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8/30/23 Wednesday

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Breathtaking: Scientists Spot Completely New, Baffling Type of Oxygen

Scientists in an atomic lab in Japan have created two new forms of oxygen with puzzling properties, challenging prevailing theories about atomic structure.

It's the heaviest oxygen isotope you've ever seen, and it's behaving in a strange way: that's oxygen-28, one of two new isotopes of the organic element to have recently been created in a lab.

Yosuke Kondo of Tokyo Institute of Technology writes in an article published in Nature on Wednesday that her crew of scientists subjected some elements to "extreme conditions" to cause the formation of oxygen-28 and another isotope, oxygen-27, which is slightly smaller.

The two isotopes are both forms of oxygen, which always has eight protons in each atom - its defining feature as element number 8 on the Periodic Table. However, an elemental atom can have any number of neutrons and not change its chemical properties.

Previously, the most neutrons ever seen in an oxygen nucleus was 18, an isotope known as oxygen-26 because it also has the eight protons inside it.

To force the new isotopes of oxygen to form, Kondo's team used the RIKEN Radioactive Isotope Beam Factory in the Japanese city of Saitama. Officials fired a beam of calcium-48 isotopes at a beryllium target to break off pieces of the calcium - which has 20 protons in its nucleus - and produce lighter atoms. Among those produced were atoms of fluorine-29, which has 9 protons and 20 neutrons and sits next to oxygen on the Periodic Table.

Researchers then took this fluorine-29 atom and smashed it together with a liquid hydrogen atom - which has 1 proton in its nucleus - to trim the fluorine down into oxygen. It worked, and they produced two different atoms using the procedure, one with 20 neutrons and one with 19 - oxygen-28 and oxygen-27, respectively.

While all that is pretty basic particle collider stuff, what happened next has baffled scientists, who expected oxygen-28 to be stable: it decayed, experiencing "spontaneous neutron emission," according to the paper.

That is, it quickly shed four neutrons and became oxygen-24. Oxygen-27 also quickly decayed, losing three neutrons to also become oxygen-24.

Stability was expected due to mathematical relationships governing "shells" of particles in the nucleus, in which multiples of eight and 20 are considered "magic" numbers due to their typically high stability. Kondo's team expected oxygen-28 to be stable because its isotope number is "doubly magic."

For example: the form of oxygen we breathe here on Earth is oxygen-16, which is a multiple of eight and is extremely stable - so don't worry, your breath isn't about to be spontaneously taken away!

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US Plan to Flood Pacific With AI-Driven Drones Risks Uncontrollable Escalation With China

Artificial intelligence can't be trusted to auto-correct emails, much less make civilization-altering decisions about the use of lethal force, a peace activist told Sputnik on Wednesday. Putting autonomous weapons into high-risk situations only risks triggering a war nobody can back down from.

The US Department of Defense has unveiled a new AI drone program designed to close the gap with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Called "Replicator," the program aims to introduce thousands of cheap and disposable - "atrittable" in Pentagon parlance - autonomous drones over the next two years.

"Replicator will galvanize progress in the too-slow shift of US military innovation to leverage platforms that are small, smart, cheap and many," US Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks said on Tuesday at an industry event.

Noting that China's core advantage is mass - "more ships, more missiles, more people" - Hicks said the US would "counter" the PLA's mass "with mass of our own, but ours will be harder to plan for, harder to hit, and harder to beat."

Michael Wong, the national vice president of Veterans for Peace, co-chair of the Veterans for Peace China Working Group, and co-founder of Pivot to Peace, a coalition of Chinese and peace communities, told Radio Sputnik that giving AI the power to both trigger and escalate military conflicts "poses a great danger to all of humanity."

"We should be very concerned. Let me make three main points. First, China does not want an arms race. They've spoken at the UN about this and they're very much against having such a race in the first place. And my second point is, if there is an arms race, if the United States is foolish enough to force it on China, China will win. And my third point is, these AI, sometimes called killer robots, are a danger to all of humanity because they interact with each other, they could conceivably interact with our nuclear systems, and it risks decisions being made by AI without the oversight of humans or controlled by humans that will escalate situations out of control," he said.

