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8/14/23 Monday

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Singapore's Deputy PM Warns City-State Facing 'Structural Decline' Without Immigration

The Southeast Asian city-state has such a low birth rate that without a steady stream of immigration, its economy will crumble, Singapore's deputy prime minister has warned. Its society is rapidly aging and its birth rate has fallen well below the widely accepted "replacement rate" of 2.1 children per mother.

"If we are not able to bring in immigrants to top up the population then we are in structural decline, and eventually the population will decline, the workforce will decline and Singapore will decline," Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said at the Reinventing Destiny conference on Monday.

Singapore has suffered the tribulations of many other highly-developed economies, including a declining birth rate. Last month, the latest figures released by the Singaporean Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) showed that Singapore's birth rate hit a record-low in 2022, including a 7.9% decrease in live births just from the prior year.

The report showed that the median age of first-time mothers has risen from 30.6 years old in 2018 to 31.9 years old in 2022, correlating to a rise in first-time mothers with university degrees, which increased from 58% to 63.6% in the same time period. That followed a February report showing the country's fertility rate was just 1.04.

Indranee Rajah, who serves as Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, told a parliamentary committee at the time that the decline was in part because it was the Year of the Tiger "in the lunar calendar, which is generally associated with lower births among the Chinese," who form 74% of the country's population.

However, critics noted that the skyrocketing prices of homes in Singapore was a major factor, since it limits the ability of couples to set out on their own, requiring them to spend more of their lives saving money to get their own home.

In its budget proposal that month, the government urged for new benefits for new parents, including bigger cash payments for new parents after birth; doubling the amount of parental leave given to fathers, and subsidizing home purchases in public housing run by the city's Housing & Development Board (HDB), under which about 80% of the population lives.

Fertility encouragement is nothing new in the Southeast Asian city-state, which rolled out its first such policies in 1987.

About 3.5 million of Singapore's 5.5-million-strong population are citizens, with another 500,000 classified as permanent residents and 1.45 million classified as non-residents - nearly all of whom are migrant workers, but in which foreign students are also included.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), this vast class of labor is necessary to fill roles in Singapore's industrial sector, but is also highly prevalent in domestic work.

"Migrant domestic workers are excluded from Singapore's main labor law, resulting in unregulated working hours," the UN-affiliated agency wrote in a 2020 report. "Singapore does

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not have a minimum wage; women migrant workers are deported if found pregnant; and Singaporean employers often restrict movement of domestic workers, resulting in isolation and restricted ability to seek help when needed."

Speaking on Monday, Wong noted that Singapore is controlling the number of immigrants who will be allowed to work.

"At the end of the day, the numbers are constrained by how much we are able to integrate the new arrivals" and how the migrants "embrace our values and way of life," he said.

"We will not have the ability to integrate all of them into our society," he said. "A small proportion will come in as permanent residents and it's gated, it's regulated. And we want to make sure that those who come in as permanent residents and eventually citizens are the ones who have the best chance to integrate into our society."

In 2022, just 23,100 people were granted Singaporean citizenship and about 34,500 new permanent residencies were granted.

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Singapore Blasts US for 'Extreme Competition' With China, Warns 'Disastrous for Global Economy'

Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong warned of the potential for disaster ranging far beyond the two states, accusing the US and China alike of waging war with weapons humanity doesn't have a firm understanding on the limitations of: economic sanctions.

Speaking at an event marking the 100th birthday of the late Singaporean independence leader Lee Kuan Yew, Wong warned the "collateral damage" in US-China competition could not be foreseen, making it "the biggest issue in the world."

"The dynamic that's now being created because of the US-China extreme competition will lead us down a path that will be disastrous for the global economy," Wong said, adding that US efforts to undermine and restrict China's development of advanced electronics were unlikely to "keep China down."

"There will be a trade-off in terms of performance, in terms of power consumption, in terms of reliability – but you can design a workaround solution," Wong said about the impact of US sanctions on China's tech sector. "Yes, it will slow down China's access to high-end capabilities to some extent, but it's not going to keep China down forever."

Among the measures Washington has adopted to curb the advance of Chinese tech industry include blacklisting major firms from US markets, banning US companies from investing in Chinese companies tied to the government or military - which is most in the socialist state - and pressuring other nations to adopt similar policies, particularly with regards to 5G internet networks and selling advanced microchips to Chinese firms.

Wong's words come just days after the Southeast Asian city-state was paid a visit by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who called the US "the biggest destabilizing factor in the world."

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"The United States, out of its motive to maintain unipolar hegemony, is unwilling to see the development and revitalization of China and other emerging countries," Wang told Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.
"On the one hand, it condones and supports the Taiwan independence forces relying on the United States to seek independence, trying to cross China's red lines," he said. "On the other hand, it tears away the pretense of fair competition and coerces other countries into unilateral protectionism against China. These perverse practices will only damage its own credibility, laying bare the fact that the United States has become the biggest destabilizing factor in the world."
During Wang's visit, he and Singaporean officials also discussed their close economic relationship, which has expanded in recent years with the ratification of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade bloc and other similar agreements. China was already Singapore's biggest trading partner and ethnic Chinese form nearly 75% of Singapore's population.
Singapore also has a strong relationship with the US, however, including trade and military ties.

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2024 Hopeful RFK Jr. Backtracks on Remarks Supporting Three-Month Abortion Ban

A Democratic presidential candidate is struggling to unring the bell after his latest statement in contradiction to the stated values of his party.
Speaking to reporters at the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines on Sunday, Robert. F. Kennedy, Jr. said he would support a ban on aborting a pregnancy after 90 days of gestation - a position his campaign soon sought to retract.
"I believe a decision to abort a child should be up to the women during the first three months of life," Kennedy said while fielding questions from a gaggle of reporters. He added: "Once a child is viable, outside the womb, I think then the state has an interest in protecting the child."
The media hubbub was immediate, and just hours later, Kennedy's campaign issued a statement claiming the 69-year-old candidate "misunderstood" the question.
"Mr. Kennedy's position on abortion is that it is always the woman's right to choose. He does not support legislation banning abortion," the campaign said.
In response, the journalist who posed the question to RFK, Jr. published on the social media site X the entire transcript of the exchange "in which I ask the questions multiple times to make sure we're understanding - even at one point saying I was surprised by the stance."
It's unclear exactly what Kennedy meant, either, since fetal viability generally occurs between 23 and 24 weeks of gestation, which is more than 5 months after conception. However, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) notes "there is no single formally recognized clinical definition" of the term.
"The concept of viability of a fetus is frequently misrepresented or misinterpreted based on ideological principles," the association writes. "This perpetuates incorrect and unscientific understandings of medical terms and leads to interference in the practice of medicine. As

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people across the United States continue to navigate the developing post-Dobbs landscape, it's critical that medical terminology be understood through the lens of science rather than the lens of political application and interpretation. Understanding viability is especially important as policy makers and those who interpret policy draw on the concept of viability in order to inform and create laws. As such, ACOG strongly discourages the inclusion of viability in legislation or regulation."

It's also a position out of line with almost the entirety of the Democratic Party, which has long rallied around abortion rights but especially after the US Supreme Court overturned the federal right to an abortion in the Dobbs vs. Jackson ruling last year. The decision unleashed a tsunami of bans and restrictions in Republican-controlled states.

Indeed, Kennedy's position is identical to that of a Republican candidate - former US Vice President Mike Pence, who has also called for a 15-week abortion ban.

Last week in Ohio, voters rejected a GOP-led attempt to block changes to the state constitution, such as one proposed by Democrats that would enshrine access to the medical procedure in the state's top legal document. In California, Vermont and Michigan, Democrats have already succeeded at that effort, and similar proposals could appear on ballots in Maryland, Missouri, Nevada and New York in 2024 or 2026.

The 2024 race is shaping up to be heavily focused around abortion rights, too: a Gallup poll last month found that 28% of voters insisted that the candidate who gets their vote must share their views on abortion, and a record-low number of just 14% say it's not important at all.

Of those who place prime importance on the topic, 17% identify themselves as pro-choice (that is, supportive of abortion access) and 10% identify as pro-life (that is, opposed to abortion).

Kennedy's campaign has been beset by scandals thanks to the candidate's proclivity for outrageous gabs. Already controversial for his unproven views that vaccines cause autism and that chemicals in drinking water cause transgender identities, Kennedy has also drawn flak for suggesting COVID-19 is a bioweapon deliberately engineered to spare ethnic Chinese and Ashkenazi Jews - again, a conclusion for which there is no scientific proof.

The latest aggregate polling data compiled by FiveThirtyEight has 63.8% of Democratic voters saying they intend to vote for US President Joe Biden, while 15.2% say they intend to vote for Kennedy.

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New Study Finds Connection Between Ultrafine Particle Pollution, Dementia

Scientists are warning that exposure to a certain type of pollution is a likely factor in whether a person develops dementia later in life, thanks to a new study.

Led by a group of researchers at the University of Michigan, the study was published on Monday in JAMA Internal Medicine, a peer-reviewed publication by the American Medical Association that was once titled Archives of Internal Medicine.

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The study looked at data from 27,857 people from between 1998 and 2016, of whom about 15% developed dementia during that time. Of those who developed dementia, all lived in areas of the US with higher concentrations of particle pollution than those who didn't develop dementia.
The study did not elaborate on how the dementia manifested itself, as dementia is a generic term for a number of neurocognitive degenerations associated with old age, such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and Huntington's disease, among others. More than 55 million people around the world have dementia, with another 10 million developing it each year, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).
The pollution with which it was correlated was a type of fine and ultrafine particles smaller than 2.5 micrometers in diameter, called PM2.5. At such a tiny size, these particles "can penetrate deeply into the lung, irritate and corrode the alveolar wall, and consequently impair lung function," according to a 2016 study.
In the University of Michigan study, the "strongest associations" with increased dementia occurrence was PM2.5 pollution from agriculture, traffic, coal combustion, and wildfires.
"Our findings indicate that lowering levels of particulate matter air pollution, even in a relatively clean country like the United States, may reduce the number of people developing dementia in late life," said Sara Dubowsky Adar, associate chair of epidemiology at the University of Michigan School of Public Health and lead author of the study.
Boya Zhang, a study co-author and University of Michigan research fellow who focuses on the effects of air pollution on cardiopulmonary disease and cognitive aging, said that the study "suggests that particulate matter air pollution from agriculture and wildfires might be more neurotoxic compared with other sources. However, more research is needed to confirm these effects, especially for these two sources which have received less attention in prior research."
"Given that the development of dementia could take a long time, this study mainly aimed to provide evidence for policymakers to reduce exposures to these sources of emissions," she added.
The study comes during a year of dramatically increased wildfire activity as well as persistent "heat domes" of stagnant air that have spread across wide areas of the northern hemisphere during the summer of 2023. While the heat domes can make temperatures skyrocket and encourage wildfires to break out, the stagnant higher layers of air can block lower air from rising, trapping pollution close to the surface.
Wildfires raging in Canada, Italy, Greece, and elsewhere have poured smoke into the skies, tainting the air for thousands of miles downwind as the smoke and fine particulate matter spreads around the world. In Canada alone, the fires have been so severe as to have already accounted for more carbon output than the northerly nation's entire annual output last year, and reached 25% of global carbon pollution by itself.

