant initial step in the implementation

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of this agreement," the Iranian mission said on Thursday.

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US Weather Officials Expect Above Average Atlantic Hurricane Season - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik) - The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) said on Thursday that it expects above-average levels of hurricane activity in the Atlantic Ocean for the 2023 hurricane season due to water and air temperature conditions.

"Scientists at NOAA's Climate Prediction Center – a division of the National Weather Service – have increased their prediction for the ongoing 2023 Atlantic hurricane season from a near-normal level of activity to an above-normal level of activity with today's update," NOAA said in a statement.

The increased hurricane activity is expected due to record-warm Atlantic sea surface temperatures and atmospheric conditions associated with the ongoing El Nino event, the statement said.

Forecasters raised the likelihood of an above-normal Atlantic hurricane season to 60%, up from 30% in May, the statement said. Forecasters predict 14-21 named storms, including between six and 11 hurricanes, of which between two and five could become major hurricanes, the statement said.

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PREVIEW- Trump Protective Order Hearing to Take Place on Friday, Ex-President Will Not Attend

WASHINGTON, August 11 (Sputnik)- The hearing on the Parties' Respective Protective Order Proposals called for to keep evidence from the public in the criminal case involving Donald Trump's alleged role in efforts to overturn the 2020 US presidential election will take place on Friday in front of US District Judge Tanya Chutkan.

Judge Chutkan has waived Trump's appearance at the hearing at 10:00 a.m. in Washington.

The hearing is scheduled on the prosecutor Jack Smith's request for a protective order in the criminal election against the former president.

Earlier, Trump's lawyers asked to push the hearing into early next week, citing a busy schedule and a hearing in Florida scheduled for the day before.

Trump is also facing a federal criminal case put forward by Smith in Florida for retaining classified documents after leaving the White House and obstructing the government's efforts to have the records returned.

The government is requesting the court restrict all of their produced documents without regard

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for their relative sensitivity. Trump's attorneys are instead proposing to shield only sensitive materials from public view.

The request was filed in the US District Court for the District of Columbia, where Trump faces criminal charges including conspiracy against rights and conspiracy to defraud the United States for his alleged role in attempting to overturn the 2020 election results through the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, and related activities.

Trump, who also faces criminal charges linked to other cases, has characterized the indictment as being part of the weaponization of the US justice system against him to prevent him from running in the 2024 presidential election.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, Aug 11 (Sputnik) -

BIDEN FUNDING REQUEST

* US President Joe Biden on Thursday sent a letter to Congress asking for an additional $40 billion in funding of which $24 billion for Ukraine, including $9.5 billion for military equipment and $3.6 billion for other security support to that country.
* Biden is also asking lawmakers to approve $200 million to counter the activities of the Russian private military company Wagner Group in Africa.
* Biden is asking for $2.65 billion to assist with US border management operations, including to shelter and support migrants released from Department of Homeland Security custody.
* Biden is requesting $12 billion from Congress for disaster relief efforts in the United States, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) said.

US-IRAN PRISONER SWAP

* Iran has released five US citizens from prison and placed them under house arrest, but talks on their eventual release continue, White House National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said on Thursday.
* The United States has agreed to release approximately $6 billion in frozen Iranian oil revenue as part of a prisoner swap deal with Tehran, US media reported.
* Iran has released four US citizens, who had been previously declared wrongfully detained by Washington, and put them under house arrest, according to media reports.

OPEC REPORT

* OPEC keeps its forecast for the global oil demand growth in 2023 unchanged but expects the demand to increase by 2.4 million barrels per day to 102 million barrels per day, according to its fresh report published on Thursday.
* OPEC has upgraded its forecast for Russia's oil and condensate production in 2023 by 100,000 barrels per day to 10.38 million barrel per day, according to the organization's fresh

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report.
* OPEC has slightly upgraded its forecast for oil production for 2023 outside the organization and expects an increase by 1.5 million barrels per day to 67.3 million barrels per day, according to its new monthly report.
* The oil production in Russia in June decreased by 100,000 barrels per day month-on-month to 9.5 million barrels per day, according to a fresh report by OPEC.