"Zhang Jun, who is the China representative to the UN, spoke at the UN recently, and he urged the UN a lead in advocating for a peaceful use of AI, regulations and rules to control the development of AI and to direct AI for peaceful use, not for weapons. And he felt that standards need to be made to regulate and control AI. And UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres also said that interaction between AI, nuclear weapons, biotechnology, neurotechnology and robotics is deeply alarming," Wong explained.

"And yes, if China were to have an arms race forced on them on AI, China's actually slightly more advanced in some ways in AI than we are. They also are able to mass produce things in general much faster than we are. For example, here in California, we've been trying for over a decade to build high speed rail just from San Francisco to Los Angeles. We have not been able to do that. China has built thousands of miles of light rail all across the country, networking every

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major city in China in just about ten years. So in terms of mass producing anything, China will win if we engage in a race with China."

Wong then pointed out a very practical example of why giving computers such authority is dangerous: they can't even get things like spell-checking and auto-correcting text right.

"How much trouble do you have with your computer? Would you trust your computer to make life and death decisions for you?" he asked. "You know, I have trouble with my smartphone auto-correcting my email, making mistakes, and making them wrong. Yeah, you know. So do we want autonomous robots, killer robots out there deciding which humans to kill and when and why?"

"And also if two automated nationwide systems are fighting each other, they will be geared and programmed to win, which means that if they can't win, they will escalate. And that means that escalation could easily spiral out of control. We could end up in a nuclear war. So this is very foolish. There is an actually an organization I discovered called Stop Killer Robots dot org. If anybody wants to go to their website, they can get involved."

For years, the US and its allies have engaged in so-called "freedom of navigation operations" (FONOPS) in which they deliberately flout the territorial claims of other nations that they consider to be "excessive" by sailing US warships through those waters. In the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, such demonstrations have become commonplace, although China takes them seriously and has at times met FONOPS with a stern response, sending their warships and aircraft to within a few dozen feet of the violating US ship or plane.

Wong noted that the Pentagon's "Replicator" program would increasingly put AI into such flashpoints.

"For Americans to understand how China feels, just imagine if China or Russia were doing freedom of navigation patrols up and down our coast. And when I say freedom of navigation patrols, I'm not even just talking about sending a cruiser or a destroyer through these waters every every few months, I'm talking about entire aircraft carrier battle groups, a whole armada of ships patrolling up and down China's coast. And that's very provocative. Just imagine if China or Russia were doing that to us. How would we feel? That would be a very obvious threat. The Americans, when they read the mainstream news, they hear China's being aggressive, China's being a threat. China is not on our borders, that China's not running battle groups up and down our coast. We're doing it to them," he said.

"And we say, well, we're defending our allies in the Pacific. Our allies are not under threat. China's not threatening Japan. China is not threatening South Korea, China is not even threatening Taiwan."

We keep saying China intends to invade Taiwan: China's very clear they've been saying the same thing now that they've been saying for 50 years, which is 'We want peaceful reunification with Taiwan eventually, no time frame named, and that we would only consider use of force if Taiwan were to declare independence.' The United States keeps trying to push that red line. And if you look at polls in Taiwan, the polls always say a majority of people in Taiwan want to maintain the status quo. And the status quo is working for both sides just fine right now. You know, there's been billions of dollars in trade that goes back and forth each year between the mainland and Taiwan, there's thousands of tourists and businesspeople that go back and forth every year, the economies are thriving on both sides. The status quo is working just fine. So the