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Kenya Launches First-Ever Inquiry Into Alleged Abuses by British Soldiers

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The British first colonized the land now known as Kenya in the late 1800s and held onto the territory until 1963, when it gained its independence. The agreement allowed British soldiers to continue training in the country twice a year.

The government of Kenya has launched an inquiry into British soldiers stationed in the East African country, marking the first such inquiry into UK troops by the former colony since it gained independence in 1963.

Kenya's parliamentary defense committee is leading the inquiry into allegations of murder, sexual abuse and environmental destruction by the British Army Training Unit Kenya (Batuk).

Kenyan lawyer Kelvin Kubai, who is representing residents suing Batuk over alleged environmental abuses, noted that Kenyans have no "clear cut channel through which victims of British army abuse can seek redress."

The inquiry is part of a larger pushback against the Kenya-UK defense treaty, which was renewed in 2021 but not implemented until April of this year because of concerns raised by residents and local politicians near the base.

The unit's base resides in Nanyuki, about 125 miles north of Kenya's capital Nairobi.

Among the most significant abuses believed to be committed by British troops is the murder of Agnes Wanjiru, a 21-year-old mother whose body was found stabbed and stuffed into a septic tank.

A 2019 UK inquiry found that British soldiers were responsible for the murder and in 2021, an alleged confession to the murder by a British soldier was published in media outlets, but no one has been charged in the crime.

In the latest version of the Kenya-UK defense treaty, murder was not included in the list of crimes that Kenyan authorities could prosecute British soldiers for.

Kenyan and UK authorities have been accused of taking a lackadaisical approach to the case and the British army has been accused of attempting a coverup.

Accusations of sexual assault by British soldiers have long been a feature of the UK's presence in Kenya.

In 2003, more than 600 women from the Masai and Samburu tribes marched to the British High Commission, demanding that the British government pay for the education of their mixed-race children that were the result of rapes by British soldiers.

Nelson Koech, the chair of the defense committee leading the inquiry, said that if significant abuses in violation of the treaty are found, it may allow Kenya to back out of the 2021 defense treaty.

"If we realize that there's been a lot of activity that spits in the face of [the treaty], it gives us room to re-look at the agreement, and even to exit," Koech said.

There have also been claims that the army has left unexploded bombs on grounds accessible by the public and uses chemicals during military drills that risk lives, a claim the British army has denied.

"The British army use white phosphorus illuminant rounds on training exercises in the UK and overseas, they are never used as a weapon. They are not considered to be hazardous to health and safety, provided that the existing safety precautions are followed. In Kenya, the British army only fires white phosphorus on Archer's Post training area, which is a Kenyan Ministry of Defence gazetted training area and not communal land," an Army spokesperson told UK media.

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But Koech said the issues being brought up can no longer be ignored by the Kenyan government. “If Batuk, like it’s claimed, has been committing injustices then we don’t want any form of neocolonialism. As a country we will say no.”

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NTSB Says Weekend Airshow Crash Result of Engine ‘Loss-of-Power’ Issues

The MiG-23UB was created by the Soviet Union in 1970 and was manufactured for the Soviet military until 1978 and for export customers until 1985.
The airshow crash that resulted in two pilots ejecting midair and the plane crashing into the parking lot of an apartment complex in Michigan over the weekend was caused by a loss-of-power issue with the engine, a senior National Transportation Safety Board air safety investigator revealed.
On Sunday, a Russian MiG-23UB fighter jet was performing at the 25th Thunder Over Michigan airshow in Ypsilanti, a town between Detroit and Ann Arbor, when during its second of three passes a puff of smoke erupted from the plane as the pilot and co-pilot ejected.
Both pilots landed in Belleville Lake, where they were later rescued. The pilot reportedly suffered major but non-life-threatening injuries while the co-pilot sustained minor injuries. It is not known at this time if they have been released from the hospital.
John Brannen, a senior air safety NTSB investigator, said the cause of the crash remains unclear but that the plane experienced “engine loss-of-power issues” before the plane crashed. A team of investigators were still at the crash site on Monday documenting the aftermath and working with a recovery crew. A preliminary report is expected in around 10 days, but Brannen said a full investigation may take up to two years.
"Right now, all the information is preliminary and we can't draw any conclusions," Brannen said. "The fact that both pilots survived and there were no ground injuries is a very good outcome."
After the pilots ejected, the plane crashed into a field and traveled more than 500 feet on the ground, eventually coming to rest in the parking lot of a nearby apartment complex, colliding with unoccupied vehicles.
Some residents of the building were evacuated but the building never caught fire. The US Environmental Protection Agency is also reportedly on the scene to investigate any potential contamination from the jet’s fuel.
Brannen said the plane’s country of origin and military background may slow the investigation. “[T]here's no what we call a 'flight certificate' that civilian airplanes have with details of the manufacturers that you can go to for assistance in this, which will make this more difficult,” Brannen told US media.
Residents of the apartment complex described the crash and aftermath to US media. “We were watching TV and we heard a big 'boom,' and then we're like, 'What the heck is that?'” Emilio Cancel, who lives in an apartment near the crash, said. "I looked outside, and all of [a] sudden, I see something 'boom,' blew up right here," he said. "The biggest fireball I've ever seen.

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Trump Indicted for Fourth Time in Georgia Election Interference Case

The former US president has already been hit with a total of three indictments, two of which are federal cases. To date, the Trump camp has repeatedly rejected all charges, underscoring that legal proceedings are intended to block the ex-commander-in-chief's 2024 reelection campaign.

Former US President Donald Trump was indicted for a fourth time late Monday, this time for his and his allies' alleged actions to overturn the 2020 presidential election results in the state of Georgia.

The grand jury indictment in Georgia stretched far into the night on Monday, with the indictment only becoming public just before 11 p.m.

The 98-page indictment list charges a total of 19 individuals including Trump, and fellow associates Rudy Giuliani, John Eastman, Mark Meadows, Jeffrey Clark, among other figures.

Over 40 charges are listed in the filing, which also notes there are 30 co-conspirators who have yet to be officially indicted.

Trump was specifically hit with 13 charges, including: Violation of the Georgia RICO Act, solicitation of violation of oath by a public officer, conspiracy to commit impersonating a public officer and conspiracy to commit forgery in the first degree, among others.

Among the charges listed in the filing against Trump, violations of the Georgia RICO (racketeering) Act is considered the most serious.

RICO cases are typically used to clamp down on drug cartels or larger criminal organizations. It's specifically used in cases where an alleged offender engaged in a minimum of two predicated crimes that were in connection to an enterprise that is either considered legal or illegal.

Shortly after the indictment was released, Fulton County District Attorney Fani T. Willis told reporters that the defendants must surrender voluntarily no later than 12 p.m. local time on August 25.

"[Trump and his allies] constituted a criminal organization whose members and associates engaged in various related criminal activities," Willis said at a news conference just before midnight Monday. "They knowingly and willfully joined conspiracy to unlawfully change the outcome of the election in favor of Trump."

Willis did state that she will seek to try the case within six months' time, and that she wanted to try all defendants together, a task that insiders have already noted may pose several difficulties.

Ahead of the indictment's release, the Trump campaign issued a statement condemning the latest filings, noting Willis "strategically stalled her investigation to try and maximally interfere with the 2024 presidential race and damage the dominant Trump campaign."

"Combined with the intentionally slow-walked investigation by the Biden-Smith goon squads and the false charges in New York, the timing of this latest coordinated strike by a biased prosecutor in an overwhelmingly Democrat jurisdiction not only betrays the trust of the American people, but also exposes true motivation driving fabricated accusations," the release continued.

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Prosecutors have been investigating the alleged election interference scheme for two and half years. The investigation, led by Willis, focused on five actions allegedly taken by Trump and his allies, including phone calls that Trump made to state officials in which he told one to "find" the votes he needed to win the state.

Prosecutors also investigated a scheme to upend the vote by sending fake electors to certify the vote and a data breach at an election office in Coffee County.

Earlier Monday, US media reported that a document outlining charges against Trump from the Fulton County District Attorney's Office was momentarily made public before being taken down. At the time, the Fulton County Clerk's office acknowledged the mishap and stated the document was fictitious. The release said that no documents had been filed in the case, and reiterated that files that do not have an official case number, filing date, and the name of the clerk of courts are not considered official fillings and should not be treated as such.

The case in Georgia is separate from the federal case against Trump for his alleged attempts to overturn the election in six crucial states, including Georgia.

Willis said that while there is some crossover between the two cases she did not coordinate efforts with the federal prosecutors.

Trump has also been indicted on federal charges related to his alleged mishandling of classified documents and in a New York state case over money he paid to an adult film actress to keep her from speaking about an affair she alleged to have with Trump years before the start of the 2016 US election cycle. In that case, investigators claim the payments were illegally classified as legal expenses.

The cases in Georgia and New York are particularly significant because the US president does not have authority over state courts. While legal experts have debated if a president could pardon themselves in a federal case, there is no doubt they cannot in cases handled by state courts.

If Trump returns to the White House in 2024, he will not be able to pardon himself in those cases.

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'Chilling Story for Press Freedom': Raid on Small Town Newspaper Sparks First Amendment Concerns

The Federal Privacy Protection Act forbids law enforcement from executing a search warrant on a newsroom except in very specific circumstances.

A Kansas town with a population of just a few thousand residents has found itself in the middle of a battleground over the First Amendment after local law enforcement raided the office of the town's paper, The Marion County Record.

Eric Meyer, the owner of the newspaper, revealed that the town’s police department raided his home, the paper’s office and the home of the town’s vice mayor. His 98-year-old mother and

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co-owner of the paper, Joan Meyer, lived in the same house and died the day after the raid. Eric Meyer says she died from “shock and grief” that resulted from the police search.

The Friday raid saw police seized computers, cell phones, and reporting materials among other objects from Meyer’s house and the paper’s office.