NIGER DEVELOPMENTS
* Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder confirmed on Thursday that several members of Niger's military junta previously received training from the United States.
* Nigeria's president and the chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Bola Ahmed Tinubu said that nothing is ruled out when it comes to the situation in Niger, including the use of force as a last resort.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* The United States has received every indication that Ukrainian forces are properly utilizing the US-supplied dual-purpose improved conventional munitions (DPICMs or cluster munitions), Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Thursday.
* The United States received a report from Kiev on its use of US-supplied cluster munitions against Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, but will not disclose its details, a US official told Sputnik.
* Ukraine has suffered more than 290 soldiers killed and injured in the Donetsk area over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

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Kirby Says Americans Understand Biden's Request for $24Bln More For Ukraine, Despite Polls

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - US National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday that the American people understand why President Joe Biden requested billions more in aid for Ukraine, despite recent polls showing declining support for US assistance for Kiev.
The Biden administration earlier on Thursday asked Congress for $24 billion in additional funds for Ukraine, including $13.1 billion in military assistance and $7.3 billion in economic and humanitarian aid.
"The polls notwithstanding, I think the American people understand what is at stake here," Kirby said, when asked about a recent CNN survey that showed most Americans oppose additional funding for Ukraine.
The CNN poll, published last week, showed that 55% of Americans oppose Congress authorizing additional funding to support Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, while 45% disagree.
The US has committed more than $75 billion in various types of assistance to Ukraine since February 2022. Most of that aid, or nearly $50 billion, has been spent on weapons and related

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military equipment.

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Biden Should Avoid Spending More on Ukraine Aid, Seek to Improve US Security - Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden should focus on supporting efforts to improve security within the United States rather than on spending more funding on a proxy war in Ukraine, US Congressman Paul Gosar said in a statement to Sputnik on Thursday.

"Rather than spending a single penny more fighting a proxy war in Ukraine and killing more people, a more worthwhile effort would be if Biden would put America first by allocating resources in our country to secure the southern border, which is being invaded by seven million lawbreakers, funding law enforcement efforts to combat the violent crime and drugs destroying cities across America, or aiding our homeless population, including countless veterans, who are sleeping on sidewalks," Gosar said.

Earlier on Thursday, the White House Office of Management and Budget revealed that Biden is asking Congress for some $24 billion in additional assistance for Ukraine, including $13.1 billion in further military assistance for next year.

The topline for Biden's supplemental funding request is $40 billion, according to the White House. Biden's proposal only seeks $2.65 billion for border management operations.

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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Trump Appeals Dismissal of His Defamation Counterclaim Against E. Jean Carroll – Filing

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump appealed the dismissal of his counterclaim in the defamation lawsuit involving E. Jean Carroll, according to a court filing published on Thursday.

"Notice is hereby given that the Defendant, Donald J. Trump, appeals to the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit from the Memorandum Opinion Granting Plaintiff's Motion to Dismiss Defendant's Counterclaim and Certain Purported Defenses…," the document said.

On Monday, a US judge dismissed former President Donald Trump's counterclaim alleging E. Jean Carroll defamed him by continuing to accuse him of raping her in public statements following a verdict from a jury.

In 2019, Carroll accused Trump of trying to rape her in either 1995 or 1996 in a dressing room in New York City. Trump rejected the allegations as false and said he never met Carroll. Later in

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the year, the author filed another lawsuit against Trump, accusing him of damaging her reputation and career after he called her a liar.

In May, a jury found it more likely than not that Trump is liable for battery based on Carroll's accusations of sexual abuse and ordered him to pay $2 million in damages. The jury also found Trump liable for defamation, ordering him to pay $3 million in damages for publicly rejecting the accusations. At the same time, the jury ruled that Carroll was not raped but was rather "sexually abused."

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Sullivan Reaffirms US May Give Venezuela Sanctions Relief for Fair Elections - White House

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in a meeting with Mexican Foreign Secretary Alicia Barcena reaffirmed the United States' willingness to alleviate sanctions on Venezuela if the Maduro government takes concrete steps toward free and fair elections, the White House said on Thursday.