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United States is the one that keeps pushing the red line and trying to provoke a war just like we did in Ukraine," Wong said.
"There's no need for this. The United States basically is trying to stop China from its peaceful economic rise because they don't want a large segment of the world not being under the thumb of US domination. It's basically exploitation and imperialism of the Third World, of which China is still a part."
"The US elite, especially right now, is composed of people who have a very arrogant and unrealistic view of America and the world. They keep introducing new weapons systems into Ukraine and thinking that that's going to turn the tide of war. And each time they're proven wrong, because whatever they do, the Russians will counter it," he said. "And they're applying that same logic to China, that they can come up with some new gimmick that can somehow defeat China."
"This magical thinking is very, very dangerous. You know, there's always been talk about pushing the edge of nuclear escalation in Ukraine, and they're doing the same thing with China, they're pushing the edge, constantly, of escalation. They're introducing new systems, they're getting more and more desperate and they're engaging in more and more magical thinking, which is extremely dangerous. And once we have all these AI killer robots running around the planet - because not just China, but, you know, many countries can develop them - we'll have something that we don't have control over. It almost looks like the 'Terminator' series of movies that Arnold Schwarzenegger starred in."

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Zelensky 'Pissed Off' Biden at First Meeting With 'Absurd' Demands, New Book Claims

The first time he came to visit the White House after US President Joe Biden had taken office, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky "bombed" the visit, according to a new book about the drama of Biden's first two years in office.
Zelensky made his first trip to Washington, DC, in early September of 2021 to meet with Biden. While the Ukrainian leader had been in office for three years by that point, he had only met Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York City and never visited the US capital city some 200 miles to the southwest.
The visit was recounted by Atlantic staff writer Franklin Foer in his new book "The Last Politician: Inside Joe Biden's White House and the Struggle for America's Future," which will hit shelves next week.
"Even Zelensky's most ardent sympathizers in the administration agreed that he had bombed," Foer said of the meeting, according to news outlets that received advance copies of the book. According to Foer's recounting, Zelensky "pissed off" Biden with his demand to join NATO and his "absurd analysis" of alliance dynamics.
"Zelensky's frustration occluded his capacity for logic. After begging to join NATO, he began to lecture that the organization is, in fact, a historic relic, with waning significance. He told Biden

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that France and Germany were going to exit NATO," Foer wrote. "It was an absurd analysis - and a blatant contradiction. And it pissed Biden off."
"It suggested more difficult conversations to come," Foer added.
According to Foer, Zelensky seemed to blame Biden for the "humiliation" he suffered during Trump's first impeachment, which centered around claims Trump had abused his power by threatening to withhold military aid for Kiev until Zelensky's government relaunched a probe into Joe Biden and his son, Hunter Biden, who in 2014 had been the head of Washington's Ukraine policy and a board member of the Ukrainian gas company Burisma, respectively. This, Foer said, contributed to the "political awkwardness" of the 2021 encounter.
Foer also writes that Zelensky saw Biden as weak after having decided to waive sanctions against the Russian company building the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which was part of an attempt to assuage the government of then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel, which had banked heavily on the new gas line to meet German energy needs.
Foer added that Biden saw Zelensky, who had previously been an actor and not a politician, as an "amateur" for having unwittingly played a part in US Sen. Ted Cruz's (R-TX) antics regarding blocking State Department nominees over the sanctions waiver.
"To be fair, Biden didn't think much of his Ukrainian counterpart, either," Foer added, noting that Biden was more comfortable with fellow lifelong politicians than slapstick comedians.
In his book, Foer does not use direct quotes or cite sources, but according to the book's publisher, Penguin Random House, the text is based on "unparalleled access to the tight inner circle of advisers who have surrounded Biden for decades."
The book covers Biden's presidency from January 2021 up to the present, shedding light on the events following the January 6, 2021, insurrection, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Biden's political sparring with Republicans, and the beginnings of the conflict in Ukraine, among other events.

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US Sues to Block Company From Salvaging Pieces of RMS Titanic Wreck

Earlier this year, a commercial sightseeing expedition to the Titanic by OceanGate Expeditions ended disastrously after its unorthodox submersible design, which did not meet commonly accepted safety requirements, catastrophically imploded. The accident instantly killed all 5 aboard, including OceanGate CEO Stockton Rush.
A US company is facing a lawsuit by the federal government that seeks to block the firm from undertaking an expedition to the wreck of the RMS Titanic. The US has argued the shipwreck is a hallowed gravesite, and taking pieces from it would violate international agreements about its care.
The suit has been filed in the US District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia against RMS Titanic, Inc. (RMST), which has plans for a May 2024 expedition to the Titanic wreck.