Incidentally, the raid unfolded as the paper was investigating the town’s police chief, Gideon Cody, over claims they received about alleged sexual misconduct allegations from his previous job at the Kansas City Police Department.

The computers seized by the police department included information about that investigation and the sources that made those claims about Cody.

The Marion County Record covers events in the paper’s namesake county, which sits in Kansas and has roughly 11,100 citizens. The city of Marion itself had less than 2,000 residents as of the 2020 census.

The search appears to stem from a claims by Kari Newell, of restaurant Kari's Kitchen, who alleged the newspaper stole her identity to obtain information about her.

Newell’s issues with the paper appear to be longstanding. On August 1, her restaurant hosted an event for Congressman Jake Laturner, an event Meyer says he and his staff attempted to cover but were asked to leave by Cody.

Meyers says a source contacted a reporter for the paper the next day, alleging Newell had a previous DUI conviction and was driving without a license. It was then that Meyers says the paper launched its investigation into the allegation using public websites before eventually deciding against publishing a story on what they found.

Instead, he says he passed on the information to Cody because Newell was applying for a liquor license and state law prohibits liquor licenses for individuals with felony DUI convictions and also requires the holder to have a state driver’s license.

Meyer then says Vice Mayor Ruth Herbel asked the paper to send the same information to her because the city council was set to vote on Newell’s liquor license application, which the council approved with a 4-1 vote.

During that meeting, Newell admitted to having a DUI conviction and accused the paper of obtaining that information illegally. In a statement given to US media, she said she believes the paper got the information by stealing a piece of mail sent to her by the Kansas Department of Revenue.

The straw that broke the camel's back came when the outlet opted to publish an article about Newell's accusations and the subsequent council meeting. Two days later, Marion County Court Magistrate Judge Laura Viar signed a search warrant alleging the paper committed identity theft and “unlawful acts concerning computers.”

The warrant’s supporting affidavit establishing probable cause has not been released publicly. Kansas state law requires that the judge has up to 10 days to decide if the affidavit will be released publicly, released with redactions, or placed under seal.

A Marion County District Court told local media on Monday that the affidavit was “just being uploaded to the system.”

Chris Garaffa, a privacy consultant and the cohost of CovertAction Magazine’s Bulletin podcast, told Sputnik’s Political Misfits on Monday that the case “is a chilling story for press freedom in the US.”

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“This needs to be federalized at this point,” Garaffa added. “There needs to be federal eyes and transparency on this entire process. Just because this is a town of 2,000 people doesn’t mean it's not a bellwether for attacks on press everywhere else.”

In a statement posted on social media, Cody asserted his department was acting within the law and remained “unbiased.”

The Federal Privacy Protection Act protects newsrooms from being raided by the police, requiring a subpoena instead of a search warrant if law enforcement requires materials from journalists, except in specific circumstances.

Cody has implied in his post that the raid of the Record’s offices fell under one of those exceptions.

“The Act requires criminal investigators to get a subpoena instead of a search warrant when seeking “work product materials” and “documentary materials” from the press, except in circumstances, including: (1) when there is reason to believe the journalist is taking part in the underlying wrongdoing,” the post reads.

But the Reporters of Committee for Freedom of the Press has disputed that claim, condemning the raid and explaining to Cody in a letter that proceedings did not meet the criteria laid out in the act.

“This ‘suspect exception,’ which you cite, is inapplicable when the relevant conduct consists of the receipt, possession, communication, or withholding of the material, with only limited exceptions for certain federal statutes that are not at issue here,” the statement reads, adding that “for documentary material, which it appears was also seized by your department, the [Privacy Protection Act] adds two additional exceptions that permit its seizure by law enforcement, neither of which appear to apply here: (1) when notice pursuant to a subpoena would result in the destruction, alteration, or concealment of such materials; or (2) when such materials have not been produced pursuant to a court order directing compliance with a subpoena, all appellate remedies have been exhausted and there is reason to believe that delay [...] would threaten the interests of justice.”

In Newell’s statement, she claims the Record “has a LONG standing reputation of contortion,” and that the “community by large is FED up.”

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Fitch Analyst Says Rating Agency Could Downgrade US Banks

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) – Fitch Ratings could downgrade more than 70 US banks including JP Morgan Chase if the banking industry suffers another downgrade, Fitch analyst Chris Wolfe told CNBC in an interview on Tuesday.

Fitch on June 27 downgraded its assessment of the US banking industry's operating environment from AA to AA-, citing "gaps in the regulatory framework and structural uncertainty around the normalization of monetary policy." Another downgrade would force Fitch to re-evaluate all of the lenders it covers, Wolfe said.

“If we were to move it to A+, then that would recalibrate all our financial measures and would

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probably translate into negative rating actions," Wolfe said.

Wolfe explained that the main problem with a recalibration of ratings would be that the industry's score would be lower than their top-rated lenders. Thus, financial institutions such as JPMorgan and Bank of America would fall to AA- from A+, as banks cannot have higher ratings than the environment they operate in.

The analyst declined to speculate on the timing of the potential move, nor would he comment on the impact it could have on lower-rated firms.

In late June, Fitch Ratings announced that it downgraded the credit rating of the United States from AAA to AA+, citing "a steady deterioration in standards of governance." The rating agency also said that it found troubling the debt limit standoffs between the two major political parties in Congres, despite their last-minute resolutions to avoid a debt default.

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Death Toll From Hawaii Wildfires Reaches 99 - Maui County

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - The number of fatalities from one of the deadliest fires in US history that swept Hawaii has increased to 99, according to new data published by the Maui County.

"Maui Police Department said that there are 99 confirmed fatalities today," the Maui County said in a press release on Monday.

So far, rescuers have managed to search 25% of the territory that was affected by the wildfires, the release added.

According to the White House, there are nearly 500 personnel from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on the ground.

FEMA has provided the Maui County with 50,000 meals, 75,000 liters of water, 5,000 cots and 10,000 blankets and shelter supplies for distribution, the White House said in a fact sheet.

The agency has also authorized one-time payments of $700 per household to those residents of Hawaii who were displaced from their homes and have critical needs, the White House said.

The wildfires in Hawaii broke out due to dry and hot weather and are exacerbated by strong winds brought by Hurricane Dora. The fire destroyed several settlements, including the popular tourist town of Lahaina. The authorities are forced to block roads and suspend public transport. Hundreds of local residents were evacuated from the area.

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden officially declared a major disaster in Hawaii, which makes additional federal resources available to help combat the ongoing wildfires on the islands.

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Trump Says Will Release Detailed Report on Alleged Election Fraud in Georgia on Monday

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said on Tuesday he will release a detailed report on alleged 2020 election fraud in Georgia at a news conference on August 21.

"A Large, Complex, Detailed but Irrefutable REPORT on the Presidential Election Fraud which took place in Georgia is almost complete & will be presented by me at a major News Conference at 11:00 A.M. on Monday of next week in Bedminster, New Jersey," Trump said in a message on Truth Social.

Trump pointed out that based on the results of the conclusive report, all charges should be dropped against him and others.

"There will be a complete EXONERATION! They never went after those that Rigged the Election. They only went after those that fought to find the RIGGERS!" he added.

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US Conservative Group Launches Campaign to Rally Republican Support for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - Conservative group Defending Democracy Together launched a campaign on Tuesday to rally Republican support for backing Ukraine, according to a release.

"A brand-new $2 million campaign called 'Republicans for Ukraine' launches today to persuade GOP voters and elected officials to stand with the United States' Ukrainian ally against Russia," the release stated.

The campaign will run first-person testimonial ads from Republican voters on cable and network TV and on YouTube through the end of the year. The ads will also air on Fox News and be placed on 10 billboards during the first Republican presidential debate in Milwaukee on August 23

Campaign spokesperson Gunner Ramer said the ads would remind Republican party leaders that many Republican voters supported Ukraine and backing Ukrainian democracy was part of America's role in upholding freedom.

Defending Democracy Together is led by Republican strategist Sarah Longwell and conservative political commentator Bill Kristol.

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RPT: FEATURE - Afghan Refugee in US Says Nobody Was Prepared for Taliban Takeover

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - Afghan refugee and former official, Ajmal Hussainkhail, told Sputnik on the second anniversary of the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism)

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takeover that people were totally taken off guard by that development and shared his memories of the nine days in Kabul before escaping to the United States.

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban seized Kabul, two decades after being ousted by US-led forces in the wake of the September 11 attacks. The development accelerated the US troop withdrawal, which began in April and was completed in late August.

The Taliban's return triggered economic disarray and food shortages that have pushed the country to the brink of a humanitarian crisis. Thousands of Afghans have fled the country fearful of the Taliban, widespread violations of human rights and women and girls being deprived of their freedoms.

"We were not prepared for that. We were not informed that the Taliban will take over Afghanistan," Hussainkhail said. "We didn't think that it would happen."

NO WAY OUT

Hussainkhail, 31, a former director of revenue collection at the transport ministry and an owner of his own suit brand, came to the United States two years ago and is still trying to digest what happened in those days.

Hussainkhail still remembers the day that forever changed the lives of millions of people in Afghanistan. He and his colleagues had gathered at the ministry as they always did on Wednesdays and Sundays, to send money they had collected from tours to the Transport Ministry account at Afghanistan's Central Bank.

"That day, 12 members of the Taliban came to my office and asked what my job title was. I said, 'I'm director of revenue collection,' and they inquired why I had not escaped from the office as the others did," Hussainkhail recalled, adding that he immediately pointed out to the Taliban that both he and them were Afghans. "They told me that they needed cars and as they were with the guns, I said, 'Every car that you need, you can take it.'"

Since Hussainkhail agreed to give them the vehicles, the Taliban members promised not to take his car, and he went home. Being overwhelmed with thoughts and emotions, he fell asleep in the middle of the afternoon, and woke up the next morning to more than 100 missed calls and text messages from his wife's sister from Germany.

When he called her back, she started anxiously telling him to go to the airport and all people were already there trying to escape.

"I woke up my wife and we went to the Hamid Karzai International Airport. When we got there - it is 20 minutes away from my home - there was a huge crowd of the people and the taxi drivers," he said. "The taxi drivers were joking saying 'taxi to US. taxi to Canada.' They were laughing."

The Taliban took control of all gates of the airport and there was no way to go inside. So, Hussainkhail said, they turned around and came back home at midnight. On the way home, Hussainkhail's car was stopped at several checkpoints as Taliban looked for guns.

Over the ensuing days, he rarely went outside. Although he did not close down the clothing brand store, no customers came to buy suits. Meanwhile, the ministry remained closed with only security guards on site.