"National Security Advisor Sullivan and Secretary of Foreign Affairs Barcena discussed the situation in Venezuela, and National Security Advisor Sullivan reaffirmed US willingness to alleviate sanctions in response to concrete steps toward free and fair elections," the White House said in a press release.

According to media reports, US and Venezuelan officials have had at least two secret meetings in the last several months, however, details of those discussions have not been disclosed.

Sullivan and Barcena also committed to continue addressing the root causes of migration in the region and to increase enforcement along the US-Mexico border, the release said.

The two officials pledged to accelerate cooperation to prevent arms trafficking and reduce the flow of illicit synthetic drugs along the US southern border, the release added.

The two sides also discussed the situation in Haiti, including Kenya’s consideration of leading a multinational force to Haiti in response to the Haitian government’s request for security assistance.

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US Has Given Ukraine Over 2Mln 155mm Artillery Shells Since Start of Conflict - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has supplied Ukraine with more than 2 million 155mm artillery shells since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, Defense Department spokesperson Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder said on Thursday.

"So in terms of 155 [mm shells], we provided to date over 2 million 155 millimeter ammo rounds to Ukraine since the start of the fight," Ryder said during a press briefing.

The US military has been able to rapidly increase 155mm ammo production from 14,000 shells

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a month in February 2022 to approximately 24,000 shells a month currently, Ryder said.
The United States plans to be able to produce over 80,000 155mm artillery shells a month over the following year, according to Ryder.
The spokesperson pointed out that while these stockpiles are not unlimited, the United Sates is comfortable where it's at right now with its artillery stockpiles.
The United States also believes it will be able to continue to work closely with allies and partners around the world on this matter, Ryder said.

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Biden Asks Congress for Total of $40Bln in Supplemental Funding - White House

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is requesting Congress to approve a total of $40 billion in supplemental funding for next year, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) revealed on Thursday.
The White House funding request includes a proposal of $24 billion in additional assistance for Ukraine, including $13.1 billion in military aid, according to the document.
Biden is also asking for $2.65 billion for border management operations, among other requests.

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Biden Admin Seeks $3.3Bln From Congress to Expand World Bank Development – White House

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration seeks $3.3. billion in additional funding from Congress to expand the development and infrastructure programs of the World Bank and via bilateral tools to the countries affected by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, US President Joe Biden said in a letter to Congress on Thursday.
"The Administration is requesting $3.3 billion to materially expand development and infrastructure finance provided by the World Bank and through bilateral tools to the countries hard hit by the spillovers of Russia's war and provide an alternative to coercive PRC financing," the letter said.
The Biden administration expects that the $3.3 billion will yield more than $27 billion in US-backed financing and grants for developing countries, the document said.

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White House Says Requesting $12Bln From Congress for US Disaster Relief

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is requesting $12 billion from Congress for disaster relief efforts in the United States, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) said on Thursday.

"We are requesting $12 billion for the Disaster Relief Fund to ensure that the Federal Emergency Management Agency can continue to support critical activities in communities that have dealt with or are currently dealing with disasters, while also maintaining sufficient preparedness to respond to future catastrophic events," OMB said in a statement.

The disaster relief funding comes as part of a larger $40 billion supplemental funding request to Congress, which also includes approximately $24 billion for Ukraine and other international efforts.

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Biden Admin. Asks Congress for $2.65 Billion for Border Management Operations - Letter

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - In a letter to Congress, US President Joe Biden is asking for $2.65 billion to assist with border management operations, including the shelter and support of migrants released from Department of Homeland Security custody.

"$2.2 billion for border management, operations, shelter and services for migrants released from DHS custody, and DOD support; $416 million for counter-fentanyl activities like non-intrusive inspection system deployment," the document said.

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Mexico Sets Up Digital System to Track Fentanyl Precursors - Foreign Secretary

WASHINGTON, Aug 10 (Sputnik) - Mexico is setting up a sophisticated digital system to track fentanyl precursor chemicals and establish controls in ports of entry, Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs Alicia Barcena said on Thursday.

"We are pulling together a digital tracking system, very sophisticated and very interesting. The most important controls we are setting up are in the coastal areas, in the ports of entry," Barcena said during a conversation at the Atlantic Council.