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RMST says in its suit that it plans to take images of the entire shipwreck, including “inside the wreck where deterioration has opened chasms sufficient to permit a remotely operated vehicle to penetrate the hull without interfering with the current structure."

The company has also said it plans to bring back artifacts from the debris field surrounding the hull and “may recover free-standing objects inside the wreck,” including “objects from inside the Marconi room, but only if such objects are not affixed to the wreck itself.”

The Marconi room houses the ship’s Marconi wireless telegraph machine, an early 20th century wireless communication device invented by Italian engineer Guglielmo Marconi that uses Morse code. The crew of RMS Titanic used the machine to signal for help as the ship began to sink. Fortunately, nearby vessels and shore listening stations picked up the distress calls and sent help, saving the lives of more than 700 passengers scattered in the frigid North Atlantic waters near where the Titanic sank on April 15, 1912.

“At this time, the company does not intend to cut into the wreck or detach any part of the wreck,” RMST stated, adding it intends to “work collaboratively” with the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which oversees US relations concerning the wreck.

The company claims it does not need a permit for the expedition, but US government lawyers see it differently.

The US, United Kingdom, France and Canada have jointly agreed to treat the site of the Titanic wreck as a sacred burial site and to block attempts at looting or salvaging the wreck, which sits beneath 12,500 feet of water. While some 700 passengers were saved, another 1,500 passengers and crew perished in the freezing waters amid a botched evacuation operation that included an inadequate number of lifeboats.

“RMST is not free to disregard this validly enacted federal law, yet that is its stated intent,” the US government’s filing argues. If the company does so, the wreck “will be deprived of the protections Congress granted it.”

After the Titanic’s wreck was found in 1985 by a Franco-American joint search effort, the US Congress passed a law stating that “no person shall conduct any research, exploration, salvage, or other activity that would physically alter or disturb the wreck or the wreck site of the RMS Titanic.”

Since its discovery, the Titanic has been the subject of extensive research, including exploration by manned and unmanned deep sea vehicles. RMST has played a major role in the recovery of more than 4,000 artifacts from the wreckage site, the largest of which was a 2-ton piece of a reciprocating engine.

However, public opinion turned strongly against subsequent attempts to raise pieces of the ship after a 1996 effort to bring back a piece of the hull failed spectacularly and was compared to “piracy” and “grave-robbing.”

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Undercover Biden - Cartoon

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Earlier Wednesday, reports surfaced detailing that a new batch of emails had been obtained by the America First Legal group, and that the latest findings showed just how Hunter Biden involved himself in his father's dealings from planning White House events to using his the Biden name to gain access for associates.

The US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is reportedly in possession of nearly 5,400 emails, electronic records, and other documents that show US President Joe Biden used pseudonyms while discussing foreign business deals with his son, Hunter Biden, during his time as vice president.

The revelation was recently voiced by US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer, who detailed on Tuesday via social media that NARA "admitted" to having in its possession over 5,000 emails' worth of evidence on the matter.

The House committee earlier requested unredacted information from the National Archives that's outlined the president's alleged email addresses through a pseudonym, with the Southeastern Legal Foundation group filing a federal lawsuit against NARA to obtain the nearly 5,400 emails linked to email accounts: robinware456@gmail.com, JRBWare@gmail.com and Robert.L.Peters@pci.gov.

"We have performed a search of our collection for Vice Presidential records related to your request and have identified approximately 5,138 email messages, 25 electronic files and 200 pages of potentially responsive records that must be processed in order to respond to your request," the NARA wrote in an email to the nonprofit on June 24, 2022.

"Please keep in mind that these totals are an estimate and that all material processed may not be applicable to your specific topic," it continued. "The staff of the Archival Operations Division is currently processing and reviewing FOIA requests that precede your request. To treat everyone equitably, we have placed your request in our Complex queue by the date it was received in our office."