"Those days, many places were closed and pricing was too high. I gave some money to workers who were in charge of the door of the ministry," he said.

THE ESCAPE

About nine days later, Hussainkhail suddenly received a phone call from his brother-in-law, who

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is an American citizen and worked as a translator for the US government.

"He said 'I'm so sorry. When I was in Afghanistan I couldn't help you, but if you... go to the airport, the soldiers will definitely help you, because you worked with the US Embassy,'" Hussainkhail recollected.

His father soon drove them to the airport and once they got out of the car and approached the crowd waiting to get inside the airport, the Taliban hit Hussainkhail, as they were hitting everyone.

"A five-minute walk from the entrance, but we spent 30 hours to get to the gate of the airport," he remembered.

When asked for documents at a fourth checkpoint, he showed the officer the contract he had with the US embassy. The officer said he did not care about Afghan documents and told Hussainkhail to leave the area.

Then, all of a sudden, the officer said to hold on. The US official then noticed Hussainkhail had a certificate from USAID in his folder from a financial management course he took.

"[The official] said that is my US visa," Hussainkhail said. "They let me in."

Once inside, Hussainkhail said US soldiers gave them food and water.

"Then, half an hour later the aircraft came and we left Afghanistan," he said. "That was the US Army Force plane with more than 400 people. No seats, people were just sitting in the middle of the airplane."

From Afghanistan, they had a four-hour flight to Kuwait where they were sent to a US military base for 10 days before flying to Washington, DC.

LIFE TODAY

They now live in Alexandria, Virginia, where Hussainkhail works as an Uber driver, while his wife is looking for a job as a midwife.

"I came here with just one shirt. We didn't have anything. We bought a car… everything is on credit," he shared. "We struggle every month to make our payments on time. It's very hard."

Hussainkhail said he needs to pay for both his family in the US and his family back in Afghanistan, including his sister who is fighting cancer.

And every month, because medical care in Afghanistan is not as high quality, his sister has to go to Pakistan, he explained.

"They have to pay a lot of money to the cops in order to cross the border, and also to the Taliban members and the Pakistani soldiers to let them go to Pakistan for treatment," he shared.

While the memories of the chaos in his country are still fresh, Hussainkhail feels like he is lucky to be where he is now and dreams about bringing his parents and sister to the United States.

He also dreams of reopening his clothing brand store to make suits.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Biden Restrictions on Chinese AI Investments Likely to Backfire

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is shooting itself in the foot and self-destructively damaging its own high tech economic growth by banning investments by

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American companies in Chinese artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities, experts told Sputnik.

Last week, President Joe Biden signed an executive order that restricts US companies from investing in Chinese artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities and technologies - including semiconductors and quantum computing.

The Biden administration said the move is intended to prevent such technologies from enhancing Chinese military, intelligence, and surveillance capabilities. In the executive order, Biden said his administration was concerned that certain US investments may accelerate the development of products China could use against the United States.

Retired US Army Colonel and international consultant Earl Rasmussen, former vice president of the Eurasia Center, described the new policy as "accelerated economic suicide."

"While the decision(s) are aimed to limit Chinese growth, they will likely impact the US and European economies greater. It is estimated that 70,000 US companies may be adversely impacted," Rasmussen told Sputnik.

Due to the previous Biden chip ban, US companies are expected to lose up to $80 billion," Rasmussen added.

"There is much discussion of decoupling from China for the US and Europe. This will likely have a much more adverse impact on the US and Europe than China," Rasmussen said. "Europe is already suffering from following the US lead in sanctions directed towards Russia, combine this will decoupling from China and we will only see an even greater economic death spiral."

Independent Institute Center for Peace and Liberty Director Ivan Eland believes that while they may impede Chinese capabilities somewhat, such limits will also curb the free flow of information and could slow US innovation. Not to mention, China is likely to retaliate, he added.

"China is likely to respond, which compounds the US self-induced wound. For example, bans on rare earth minerals," Eland told Sputnik. "They may also respond by making other economic and investment/trade deals where they can, once again hurting US companies."

Retired Brown University Assistant Professor of Economics Barry Friedman warned that US companies will not get the benefit of learning from Chinese production operations and developing cost-effective components for sale or use at home and third countries.

LITTLE IMPACT ON CHINA

Rasmussen said the executive order is more a move to limit Chinese growth than it is regarding US national security, but it is likely to have minimal effect. A report from the US-based Center for Security and Emerging Technology points out that Chinese investors remain the dominant investors in Chinese AI companies, Rasmussen noted.

"Between 2015 and 2021, at least 71% of the transaction value and 92% of the investment transactions came from Chinese investors. Hence, it is doubtful that the new restrictions will have any serious and long lasting impact," he said.

Moreover, despite all these restrictions, China remains the global manufacturing engine, he added. Rasmussen predicted that China will continue its partnership with the global south to assist in nurturing economic development and hence expanding their share of the global market.

Friedman said there are ways China can circumvent the restrictions.

"There could be ways to purchase advanced technology built into industrial products and traded in shadowy 'wholesale' markets. Example, the reports of Haas precision-machining tools and

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various semiconductors purchased through hidden transactions on the international market despite sanctions on direct sales to Russia," Friedman said.

Political commentator Alex Krainer, founder of Krainer Analytics, said the move is a shortsighted sign of desperation.

"I've gotten used to the zealots around Biden being long on ideology and short on all other talents, so I find it easy to believe they're just grasping at straws to show off some toughness and giving themselves some shiny negotiating chips, but I very much doubt that the Chinese are losing any sleep over this," Krainer told Sputnik.

Alan Tonelson, a long-time national security analyst who blogs at RealityChek, doubts the new measures will have much of an impact on China's military capabilities.

"Unfortunately, the new US curbs are still too narrowly drawn to slow China's military-related technology development significantly over time," Tonelson said.

Tonelson also said China has too much to lose to respond aggressively. In principle, Beijing retains formidable retaliatory capabilities in areas like rare earths and other critical minerals, but the US has leverage too given China is struggling to generate adequate growth and employment, Tonelson added.

Former London merchant banker, US financial analyst and columnist Martin Hutchinson, said the new policy will not produce any significant results. China's most effective retaliation to Biden's move would be to cut off rare earth supplies, but that could backfire, Hutchinson argued, saying that there are other unexploited sources for these materials outside of China.

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Georgia Grand Jury Indicts Trump on 13 Charges in Election Interference Case - Filing

(Updates with details, background in paras 4-11)

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - A Fulton County grand jury in the state of Georgia indicted former President Donald Trump with 13 criminal charges related to an investigation alleging he attempted to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election, a court document revealed.

Several of the charges Trump faces include violation of the Georgia RICO Act, solicitation of violation of oath by a public officer, false statements and writings, forgery, among others.

Eighteen other associates were also charged in the indictment, including Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani and former Trump chief of staff Mark Meadows.

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis said in a press conference late Monday night that a grand jury issued arrest warrants against the 19 defendants named in the 41-count indictment, but they will all have an opportunity to voluntarily surrender by August 25.

Willis said she will ask the court to set the trial date within the next six months.

The Georgia racketeering scheme charge alone carries a prison sentence of up to 20 years. The person could also face a fine of up to $250,000 or double the amount of proceeds earned from illicit activity, according to the statute.

Trump has repeatedly condemned the criminal proceedings against him as attempts to

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weaponize the American justice system to prevent him from running in the 2024 US presidential election and denied any wrongdoing.

On Monday afternoon, Reuters reported that a document from the Fulton County District Attorney's Office was published online previewing charges against Trump before being taken down.

Giuliani, in a statement, suggested that the former US president's legal team should file a motion to dismiss for a constitutional due process violation for publicly issuing an indictment before the grand jury had actually signed one.

Willis declined to comment about the leak when asked about it during the press conference.

Trump's lawyers did not immediately respond to Sputnik for comment on the indictment.

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Georgia County Prosecutor Says Jury to Issue Arrest Warrants in Trump Election Case

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis said in a press conference that a grand jury issued arrest warrants against the 19 defendants named in a 41-count indictment, including against former President Donald Trump, in an election interference case, but they will all have an opportunity to voluntarily surrender by August 25.

"Subsequent to the indictment, as is the normal process in Georgia law, the grand jury issued arrest warrants for those who are charged. I am giving the defendants the opportunity to voluntarily surrender, no later than noon on Friday, the 25th day of August, 2023," Willis said late Monday night.

Willis said she will ask the court to set the trial date within the next six months.

Trump faces 13 criminal charges related to allegedly attempting to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election in Georgia, including violation of the Georgia RICO Act, solicitation of violation of oat by public officer, false statements and writings, forgery, among others.

The Georgia racketeering scheme charge alone carries a prison sentence of up to 20 years. The person could also face a fine of up to $250,000 or double the amount of proceeds earned from illicit activity, according to the statute.

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Several of the charges Trump faces include violation of the Georgia RICO Act, solicitation of

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violation of oath by a public officer, false statements and writings, forgery, impersonating a public officer, among others.

Eighteen other associates were also charged in the indictment, including Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani and former Trump chief of staff Mark Meadows.

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Georgia Grand Jury Approves 10 Indictments in Trump 2020 Election Interference Case

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - A Fulton County grand jury in the state of Georgia approved 10 indictments late Monday night against former President Donald Trump in an election-interference case attempting to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election, NBC News reported citing a court document.

The court document submitted Monday night shows a grand jury approved 10 indictments related to an investigation into former US President Donald Trump's alleged attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

An NBC reporter posted a photo of the indictments, that did not appear to have the judge's signature.

It is unknown whether Trump is potentially named in either of the indictments, but it is likely.

Trump has repeatedly condemned the criminal proceedings against him as attempts to weaponize the American justice system to prevent him from running in the 2024 US presidential election and denied any wrongdoing.

On Monday afternoon, Reuters reported that a document from the Fulton County District Attorney's Office was published online showing charges against Trump before being taken down.

The two-page document, which was reportedly published in a court filing system for a brief moment, showed multiple criminal charges against Trump, including violation of Georgia RICO (Racketeer, Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act), solicitation of violation of oath by a public officer, filing false documents, making false statements, among others.

Former Trump Attorney Rudy Giuliani, in a statement, suggested that the former US president's legal team should file a motion to dismiss for a constitutional due process violation for publicly issuing an indictment before the grand jury had actually signed one.

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RFK Jr. Says US Operates Laboratories in Ukraine to Develop Bioweapons

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - The United States operates biological research laboratories in Ukraine for the purpose of developing bioweapons, 2024 Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said in an interview with Tucker Carlson.