Barcena pointed out that the Mexican government is making these efforts both in the coastal areas and on the border. She also noted that it is very difficult to trace precursor chemicals because they are coming not in large containers but sometimes in very "small packages."

She mentioned that precursors are going not only from Mexico to the US but in the opposite direction. In this regard, she emphasized the importance of cooperation between the two countries, as well as Canada to deal with the issue.

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In late July, the US and Mexico adopted a joint declaration to combat the flow of fentanyl and illegal arms sales. The White House also announced the release of a comprehensive government-wide response to combat the emerging threat of fentanyl and xylazine to the United States.

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Biden Seeks $200Mln From Congress to Counter Wagner Activities in Africa

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in a letter to Congress on Thursday is asking lawmakers to approve $200 million to counter activities by Russian private military company Wagner Group in Africa.
"$200 million to strengthen African countries' resistance to Vagner [Wagner]," the document said.

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Biden Asks Congress for $13Bln in Additional Military Aid For Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in a letter to Congress is asking for an additional $13 billion in supplemental funding to continue military assistance to Ukraine next year.
"$9.5 billion for equipment for Ukraine and replenishment of DOD stocks; and $3.6 billion for continued military, intelligence, and other defense support," the document said.
Biden is also asking for $7.3 billion for economic, humanitarian, and security assistance to Ukraine.

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Pentagon Says Launched AI Task Force to Study Responsible Use of Tech

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department launched a task force to study the responsible application of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, the Pentagon said on Thursday.
“Today, the Department of Defense announced the establishment of a generative artificial intelligence task force, an initiative that reflects the DoD's commitment to harnessing the power of artificial intelligence in a responsible and strategic manner,” the Pentagon said in a statement.
The group, dubbed Task Force Lima, will help analyze and integrate generative AI tools across

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the Defense Department, the statement said.
Task Force Lima will be led by the Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Office (CDAO), the statement added.
The United States must consider the extent to which adversaries will use AI technology and seek to disrupt the US's use of AI, CDAO head Craig Martell said in the statement.
CDAO, which first became operational in June 2022, is tasked with accelerating the Pentagon's adoption of data, analytics and AI, according to the statement.

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Biden Says Proposes Tripling Number of Rental Aid Vouchers for Veterans to Over 100k

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday he is going to ask Congress to join his initiative and triple the number of rental assistance vouchers for extremely low-income veterans to more than 100,000.
"Last year, the VA [the US Department of Veterans Affairs] found permanent housing for over 40,000 veterans and set a goal of permanent housing lease for another 38,000 this year. I'm proposing that Congress join in and triple the number of rental assistance vouchers for extremely low-income veterans now," Biden said during his remarks on the one-year anniversary of the PACT Act.
In March, the department announced its 2023 goal, including placing at least 38,00 homeless veterans into permanent housing and ensuring that at least 95% of the veterans housed in 2023 do not return to homelessness during the year.
In January 2022, Veterans Affairs reported that a total of 33,129 veterans were experiencing homelessness, a decrease of about 11% from January 2020.

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Pentagon Confirms Several Members of Niger Junta Received US Training

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - Pentagon Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder confirmed on Thursday that several members of Niger's military junta previously received training from the United States.
"We do know that several Nigerien military personnel associated with the events there have received US training in the past," Ryder said during a press briefing. "There is no correlation between the training that they received and their activities."
Earlier in the day, The Intercept reported that at least five members of Niger's military junta received US training.

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Pentagon Says US Received 'All Indications' Ukraine Using Cluster Munitions Properly

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has received every indication that Ukrainian forces are properly utilizing the US-supplied dual-purpose improved conventional munitions (DPICMs or cluster munitions), Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"On the DPICMs: this right now has provided the Ukrainians with the capability to continue to take the fight to the enemy. We have all indications that they're employing those weapons properly on the battlefield, as they indicated they would," Ryder said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Thursday, a US official confirmed to Sputnik that the United States has received a report from Ukraine on the use of its US-supplied cluster munitions against Russian forces, although details of the report were not disclosed.

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Freeland Says Canada Going Through Intergenerational Housing Crisis

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - Canada's Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland said on Thursday that the country is going through an intergenerational housing crisis, which poses a huge challenge to the youth.

In her remarks, the minister addressed a question on what solutions she would bring forward to noticeably reduce housing costs and make them more affordable as some worry the First Home Savings Account (FHSA) launched in April is only going to drive up current prices.

On April 1, the Canadian government collaboratively with several banks launched the FHSA, to help future homebuyers to save and make an interest-free down payment on their first home.

"What they [young people] really were saying is this is a crisis, and this is an intergenerational crisis. And I really recognize that, and that's why I really believe that it's important for us at the federal level, the provincial level, the municipal level, to put forward all the tools we can to resolve this crisis, and in particular, to help the people who are being affected by it the most. And very, very often, this is a challenge that confronts young people particularly," Freeland said during a press conference from Toronto.

Freeland said that the Canadian government rolled out the FHSA to help young people in buying a home, as the group is in particular need of support regarding this issue.

The deputy prime minister further added that she understands that to solve the housing crisis Canada needs to build more houses throughout the country.

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US Government Proposes January 2 Trial Date for Trump 2020 Election Probe - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - US government prosecutors are prepared to begin a trial against former President Donald Trump on charges related to his alleged efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election as soon as January 2 next year, Special Counsel Jack Smith said in a court document filed on Thursday.

"The government proposes that trial begin on January 2, 2024, and estimates that its case in chief will take no longer than four to six weeks," the filing said.

The proposed trial date would provide Trump time to prepare his legal defense and give parties time to litigate pre-trial issues, the filing said.

The trial date would also vindicate a strong public interest in a speedy trial, the filing added.

Earlier this month, a grand jury indicted Trump on four criminal charges linked to his alleged role in efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 US presidential election. Trump has criticized the case as a weaponization of the US justice system ahead of the 2024 election, in which he is seeking the Republican Party nomination.

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US Intel Strategy Names China as Only Competitor, Russia 'Immediate, Ongoing Threat'

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - The United States views China as the only competitor capable of reshaping the international order, while Russia represents an "immediate and ongoing" threat in Europe, according to the 2023 National Intelligence Strategy (NIS) released on Thursday.

"The PRC is the only U.S. competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so," the strategy said.

Russia poses "an immediate and ongoing threat" to the regional security order in Europe and Eurasia and is a "source of disruption and instability globally," the document said. However, Moscow "lacks the across-the-spectrum" capabilities of the PRC, it stated.

The strategy called on the US intelligence community (IC) to "deepen and expand" its expertise, invest in developing innovative methods and cultivating new sources. It also suggested improving cooperation with foreign allies and partners, as well as with public and private sectors, on understanding and addressing technological and other risks.

"The IC will improve its ability to provide timely and accurate insights into competitor intentions, capabilities, and actions by strengthening capabilities in language, technical, and cultural expertise and harnessing open source, 'big data,' artificial intelligence, and advanced analytics. The IC also must enhance its ability to understand how countries in every region of the world perceive, are implicated by, and seek to navigate this new landscape, and assess their opportunities to enhance strategic relationships with the United States," the strategy said.

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The strategy established six major goals for the IC, including recruiting and developing a talented workforce, positioning itself for intensifying strategic competition, diversifying and strengthening partnerships.

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US National Security Council Says Iran Released 5 Imprisoned Americans, Talks Continue

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - Iran has released five detained US citizens from prison and placed them under house arrest, but talks on their eventual release continue, White House National Security Council Spokesperson Adrienne Watson said on Thursday.

"We have received confirmation that Iran has released from prison five Americans who were unjustly detained and has placed them on house arrest," Watson said in a statement.

Negotiations for the five Americans' release remain ongoing and "delicate," the statement added.

Earlier on Thursday, US media reported that the Biden administration will unfreeze approximately $6 billion in Iranian oil revenue as part of the deal.

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Biden Declares Major Disaster in Hawaii to Provide More Federal Aid to Combat Wildfires

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden officially declared a major disaster in Hawaii which makes available additional federal resources to help combat ongoing wildfires on the islands, the White House said on Thursday.