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"We have biolabs in Ukraine because we're developing bioweapons," Kennedy said on Monday. "And they can make frightening, frightening stuff."

The US bolstered bioweapons research following the September 11 terror attacks and subsequent passage of the PATRIOT Act, Kennedy said. The research was led by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), formerly headed by Anthony Fauci.

Bioweapons researchers develop vaccines in tandem with the weapons in order to protect aligned populations from blowback, Kennedy said. Fauci operated labs in the US until escape incidents shut down the research sites, Kennedy said.

"Fauci shifted a lot of his operations offshore, and those operations ended up, most of them, in the Wuhan lab… and then a lot of them went to Ukraine," Kennedy said.

Russian officials have also repeatedly accused the US of using research facilities to conduct bioweapons research on its borders, under the guise of epidemiological assistance.

Last year, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland told US lawmakers that the US was working with Ukraine to protect biolabs in the country amid Russia's special military operation.

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Fulton County Jury Mulling Election-Related Charges Against Trump Now Voting - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - A Fulton County grand jury in the state of Georgia is now voting on whether to indict former President Donald Trump on charges related to election interference, NBC News reported citing a source familiar with the matter.

On Monday afternoon, Reuters reported that a document from the Fulton County District Attorney's Office was published online showing charges against Trump before being taken down.

The two-page document, which was reportedly published in a court filing system for a brief moment, showed multiple criminal charges against Trump, including violation of Georgia RICO (Racketeer, Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act), solicitation of violation of oath by a public officer, filing false documents, making false statements, among others.

Former Trump Attorney Rudy Giuliani, in a statement, suggested that the former US president's legal team should file a motion to dismiss for a constitutional due process violation for publicly issuing an indictment before the grand jury had actually signed one.

According to media reports, Georgia state prosecutors have evidence to prove that Trump's legal team had a role in the 2021 voting system breach in Coffee County and Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis plans to seek charges against more than a dozen people when she presents the case. She reportedly has texts and emails implicating several of those people in the computer breach in the rural Georgia county.

Trump has repeatedly condemned the criminal proceedings against him as attempts to weaponize the American justice system to prevent him from running in the 2024 US presidential election and denied any wrongdoing.

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Yellen Says US Concerned Critical Minerals Remain Over-Concentrated in A Few Hands

WASHINGTON, August 15 (August) - The United States must be alert to the risks of the raw materials for solar panels and other renewable energies being concentrated in just a few countries even as it makes the transition from oil, coal and natural gas, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said during a speech in Las Vegas ahead of the anniversary of the Inflation Reduction Act.

"As we move away from fossil fuels, we remain concerned about the risks of over-concentration in clean energy supply chains," Yellen said on Monday.

Yellen reminded her audience that while the United States was leading the global agenda on fossil-free energies, the production of key inputs for that change - from batteries to solar panels and other critical minerals - was in the hands of just a few countries.

"It's important that we build resilient and diversified critical global supply chains that can reduce chokepoints, mitigate disruptions, and protect our economic security," she said.

Yellen did not name the countries that are rich in critical minerals deposits, although statistics show Russia and China leading in this front - both countries that the United States does not exactly have great relations with.

China, for example, produced more than 98% of the world's gallium, 90% of its magnesium and nearly 85 % of its tungsten in 2022.

Yellen said the United States could start by investing in the production of such critical minerals at home.

"But we must do more," she said, adding that the United States could, help "re-shore" some of those minerals in non-traditional countries to ensure they are readily available when needed.

"Looking beyond our shores, we are also working hard to accelerate the clean energy transition in other countries," Yellen said. "Accelerating these transitions can mean greater demand for US clean energy technologies produced by American workers. It can also bolster global clean energy supply chains."

The US Department of Energy added six elements last month to its expanded list of critical materials defined as indispensable to the clean energy transition with high supply risks. The so-called 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.

In that list, 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 report, citing data from the Paris-based International Energy Agency, 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,

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which the IEA says could account for 60% of all auto sales by 2030.

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FBI Says 75-Year-Old Man Killed in Utah Raid Pointed Gun at Agents

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - FBI agents shot and killed 75-year old Craig Robertson during a raid at his Utah home last week after he pointed a firearm at them, the FBI said in a statement.

"Robertson resisted arrest and as agents attempted to take him into custody, he pointed a .357 revolver at them," the statement said on Monday.

The agents were attempting to serve arrest and search warrants on Robertson for threatening elected officials and law enforcement officers, including President Joe Biden, the statement said.

The shooting incident is under review by the FBI Inspection Division in accordance with agency policy, the statement added.

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US Legal Experts Submit Brief in Support of January Trial for Trump Election Case - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - A group of US legal experts filed an amicus curiae brief in support of prosecutors' request to begin a trial in January against former President Donald Trump for alleged efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election.

The brief, filed on Monday in the US District Court for the District of Columbia, is backed by legal experts including former US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, former Deputy Attorney General Donald Ayer and former circuit court judge J. Michael Luttig.

"This Court should adopt the government's proposed trial date and schedule, in order that defendant Donald J. Trump and the American people receive the speedy trial to which both are entitled under the Constitution and laws of the United States," the filing said.

Last week, government prosecutors proposed that a trial against Trump begin on January 2, 2024. Earlier this month, a grand jury indicted Trump on four criminal charges linked to alleged efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 US presidential election.

Trump criticized the prosecutors' request and accused Special Counsel Jack Smith of attempting to interfere in the 2024 US presidential election, in which Trump is pursuing the Republican Party nomination.

The public is entitled to an "expeditious resolution" of the case against Trump, the filing said. Trump is also guaranteed the right to a speedy trial by the US Constitution, the filing said.

Prosecutors have said they expect the trial to take between four and six weeks.

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Some Missing People in Maui May Have Moved to Different Places to Escape Fires

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) – FEMA expects that some missing people on the Hawaiian Island of Maui might have moved to different locations in order to escape wildfires, Director for the Operations Division in FEMA's Response Directorate Jeremy Greenberg said.

"We know that there are people not yet unaccounted for, but we anticipate that there are people who have just moved to different locations, either in Maui, different islands in Hawaii, or perhaps even the mainland with loved ones and family members," Greenberg told reporters at the conference call on Monday.

He underscored that Hawaiian authorities are making "comprehensive reunification efforts" to find people who are alive but unaccounted for.

Other officials said during the call that authorities were able to resolve 800 out of 2,500 calls from people who wanted to reunite with family members.

Hawaiian authorities have confirmed 96 fatalities linked to the wildfires – the deadliest in the United States since 1918 – with the number expected to rise. The blaze started as brushfires on the islands of Maui and Hawaii last week.

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden officially declared a major disaster in Hawaii, which unlocks additional federal resources to help combat ongoing wildfires on the islands.

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Russia Demands That US Performs APEC Summit Chair Duties - Antonov

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - The upcoming Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in San Francisco is of serious concern to Russia and Moscow demands that Washington carry out its duty as chair, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said.

"Against this background, the forthcoming APEC summit in November in San Francisco causes serious concern, Antonov said on Monday. "We demand from the US administration responsible performance of the assumed duties of the chairman of the forum. We insist on the issuance of all permits to our representatives to enter the United States at the time indicated by them, and not at the last moment, as is often the case in American practice, when visas are issued during an already ongoing, and sometimes completed, event."

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ANALYSIS - Biden Restrictions on Chinese AI Investments Likely to Backfire

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is shooting itself in the foot and self-destructively damaging its own high tech economic growth by banning investments by American companies in Chinese artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities, experts told Sputnik.

Last week, President Joe Biden signed an executive order that restricts US companies from investing in Chinese artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities and technologies - including semiconductors and quantum computing.

The Biden administration said the move is intended to prevent such technologies from enhancing Chinese military, intelligence, and surveillance capabilities. In the executive order, Biden said his administration was concerned that certain US investments may accelerate the development of products China could use against the United States.

Retired US Army Colonel and international consultant Earl Rasmussen, former vice president of the Eurasia Center, described the new policy as "accelerated economic suicide."

"While the decision(s) are aimed to limit Chinese growth, they will likely impact the US and European economies greater. It is estimated that 70,000 US companies may be adversely impacted," Rasmussen told Sputnik.

Due to the previous Biden chip ban, US companies are expected to lose up to $80 billion," Rasmussen added.

"There is much discussion of decoupling from China for the US and Europe. This will likely have a much more adverse impact on the US and Europe than China," Rasmussen said. "Europe is already suffering from following the US lead in sanctions directed towards Russia, combine this will decoupling from China and we will only see an even greater economic death spiral."

Independent Institute Center for Peace and Liberty Director Ivan Eland believes that while they may impede Chinese capabilities somewhat, such limits will also curb the free flow of information and could slow US innovation. Not to mention, China is likely to retaliate, he added.

"China is likely to respond, which compounds the US self-induced wound. For example, bans on rare earth minerals," Eland told Sputnik. "They may also respond by making other economic and investment/trade deals where they can, once again hurting US companies."

Retired Brown University Assistant Professor of Economics Barry Friedman warned that US companies will not get the benefit of learning from Chinese production operations and developing cost-effective components for sale or use at home and third countries.

LITTLE IMPACT ON CHINA

Rasmussen said the executive order is more a move to limit Chinese growth than it is regarding US national security, but it is likely to have minimal effect. A report from the US-based Center for Security and Emerging Technology points out that Chinese investors remain the dominant investors in Chinese AI companies, Rasmussen noted.

"Between 2015 and 2021, at least 71% of the transaction value and 92% of the investment transactions came from Chinese investors. Hence, it is doubtful that the new restrictions will have any serious and long lasting impact," he said.

Moreover, despite all these restrictions, China remains the global manufacturing engine, he added. Rasmussen predicted that China will continue its partnership with the global south to assist in nurturing economic development and hence expanding their share of the global

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market.

Friedman said there are ways China can circumvent the restrictions.

"There could be ways to purchase advanced technology built into industrial products and traded in shadowy 'wholesale' markets. Example, the reports of Haas precision-machining tools and various semiconductors purchased through hidden transactions on the international market despite sanctions on direct sales to Russia," Friedman said.

Political commentator Alex Krainer, founder of Krainer Analytics, said the move is a shortsighted sign of desperation.

"I've gotten used to the zealots around Biden being long on ideology and short on all other talents, so I find it easy to believe they're just grasping at straws to show off some toughness and giving themselves some shiny negotiating chips, but I very much doubt that the Chinese are losing any sleep over this," Krainer told Sputnik.

Alan Tonelson, a long-time national security analyst who blogs at RealityChek, doubts the new measures will have much of an impact on China's military capabilities.