The number of people killed as a result of wildfires in Hawaii to date has increased to 36, with many settlements, including the popular tourist town of Lahaina, left destroyed, according to media reports. Wildfires, fueled by winds from Hurricane Dora, have caused 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 Hawaii, or the Big Island, according to county officials.

"Today, President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. declared that a major disaster exists in the State of Hawaii and ordered Federal aid to supplement state and local recovery efforts in the areas affected by wildfires beginning on August 8, 2023, and continuing," the White House said in a press release. "The President's action makes Federal funding available to affected individuals in Maui County."

On Wednesday, Biden said he ordered that all federal resources in Hawaii, including military assets, be made available to help with response efforts to the wildfires. Thursday's declaration expands the federal resources made available to Hawaii.

According to the White House, the additional federal assistance made available through this declaration includes grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover

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uninsured property losses, and other programs to help individuals and business owners recover from the effects of the wildfires.

The White House said in a separate press release that Biden spoke by phone with Hawaii Governor Josh Green about the wildfires in Maui and confirmed he signed a Major Disaster Declaration for Hawaii that will deliver additional federal support on top of other federals actions already underway.

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Niger Rebels Told Nuland They Would Liquidate Bazoum if Neighbors Intervene - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - The Nigerien rebels have told US Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland that they would kill deposed President Mohamed Bazoum if Niger's neighbors intervene in the country, the Washington Post reported on Thursday.

The rebels told Nuland that they would do so if Niger's neighbors decide to intervene to restore Bazoum's rule in the country after he was removed from power in military coup on July 26, the report said.

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UN Concerned About Impact Sanctions Can Have on Situation in Niger - UN Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, August 10 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is concerned about the impact sanctions could have on the situation in Niger, UN Spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Thursday.

"We have mentioned our concerns in general about sanctions regarding this particular case. Our basic concern is with the effort to overthrow the elected government we want the restoration of the government as soon as possible," Haq told a briefing.

On July 30, in response to a coup in Niger a few days prior, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) suspended all financial aid, froze rebels' assets, and imposed a ban on commercial flights to and from the country, as well as closed all borders. Nigeria, Niger's southern neighbor, cut the electricity supply to the nation.

Earlier today, the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that he is "very concerned" about the living conditions and safety of detained Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum and his family and once again called for his immediate and unconditional release.

A coup took place in Niger on July 26 during which incumbent President Mohamed Bazoum was ousted and detained by his own guard, led by Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani. The caretaker National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland closed the country's borders and broke security agreements with France, its former colonizer.

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US Received Ukraine's Report on Use of Cluster Bombs, Not Disclosing Details - Official

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - The United States received a report from Kiev on its use of US-supplied cluster munitions against Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, but will not disclose its details, a US official confirmed to Sputnik on Thursday.

"The US has received a report from Ukraine on their use of DPICMs [dual-purpose improved conventional munitions], but I am not able to disclose the contents of this report due to operational security considerations. I refer you to Ukraine to speak about their operations," the US official said.

On July 7, the Biden administration unveiled a new military aid package for Ukraine that included cluster munitions. The move was widely criticized by human rights activists and opposed by some US lawmakers. The report was requested by the Pentagon as part of the deal on the supply of this type of ammunition, according to media reports.

Cluster munitions are banned by the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM), which has been ratified by 123 countries. The United States, Ukraine, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Israel, and South Korea have not signed the convention.

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US Reaches Prisoner Swap Deal With Iran, Will Release $6Bln in Frozen Revenue - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has agreed to release approximately $6 billion in frozen Iranian oil revenue as part of a prisoner swap deal with Tehran, the New York Times reported on Thursday.

The United States will unfreeze the funds in exchange for the release of five US-Iran dual citizens, the report said, citing several people familiar with the deal. The released include three individuals suspected of espionage, a scientist and a businessman, the report said.

The Biden administration will also release several Iranian nationals held in the US on sanctions violations charges once the US detainees are returned home, the report said.

The agreement was reached after more than two years of negotiations, the report added.

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Iran Releases 4 US Citizens From Prison, Puts Them Under House Arrest - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - Iran has released four US citizens, who had been previously declared wrongfully detained by Washington, and put them under house arrest, CNN

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reported on Thursday.
Three of the released Americans have been identified as Siamak Namazi, Emad Sharghi, Morad Tahbaz but the name of the fourth remains unknown, the report said.
The Americans were transferred from Tehran's Evin prison to a hotel and will be under guard by Iranian officials, the report also said.

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Virgin Galactic Successfully Launches First Space Tourism Mission on Thursday

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - Virgin Galactic on Thursday morning launched its first crew of three tourists to the edge of space, according to a company broadcaster.
The winged spacecraft took off carried by a larger aircraft from Spaceport America in the southern part of the US state of New Mexico and launched into space at 11:17 a.m. ET.
The spacecraft carried the Virgin Galactic's first three private space tourists, including former British Olympian Jon Goodwin, Keisha Schahaff and her 18-year-old daughter Anastatia Mayers, who are both from the Caribbean.
The launch is Virgin Galactic's seventh since 2018.

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US Lawmakers Ask Biden Admin. to Halt $320Mln in Military Aid to Egypt – Letter

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) – Eleven House Democrats have asked US Secretary of State Antony Blinken not to transfer $320 in military aid to Egypt until the human rights situation in the country significantly improves, according to a letter published on Thursday.
"We write to express our concerns over the State Department providing the $320 million conditioned on human rights in Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to Egypt," the letter said. "We call on you to withhold the full $320 million of FY22 FMF until Egypt's human rights record significantly improves."
According to the lawmakers, Egypt has not taken "sustained and effective steps" required by US law to be eligible to receive $320 million.
More specifically, the letter cites the 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices, where Egypt is listed as a country with significant human rights violations, including alleged disappearance of people, and severe restrictions on freedoms of expression and assembly.
The lawmakers also pointed out that while Egypt has released some detainees, it nevertheless detained thousands more people and renewed the detention of nearly 5,000 existing prisoners.

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Chinese Cybersurveillance Capabilities Improving But Not Equal to Those of US - NSA

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - China's cybersurveillance capabilities are improving, but are not equal to those of the United States, US National Security Agency (NSA) Director and Cyber Command head Gen. Paul Nakasone said on Thursday.

"No," Nakasone said when asked during a talk at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) whether China's cybersurveillance capabilities equal those of the United States.

Nakasone pointed out that there is a scope, scale and sophistication that the NSA ascribes to what China is doing today.

"Are they getting better? Yes. But, I think the question always comes back to us, as we think about this, how do we address it?" he said.

Nakasone noted that China is different than other adversaries that he has seen during more than three decades of service in the US Army.

China is a multi-generational challenge with national power across major vectors, including diplomatic, military and economic, Nakasone said.

Leveraging the private sector and global partnerships would be very important to combat the United States' adversaries, he added.

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White House Says Time Not on Ukraine's Side Amid Counteroffensive

WASHINGTON, Aug 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has provided Ukraine with everything it asked for its counteroffensive, but progress is still slower than expected and it will be even harder with the fall coming, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday.

"In the months leading up to the counteroffensive, we fulfilled everything on the Ukrainian shopping list, everything they said they needed for the counteroffensive… And we're continuing to do that, we're continuing to willing to continue to train Ukrainian forces but more critically, we're giving them the kinds of tools and weapons that they need to break through those [lines of defense]," Kirby told CNN.

He also noted that the Ukrainians understand that "time is not on their side," and with the fall coming, it would be harder for them to maneuver on the ground and to operate drones and air defense systems. He also suggested avoiding speculation on "what success looks like" and letting Kiev determine that.

"They are very, very courageous in the fight every single day, and they are making progress. It is not frozen. It's not a stalemate. It's not as far as fast as president [Volodymyr] Zelenskyy would like to go, but they are making some progress," Kirby said.

Commenting on a recent CNN poll showing that over half of Americans oppose Congress authorizing additional funding to support Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, Kirby said it would

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not change US President Joe Biden's position.

"The President has said publicly, and he certainly said it privately to President Zelenskyy - and it's not just the president but other leaders of NATO and the G7 - that we're going to stay behind Ukraine for as long as it takes," the spokesman stated.