"Unfortunately, the new US curbs are still too narrowly drawn to slow China's military-related technology development significantly over time," Tonelson said.

Tonelson also said China has too much to lose to respond aggressively. In principle, Beijing retains formidable retaliatory capabilities in areas like rare earths and other critical minerals, but the US has leverage too given China is struggling to generate adequate growth and employment, Tonelson added.

Former London merchant banker, US financial analyst and columnist Martin Hutchinson, said the new policy will not produce any significant results. China's most effective retaliation to Biden's move would be to cut off rare earth supplies, but that could backfire, Hutchinson argued, saying that there are other unexploited sources for these materials outside of China.

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Trump Team Expecting Charges in Georgia to be Delivered 'Immediately'- Reports

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - Donald Trump's legal team is preparing work for an indictment in Georgia as lawyers expect charges to be delivered 'immediately,' CNN reported on Monday.

According to reports, Trump's team started collecting surrogates and allies, including pre-written responses as a reaction to newly applied charges. The same strategy is said to be applied in previous charges.

Earlier today, the Fulton County Clerk's office said that the document circulating online showing alleged criminal charges against former US President Donald Trump is fictitious and no documents have been filed.

The release said that no documents had been filed in the case on Monday. It also noted that papers that do not have an official case number, filing date, and the name of the clerk of courts are not considered official fillings and should not be treated as such.

Earlier in the day, Reuters reported that a document from the Fulton County District Attorney's

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McCarthy Says US House Republicans Will Continue to Address Rising Crime in Washington

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - Republicans in the US House of Representatives will continue to address rising crime in Washington, DC despite efforts by Democrats' objections to bills that support law enforcement, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said in a statement.
"While the Democrat Mayor and Democrat-led city government struggle to respond to the increased violence, this Republican Majority has already acted," the statement said on Monday. "While Democrat Mayors and Democrats in Congress refuse to acknowledge the crisis, Speaker McCarthy and House Republicans will continue to speak out and take action against rising crime in our communities."
Last week, the Washington Metropolitan Police Department released crime statistics that revealed year-to-date increases in homicide, robberies, sexual abuse and motor vehicle theft.
Democratic members of Congress voted against efforts by House Republicans to reform Washington's "soft-on-crime" approach in the Revised Criminal Code Act of 2022, the statement said. More than 100 Democrats also voted against a resolution to support local law enforcement and condemn calls to defund the police, the statement said.
However, crime should not be a partisan issue, the statement added.
Every resident and visitor to the nation's capital deserves to feel safe in the city, according to the statement.

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US Abusing APEC Host Status, Did Not Issue Visas to Several Russian Ministries - Antonov

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is fragrantly violating its Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) host country status, particularly by failing to issue visas to several Russian ministries and departments, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said.
"In the context of cooperation through APEC, the picture is extremely negative. We note the absolute unacceptability of Washington's actions as the current chairman of this authoritative multilateral platform as part of the third series of events held in Seattle by the senior officials of the forum," Antonov said on Monday. "In addition to politicizing discussions by bringing non-core

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topics into the agenda, the United States is again grossly abusing host status. Russian participation is discriminated against. Entry visas were not issued to representatives of several ministries and departments at once."
In addition, Antonov said there is a growing number of cases of Russia being refused connections to key meetings via video link.

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SPUTNIK TOP STPRIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) -

NIGER DEVELOPMENTS
* Military intervention by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to address the coup in Niger ought to be an option of last resort, US State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.
* The United States is dismayed by reports that Niger's National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland is threatening to prosecute ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, Patel said.
* The Peace and Security Council of the African Union said that it was holding a meeting to discuss recent developments in Niger where armed mutineers seized power in late July.

RUSSIA SPACE PROGRAM
* The Russian Space Research Institute on Monday published the first images provided by the Luna-25 lunar mission.
* Beijing congratulates Moscow on the successful launch of its Luna-25 lunar station, the first Russian lunar mission in almost 50 years, the Chinese Foreign Ministry told Sputnik.

US MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE
* The United States will provide Ukraine with an additional $200 million in security assistance to aid the regime in Kiev in its conflict against Russia, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday.
* The new $200 million US security assistance package for Ukraine includes additional munitions for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and Patriot air defense systems, the Department of Defense said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* The Russian Defense Ministry on Monday reported that a Spanish light mortar carrier Alacran was destroyed for the first time in the special military operation zone.
* Ukraine has lost up to 240 soldiers in the South Donetsk area over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* Widely-advertised Western equipment turned out to be far from flawless in real combat conditions, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

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* German defense contractor Rheinmetall said it would supply Ukraine with the Luna NG aerial reconnaissance drones in 2023 as part of Germany's military aid package for Kiev.

RUSSIAN ECONOMY

* The Bank of Russia said on Monday that it will hold an extraordinary meeting of the Board of Directors on Tuesday to discuss the key rate.

* The exchange rate of the US dollar at the Moscow exchange has fallen below 100 rubles after the Bank of Russia announcement on the key interest rate.

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Fulton County Clerk Says 'Fictitious Document' About Trump Charges Circulating Online

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - The Fulton County Clerk's office said Monday that the document circulating online showing alleged criminal charges against former US President Donald Trump is fictitious and no documents have been filed today.

"The Office of the Fulton County Clerk of Superior and Magistrate Courts has learned of a fictitious document that has been circulated online and reported by various media outlets related to The Fulton County Special Purpose Grand Jury," the Fulton County Clerk's office said in a press release.

The release said that no documents have been filed in the case on Monday. It also noted that documents that do not have an official case number, filing date, and the name of the clerk of courts are not considered official fillings and should not be treated as such.

Earlier in the day, Reuters reported that a document from the Fulton County District Attorney's Office was published online showing charges against Trump before being taken down. The two-page document, which Reuters said was published in a court filing system for a brief moment, showed multiple criminal charges against Trump, including violation of Georgia RICO (Racketeer, Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act), solicitation of violation of oath by a public officer, filing false documents, and making false statements, among others.

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Publication of Reported Trump Charges Before Grand Jury Vote Illegal - Lawmaker

(Updates with details in paras 6,7)

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis violated the law and should be removed from her position after her office filed election interference-related criminal charges against former President Donald Trump before a grand jury in the case voted whether to indict him.

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"This is completely against the law. The Fulton County DA [District Attorney] Fani Willis MUST BE REMOVED!!!," Greene said in a statement.

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The Fulton County District Attorney's office did not immediately respond to Sputnik's requests for comments.

Former Trump Attorney Rudy Giuliani, in a statement, suggested that the former US president's legal team should file a motion to dismiss for a constitutional due process violation for publicly issuing an indictment before the grand jury had actually signed one.

Donald Trump Jr., in a separate statement, described the incident as prosecutorial misconduct and an example of what a rigged system looks like. He further said Georgia's attorney general should get involved in the case after the alleged violation by the Fulton County district attorney.

ABC News reported that the Fulton County district attorney was going to begin presenting Trump's case to a grand jury on Monday.

Willis was expected to begin her presentation on Monday morning after a two-and-a-half-year investigation into Trump's alleged attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election and it is unknown how long it will take, the report said.

CNN reported Sunday that state prosecutors have evidence to prove that Trump's legal team had a role in the 2021 voting system breach in Coffee County and Willis plans to seek charges against more than a dozen people when she presents the case. She reportedly has texts and emails implicating several of those people in the computer breach in the rural Georgia county.

Trump has repeatedly condemned the criminal proceedings against him as attempts to weaponize the American justice system to prevent him from running in the 2024 US presidential election and denied any wrongdoing.

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White House Says Not Ready to Announce Biden's Travel to Hawaii After Devastating Fires

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) – The White House is not ready to announce any travel of US President Joe Biden to Hawaii following the devastating wildfires on Maui, press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Monday.

"I don't have anything to announce at this time," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing when asked whether Biden is planning to visit the islands. "On what the opportunities might be, what that may look like for a trip, right now we just don't have anything to share."

Deanne Criswell, the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), said during the briefing that she does not have an estimate of the damage from the fires in Hawaii and could not provide the exact number of deaths.

According to Criswell, there are at least 300 FEMA employees on the ground in Maui, the

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island most affected by the wildfires.

FEMA has activated its transitional sheltering program, which will allow moving displaced persons from shelters into hotels or motels while the issue of their long-term housing is being resolved, Criswell added.

Hawaiian authorities have confirmed 96 fatalities linked to the wildfires – the deadliest in the United States since 1918 – with the number expected to rise. The blaze started as brushfires on the islands of Maui and Hawaii last week.

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden officially declared a major disaster in Hawaii, which unlocks additional federal resources to help combat ongoing wildfires on the islands.

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Blinken, Nigerian President Discuss Restoring Constitutional Order in Niger - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by phone with Nigerian President Bola Tinubu to discuss ways to restore constitutional order in Niger, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"He [Blinken] noted the importance of maintaining pressure on the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) to restore constitutional order and to see President Mohamed Bazoum and his family released," Miller said in a statement.

Blinken also commended Tinubu for his leadership of the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) second extraordinary summit on the situation in Niger, Miller added.

In late July, the military seized power in Niger and ousted President Mohamed Bazoum.

Last week, ECOWAS leaders' summit in Abuja agreed to activate a standby force to potentially force the military to reinstate the deposed president. It came after the West African bloc's one-week ultimatum to restore constitutional order expired on August 6.

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Charges Reportedly Filed Against Trump in Georgia as Grand Jury Meets Illegal - Lawmaker

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The Fulton County District Attorney's office did not immediately respond to Sputnik's requests for comments.

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Taiwan Vice President to Return From Paraguay Via San Francisco - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - Taiwan Vice President and presidential candidate Lai Ching-te will transit through San Francisco on his way back from Paraguay, US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday* US * TAIWAN * TRANSIT * PARAGUAY *

Taiwan Vice President to Return From Paraguay Via San Francisco - US State Dept.#

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - Taiwan Vice President and presidential candidate Lai Ching-te will transit through San Francisco on his way back from Paraguay, US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

"Vice President Lai transited the US on August 12 through 13 through the outbound leg of his journey to Paraguay. He will transit San Francisco on the return leg," Patel said. "Such transits are routine and given the distances involved, they are common."

Patel emphasized that the United States is not interested in deviating from the status quo and the move is consistent with the One China policy.

"It is not any kind of pretext for coercion or provocative activity," Patel said.

On Sunday, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said Beijing expressed strong dissatisfaction over the transit of the Taiwan vice president through the United States and has strongly condemned the visit.