Kirby also expressed confidence that the American people understands "what's at stake here."

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US Shocked by Killing of Ecuador Presidential Candidate, Hopes For Investigation - Kirby

WASHINGTON, Aug 10 (Sputnik) – The United States is shocked by the assassination of Ecuadorian presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio and hopes for a transparent investigation, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday.

"It's very shocking," Kirby told CNN. "We obviously hope that there will be a full, complete and transparent investigation into this, and that the perpetrators are held properly accountable."

He expressed confidence that the Ecuadorian side is taking the situation very seriously.

"Obviously, it's not what anybody would want for the people of Ecuador, or quite frankly, Ecuador's democracy," Kirby added.

Villavicencio was shot dead and nine others were injured during an attack at an election rally on Wednesday. Local media reported that Villavicencio had received several death threats before the incident.

A prime suspect in the assassination died from gunshot wounds received during his arrest, the Ecuadorian General Prosecutor's Office said, adding that six people had been detained in connection with the incident.

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Russian MMA Legend Fedor Emelianenko Says Interested in Boxing Match With Mike Tyson

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) - Russian mixed martial arts (MMA) legend Fedor Emelianenko is interested in a boxing match against US boxing star Mike Tyson, the Russian fighter said during an interview with The MMA Hour.

"Mike Tyson probably would be interesting for me," Emelianenko said on Wednesday, when asked about his future plans.

Emelianenko, 46, retired from the MMA in February after more than two decades of competing in the sport. Emelianenko ended his MMA career with a record of 40 wins and seven losses.

Emelianenko is often listed among the greatest MMA fighters of all time despite never competing in the famous Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), although he holds wins over several of the organization's former champions.

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Tyson, 57, last competed in an exhibition boxing match against Roy Jones Jr. in November 2020. In professional boxing, Tyson holds a record of 50 wins and six losses, including 44 wins by knockout. Tyson, like Emelianenko, is often considered among the greatest athletes in his sport.

Tyson appears to be in good shape despite his age, Emelianenko said, adding that he has likewise taken time to physically recover since retiring from the MMA.

Emelianenko expressed an interest in possibly fighting Tyson in Saudi Arabia in October on a boxing card set to be headlined by heavyweight boxing champion Tyson Fury and former UFC heavyweight champion Francis Ngannou.

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UN Security Council to Hold Meeting on North Korea August 17 - US Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, Aug 10 (Sputnik) - The United States together with the UN Security Council co-penholders have scheduled an official meeting on North Korea for August 17, US Ambassador to the world body Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday.

"The United States and co-penholders: Albania, along with Japan and the Republic of Korea are pleased to announce that we requested a meeting of the Security Council for the morning of August 17 to discuss the DPRK [North Korea] human rights abuses and violations and the links to international peace and security," Thomas-Greenfield said.

The meeting will be the first open briefing on human rights in North Korea since 2017, Thomas-Greenfield added.

The United States is presiding with the UN Security Council during the month of August.

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Emmy Awards Organizers Say Ceremony Postponed to January Amid Strikes in Hollywood

WASHINGTON, August 10 (Sputnik) – Emmy awards organizers said on Thursday that the 75th annual ceremony will air on January 15, 2024, and not on September 18, as was originally planned, due to ongoing strikes in Hollywood.

"The Television Academy and FOX today jointly announced that the telecast of the 75th Emmy Awards will air on Monday, January 15, 2024 … on FOX," the organizers said in a press release.

The awards ceremony will be aired between 8 and 11 pm EST (00:00 GMT to 03:00 GMT) on January 15, according to the release.

The 75th-anniversary ceremony will take place at the Peacock Theater in Los Angeles, California over two consecutive nights on Saturday, January 6, and Sunday, January 7, 2024, the release added.

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At the same time, the Television Academy decided to keep the dates for the final voting round unchanged, between August 17 and August 28 as originally planned.

The main reason for the postponement is the ongoing strike of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG-AFTRA), the union representing American TV and film actors, and the Writers Guild of America against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). The unions demand better pay and protection of their images and performances to prevent the replacement of human performances by artificial intelligence technology.

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