Under the guise of "transit," Washington and Taipei have organized an opportunity for Lai to carry out political activities in the United States in violation of the One China policy, which seriously damages China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

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Lai Ching-te said in a post on X (formerly known as Twitter) a day earlier that he had arrived in New York, making a transit stop on his way to Paraguay, where Lai will attend the inauguration of Paraguayan president-elect Santiago Pena.

On July 20, Taiwan's CNA news agency reported that China considered preventing Lai's transit stopovers in the United States a "top priority" given the very dangerous path Taiwan is taking..

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Quebec Gov't Open to Studying Whether to Restart Province's Only NPP - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - Quebec does not rule out a return to nuclear energy and the resumption of operations at the province’s only nuclear power plant (NPP), Global News reported on Monday, citing Quebec Energy Minister Pierre Fitzgibbon.

On Thursday, Quebec’s hydroelectric utility said it is studying whether to reopen Gentilly-2 NPP located in Becancour in response to a growing demand for clean energy.

Talking to reporters on Monday, Fitzgibbon said that all energy sources should be considered as the province tries to phase out fossil fuels in its energy sector, the report said.

He also warned that all energy projects should be both socially acceptable and economically profitable.

Gentilly-2 NPP was built in 1983 and closed in 2012 due to the high costs of refurbishment.

Hydro-Quebec's proposal has faced strong criticism from Canadian environmental groups such as Greenpeace Canada, and opposition lawmakers, who called on the government to begin a national dialogue on the province’s energy future.

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People in US State of Montana Have Constitutional Right to Clean Climate - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - People in the US state of Montana have a constitutional right to a clean environment under state law, the Montana First Judicial District Court said in an order filed on Monday.

In 2020, sixteen youths filed a complaint challenging Montana's energy policy, claiming it violated the right to a clean environment for "present and future generations," which is guaranteed by the state's constitution. The plaintiffs requested the court to provide a declaration of law concerning their rights and elements of the state's energy policy.

"Plaintiffs have a fundamental constitutional right to a clean and healthful environment, which includes climate as part of the environmental life-support system," the filing said.

Montana's ban on analyzing greenhouse gas emissions and corresponding impacts to climate as part of its energy policy violates that right, the filing added.

The plaintiffs were represented by Our Children's Trust, the Western Environmental Law Center and McGarvey Law.

"This is a huge win for Montana, for youth, for democracy, and for our climate. More ruling like this will certainly come," Julia Olson, Chief Legal Counsel for Our Children's Trust, said in a statement on the ruling.

McGarvey Law attorney Roger Sullivan characterized the ruling as a "landmark decision" that establishes enforceable principles of intergenerational environmental justice.

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US Confirms Ambassador Visited Gershkovich in Russian Prison, Says Reporter in Good Health

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - The US State Department on Monday confirmed that Ambassador to Russia Lynn Tracy had visited detained detained journalist Evan Gershkovich, who is in good health, State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

"Ambassador Tracy visited Evan Gershkovich today at Lefortovo Prison in Moscow," Patel said. "Ambassador Tracy said that Evan appears in good health and remains strong despite his very challenging circumstances."

The visit, which was the ambassador's third since Gershkovich was detained by the Russian authorities and occurred six weeks after her last meeting with him on July 3.

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

IMF, Argentina Reach Agreement Needed For Further Disbursements - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the government of Argentina reached a staff-level agreement at the end of last month that paves the way for unlocking further disbursements, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Monday.

"On July 28, the Argentine authorities and IMF staff reached staff-level agreement on the combined fifth and sixth reviews under Argentina's 30-month Extended Fund Facility (EFF) arrangement," Kozack said in a statement.

The agreement is subject to approval by the IMF Executive Board, which is expected to meet on August 23 to unlock the agreed disbursements, she said.

Kozack noted that the IMF welcomes Argentina's recent policy actions and commitment to safeguard stability, rebuild reserves and enhance fiscal order.

Argentina experienced an economic crisis in 2018, with annual inflation exceeding 50% since then, and a significant devaluation of the peso as it lost more than half of its value against the US dollar.

That same year, the IMF approved a $50 billion stand-by loan for Argentina to help the country reduce its budget deficit amid the soaring inflation. Later, the fund agreed to increase the size of the financing program to $56.3 billion. However, the deal was renegotiated in 2021 to $44 billion.

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FEATURE - Afghan Refugee in US Says Nobody Was Prepared for Taliban Takeover

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - Afghan refugee and former official, Ajmal Hussainkhail, told Sputnik on the second anniversary of the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) takeover that people were totally taken off guard by that development and shared his memories of the nine days in Kabul before escaping to the United States.

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban seized Kabul, two decades after being ousted by US-led forces in the wake of the September 11 attacks. The development accelerated the US troop withdrawal, which began in April and was completed in late August.

The Taliban's return triggered economic disarray and food shortages that have pushed the country to the brink of a humanitarian crisis. Thousands of Afghans have fled the country fearful of the Taliban, widespread violations of human rights and women and girls being deprived of their freedoms.

"We were not prepared for that. We were not informed that the Taliban will take over Afghanistan," Hussainkhail said. "We didn't think that it would happen."

NO WAY OUT

Hussainkhail, 31, a former director of revenue collection at the transport ministry and an owner of his own suit brand, came to the United States two years ago and is still trying to digest what

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happened in those days.

Hussainkhail still remembers the day that forever changed the lives of millions of people in Afghanistan. He and his colleagues had gathered at the ministry as they always did on Wednesdays and Sundays, to send money they had collected from tours to the Transport Ministry account at Afghanistan's Central Bank.

"That day, 12 members of the Taliban came to my office and asked what my job title was. I said, 'I'm director of revenue collection,' and they inquired why I had not escaped from the office as the others did," Hussainkhail recalled, adding that he immediately pointed out to the Taliban that both he and them were Afghans. "They told me that they needed cars and as they were with the guns, I said, 'Every car that you need, you can take it.'"

Since Hussainkhail agreed to give them the vehicles, the Taliban members promised not to take his car, and he went home. Being overwhelmed with thoughts and emotions, he fell asleep in the middle of the afternoon, and woke up the next morning to more than 100 missed calls and text messages from his wife's sister from Germany.

When he called her back, she started anxiously telling him to go to the airport and all people were already there trying to escape.

"I woke up my wife and we went to the Hamid Karzai International Airport. When we got there - it is 20 minutes away from my home - there was a huge crowd of the people and the taxi drivers," he said. "The taxi drivers were joking saying 'taxi to US. taxi to Canada.' They were laughing."

The Taliban took control of all gates of the airport and there was no way to go inside. So, Hussainkhail said, they turned around and came back home at midnight. On the way home, Hussainkhail's car was stopped at several checkpoints as Taliban looked for guns.

Over the ensuing days, he rarely went outside. Although he did not close down the clothing brand store, no customers came to buy suits. Meanwhile, the ministry remained closed with only security guards on site.

"Those days, many places were closed and pricing was too high. I gave some money to workers who were in charge of the door of the ministry," he said.

THE ESCAPE

About nine days later, Hussainkhail suddenly received a phone call from his brother-in-law, who is an American citizen and worked as a translator for the US government.

"He said 'I'm so sorry. When I was in Afghanistan I couldn't help you, but if you... go to the airport, the soldiers will definitely help you, because you worked with the US Embassy,'" Hussainkhail recollected.

His father soon drove them to the airport and once they got out of the car and approached the crowd waiting to get inside the airport, the Taliban hit Hussainkhail, as they were hitting everyone.

"A five-minute walk from the entrance, but we spent 30 hours to get to the gate of the airport," he remembered.

When asked for documents at a fourth checkpoint, he showed the officer the contract he had with the US embassy. The officer said he did not care about Afghan documents and told Hussainkhail to leave the area.

Then, all of a sudden, the officer said to hold on. The US official then noticed Hussainkhail had a certificate from USAID in his folder from a financial management course he took.

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"[The official] said that is my US visa," Hussainkhail said. "They let me in."

Once inside, Hussainkhail said US soldiers gave them food and water.

"Then, half an hour later the aircraft came and we left Afghanistan," he said. "That was the US Army Force plane with more than 400 people. No seats, people were just sitting in the middle of the airplane."

From Afghanistan, they had a four-hour flight to Kuwait where they were sent to a US military base for 10 days before flying to Washington, DC.

LIFE TODAY

They now live in Alexandria, Virginia, where Hussainkhail works as an Uber driver, while his wife is looking for a job as a midwife.

"I came here with just one shirt. We didn't have anything. We bought a car… everything is on credit," he shared. "We struggle every month to make our payments on time. It's very hard."

Hussainkhail said he needs to pay for both his family in the US and his family back in Afghanistan, including his sister who is fighting cancer.

And every month, because medical care in Afghanistan is not as high quality, his sister has to go to Pakistan, he explained.

"They have to pay a lot of money to the cops in order to cross the border, and also to the Taliban members and the Pakistani soldiers to let them go to Pakistan for treatment," he shared.

While the memories of the chaos in his country are still fresh, Hussainkhail feels like he is lucky to be where he is now and dreams about bringing his parents and sister to the United States.

He also dreams of reopening his clothing brand store to make suits.

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US Believes Military Intervention in Niger 'Last Resort' Option - State Department

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - Military intervention by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to address the coup in Niger ought to be an option of last resort, US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

"ECOWAS has been also very clear, and very clear publicly, that military intervention should be a last resort – something that we agree with, and we continue to be focused on finding a diplomatic solution and are in close contact with ECOWAS and their leadership on this," Patel said during a press briefing.

ECOWAS hinted at the possibility of military intervention in Niger, after Gen. Abdourahamane Tchiani ousted and arrested President Mohamed Bazoum last month. The mutineers have since agreed to begin talks with ECOWAS, new Nigerien Prime Minister Ali Mahamane Lamine Zeine reportedly said.

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State Dept Says 'Dismayed' by Niger Military Threatening to Prosecute Deposed President

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is "dismayed" by reports that Niger's National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) is threatening to prosecute ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, State Department principal deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

"We are incredibly dismayed by the reports that President Bazoum's unjust detention has gone even a step further and now the CNSP is threatening prosecution," Patel said during a press briefing.

The United States sees it as an "unwarranted and unjustified" step that will not contribute to a peaceful resolution of the crisis, Patel added.

On July 26, Niger's presidential guard ousted and detained President Bazoum. The guard's commander, Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani, proclaimed himself the president of the caretaker CNSP-led government.

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US Ambassador to Russia Visits Gershkovich in Prison - Wall Street Journal

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) – US ambassador to Russia Lynn Tracy visited detained American journalist Evan Gershkovich and found him in good health, his employer the Wall Street Journal said on Monday.

The visit, which was the ambassador's third since Gershkovich's detention, occurred earlier in the day, six weeks after her last meeting with the detained reporter on July 3, the news outlet said.

"Ambassador Tracy reported that Evan continues to appear in good health and remains strong, despite the circumstances," the report quoted the US Embassy in Moscow as saying in a statement.

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Ex-FBI Agent Tells Congress Biden's Team Was 'Tipped Off' on Hunter Biden Interview

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) – A former FBI specialist told the House Oversight Committee that the agency "tipped off" the Secret Service and the Biden transition team about plans to interview Hunter Biden as part of a criminal investigation in December 2020, according to testimony released on Monday.

"The former FBI SSA [supervisory special agent] … corroborated IRS Supervisory Special Agent Gary Shapley's testimony that FBI headquarters tipped off Secret Service headquarters and the Biden transition team about the planned Hunter Biden interview during US Attorney for

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Delaware David Weiss' investigation," the committee said in a statement.

Shapley previously told the committee that the Biden transition team and Secret Service were "tipped off" about the planned interview, and the FBI agent, who testified under oath on July 17, confirmed key details of the IRS whistle-blower's testimony.

The committee's Chairman James Comer noted that the FBI agent and Shapley wanted to interview Hunter Biden in 2020, but just the night before, they learned that the Biden team had been made aware of their plans. The two were then told not to approach Hunter Biden and to instead wait for his call, but received a message from Hunter's lawyer, the statement added.

"Tipping off the transition team and not being able to interview Hunter Biden as planned are just a couple of examples that reveal the Justice Department's misconduct in the Biden criminal investigation that occurred under US Attorney Weiss' watch," Comer said.

He added that the Oversight Committee has no confidence in Weiss, who has now been appointed as a Special Counsel in the Hunter Biden probe, because of his inability to prevent the Biden transition team from being warned of key developments.

US Attorney General Merrick Garland announced on Friday the appointment of Weiss as a special counsel in Hunter Biden's case. He said Weiss would provide a public report at the end of his investigation explaining his decision to file charges or not.

Comer, on the same day, stated that by designating Weiss, the Justice Department was attempting a cover-up for President Joe Biden's family.

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NOAA Says 'Virtually Certain' 2023 Among Top 5 Warmest Years on Record

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) on Monday warned that it was "virtually certain" 2023 would rank among the five warmest years on record, with a nearly 50% probability that it would be the warmest.

"It is virtually certain, over 99% chance, that 2023 will rank among the five warmest years on record, with nearly 50% probability that 2023 will rank warmest on record," NOAA Chief Scientist Sarah Kapnick said at a NASA press briefing on climate data.

Kapnick emphasized that July was the warmest month on record "by a long shot," specifically by more than a third of a degree Fahrenheit.

Given that July is typically the warmest month of the year, the data shows this July was also likely the hottest month of "any month in any year since at least 1850," she said.

Kapnick warned that temperatures this year would be considered cool by the middle of the 21st-century if greenhouse gas emissions continued.

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US Congresswoman Says Hawaii Warning Sirens Failed to Alert Residents of Wildfires

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - A siren warning system operated by the state of Hawaii failed to alert the islands' residents of wildfires that have since killed nearly 100 people, US Congresswoman Jill Tokuda said in an interview with CBS News.

"We know everybody who's ever lived in Hawaii knows the warning sirens," Tokuda said on Sunday, when asked about the alarm system. "Unfortunately, in this situation, sadly, tragically in this situation, those sirens likely did not go off."

The state of Hawaii tests its siren system at the beginning of each month in order to detect and fix failures, Tokuda added.

Hawaiian authorities have confirmed 96 fatalities linked to the wildfires – the deadliest in the United States since 1918 – with the number expected to rise. The blaze started as brushfires on the islands of Maui and Hawaii last week.

The wildfires and their impact are a "national crisis," Tokuda said. The US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) must be provided with proper resources to provide aid to Hawaii, Tokuda said.

Rebuilding impacted areas of Hawaii may cost nearly $6 billion, according to the United States' Pacific Disaster Center. More than 2,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed in the wildfires, 86% of which were residential structures, the center said.

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US Navy Becomes Third Military Branch Without Senate-Confirmed Leader

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - Following the retirement of Admiral Mike Gilday earlier on Monday, the US Navy became the third branch of the nation's military to have no leader due to Senator Tommy Tuberville's continued blocking of new confirmations.

During a retirement ceremony at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, the admiral gave up command after nearly four years of service in the position of the top Navy officer in the United States.

After Gilday's departure, Lisa Franchetti, the vice chief of naval operations since September 2022, will take over but have the prefix "acting" until she is confirmed by the Senate.

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin once again criticized Tuberville, who stands his ground and refuses to confirm the candidacies of now three military commands: the Navy, Army, and Marine Corps.

"Three of our military services are operating without Senate-confirmed leaders. This is unprecedented. It is unnecessary, and it is unsafe. This sweeping hold is undermining America's military readiness. It's hindering our ability to retain our very best officers and it is upending the lives of far too many American military families," Austin said during the ceremony.

According to media reports, Tuberville's hold has already affected 301 high-level military officials and this number is expected to more than double by the end of the year.

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US Confirms Explosion at Base in Northeast Syria, Assesses 'Not an Attack' - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - The US Central Command (CENTCOM) on Monday confirmed to Sputnik that an explosion occurred at the US base in the province of Al-Hasakah in northeastern Syria but the command does not assess it as an attack.

On Thursday, eyewitnesses told Sputnik that a powerful explosion was heard at the US base in the province of Al-Hasakah.

"We are aware of the reports. We can confirm an explosion occurred; no cause has been determined at this time," a CENTCOM spokesperson said. "We do not assess this as an attack."

Within an hour of the event, all US personnel were accounted for and no casualties were reported, the spokesperson added.

The blast was heard in the buildings of the Al-Jabsa oil field, which US forces use as a military base, the eyewitnesses said, adding that flames could be seen on the base's territory.

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US Senate Minority Leader McConnell Says 'Russia Has to Lose in Ukraine'

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said in an interview on Monday that he believes the ongoing conflict in Ukraine is the most important development taking place internationally and Russia must lose.

In his interview with Politico, McConnell reaffirmed his support for sending generous assistance to Ukraine and criticized those who think otherwise.

"That's obviously a person who doesn't know what they're talking about," McConnell said. "So let me just tell you what the people who are actually elected to office and actually make the decisions about how long America is committed to this [helping Ukraine] think: Russia has to lose in Ukraine and we can't put a time limit on it."

McConnell pointed out that Ukraine is fighting against one of the biggest US adversaries and that is why there is nothing to dislike about Washington's stance.

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Kansas Newspaper Says Will File Suit Against Police Over Raids 'Unheard of in America'

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - A Kansas newspaper, The Marion County Record, has said it will file a suit against local police over raids it believes violated First Amendment

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protections and also contributed to the death of a 98-year-old newspaper co-owner.

The police raided the newspaper's office and the home of its owners on Friday, seizing computers, file servers, and phones of the staff. On Saturday, co-owner Joan Meyer, 98, who was present during the search, collapsed and died at her home despite being in good health for her age. Meyer was "stressed beyond her limits and overwhelmed by hours of shock and grief" after what the newspaper says were illegal police raids.

"The Record is expected to file a federal suit against the City of Marion and those involved in the search, which legal experts contacted were unanimous in saying violated multiple state and federal laws, including the U.S. Constitution, and multiple court rulings," the newspaper said on Sunday.

Publisher Eric Meyer likened the police raids to Gestapo tactics.

"We will be seeking the maximum sanctions possible under law," he said.

The raid happened after the police received a complaint from a local restaurant owner who accused the newspaper of illegally obtaining and disseminating sensitive information on a drunk-driving conviction against her. A two-page warrant was given to the staff during the search.

Over 30 US major news outlets, along with The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, have condemned the raid and expressed concerns that the police actions violated the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

"Your department's seizure of this equipment has substantially interfered with the Record's First Amendment-protected newsgathering in this instance, and the department's actions risk chilling the free flow of information in the public interest more broadly, including by dissuading sources from speaking to the Record and other Kansas news media in the future," they said in a letter to the local police department.

The police declined to comment on the incident but expressed belief that when the rest of the story is available to the public, the judicial system that is being questioned will be vindicated.

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New US Military Aid for Ukraine Includes Munitions for HIMARS, Patriot Systems - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - The new $200 million US security assistance package for Ukraine includes additional munitions for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and Patriot air defense systems, the Department of Defense said on Monday.

"Today, the Department of Defense (DoD) announced additional security assistance to meet Ukraine's critical security and defense needs," the Pentagon said in a statement. "It includes additional air defense munitions, artillery and tank ammunition, anti-armor weapons, and other equipment to help Ukraine counter Russia's ongoing war of aggression."

The Presidential Drawdown Authority package will provide Ukraine with munitions for HIMARS and Patriots, 155mm artillery rounds, Javelin anti-armor systems, tactical vehicles and mine-clearing equipment from US stocks, the statement said.

The United States will continue to work with its allies and partners to provide Ukraine with

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capabilities to meet both immediate and long-term security needs, the statement added.

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US Announces New $200Mln Security Assistance Package for Ukraine - Blinken

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide Ukraine with an additional $200 million in security assistance to aid the regime in Kiev in its conflict against Russia, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday.

"Today we are announcing the next package of security assistance to aid Ukraine as it defends its territory and protects its people. This package, which is valued at $200 million and is being executed from previously authorized Presidential Drawdown Authority, includes air defense munitions, artillery rounds, anti-armor capabilities, and additional mine-clearing equipment," Blinken said in a statement.

The US and its allies will continue to prop up Ukraine for as long as it takes to reach a resolution, the statement added.

Security assistance provided through Presidential Drawdown Authority includes equipment from existing US Defense Department stockpiles to Ukraine instead of purchases from contractors.

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Russian Aircraft Detected in Alaska's Air Defense Identification Zone - NORAD

WASHINGTON, August 14 (Sputnik) - The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) said on Monday that it had detected and tracked a Russian military aircraft flying in Alaska's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) without violating US and Canadian airspace.

"The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) detected and tracked a Russian miliary aircraft operating in the Alaska Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) late August 13, and early morning August 14, 2023," NORAD said via the X platform (formerly known as Twitter).

The Russian aircraft operated in international airspace during the entire flight and did not violate US or Canadian sovereign airspace, the statement said.

NORAD noted that Russian military activity in Alaska's ADIZ is not uncommon and was not seen as a threat.

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