The president has denied accusations of influence peddling or any wrongdoing, adding that there was a wall between his work as the vice president under former US President Barack Obama and the business dealings of his family.

But while House Republicans investigating Biden have not produced evidence of any wrongdoing just yet, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy announced last week that he may launch an impeachment inquiry against the president in September.

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Majority of Voters Are Skeptical of Possible Biden Impeachment - Poll

While a majority of the poll's respondents have said that a vote should occur before an impeachment inquiry begins, the House speaker may neglect those opinions.

A poll published on Wednesday has revealed that a majority of American voters (56%) see a possible impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden as more of a partisan political stunt than those (38%) who view it as a “serious effort to investigate important problems.”

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At least 53% of Independents who responded to the poll also agreed that an impeachment inquiry would be more of a political stunt.
The poll was conducted by Public Policy Polling and commissioned by the Congressional Integrity Project, both groups of which lean Democrat. Some 37% of those who responded to the poll said they were Democrat, while 32% said they were Republican and 31% said they were Independent.
About 88% of Biden voters said an impeachment of the president would be a “partisan political stunt” while just 20% of former US President Donald Trump’s voters said the same. When grouped politically, 81% of Democrats held this view, while 30% of Republicans said the same. Another 73% of Trump voters, and just 7% of Biden backers said the impeachment inquiry would be a “serious effort to investigate important problems.”
The survey then asked respondents whether Republicans should still move to impeach Biden if “no evidence is found” in the investigation. In response, 61% said they should not impeach him, while 32% said they should, and 7% said they were not sure.
“MAGA Republicans’ impeachment promises are nothing more than a partisan political stunt designed to hurt President Biden, and the American people know it,” said Leslie Dach, a senior adviser for the Congressional Integrity Project. "Republicans have failed to find a single shred of evidence of wrongdoing by President Biden and voters see right through their partisan games.”
A possible impeachment investigation in Biden appears to be on the horizon for Congress as summer comes to a close. Last week, US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) said he would launch an impeachment inquiry in September should the Biden administration fail to turn over documents he believes are tied to an alleged bribery scheme involving his family.
Several Republicans have shown hesitation regarding a possible impeachment inquiry. But instead of backing down, McCarthy has said he will consider launching the inquiry without a vote. At least 59% of respondents to the survey said that the House should hold a vote to authorize the inquiry, compared to 30% who said it would not be necessary.

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Jet Skiing Man Discovers WWI-Era Ship Once the Size of a Football Field

The Texas river in which the remains of the vessel was found is more than 400 miles long and acted as a shipping lane for barges and ferry boats during the 1800s. The waterway is now considered somewhat of a graveyard for World War I-era ships.
After a summer of heat and minimal rainfall in Texas, a jet skier in Evadale made a shocking discovery after coming across debris that belonged to a wooden ship dating back to World War I.
Bill Milner was jet skiing on the Neches River, just north of Beaumont, Texas, when he found what he knew to be a very large vessel.
Within moments, he informed the Ice House Museum in nearby Silsbee of his discovery, with the museum later contacting the Texas Historical Commission in Austin. Further analysis of the

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scene revealed that Milner had not only stumbled across one large wooden ship, but potentially five.

"The amazing story of these shipwrecks began in WWI, when German submarines were making more than a little headway sinking US merchant ships in the Atlantic," the Ice House Museum said in a statement on social media. "There was a grave concern that the loss of these merchant ships would seriously impede their ability to get materials for the war, as well as food and other commodities needed by the American people."

When the US first entered WWI in 1917, officials established the Emergency Fleet Corporation which built 19th-century-style wooden ships powered by steam engines due to short supplies of steel, and because many of the active shipyards were completely full as they worked to build steel ships. The wooden ships, in any case, were only destined to make a one-way voyage to deliver supplies.

However, with the war ending in 1918, the US government had no idea how to sell their 280-foot-long wooden ships. The US government later allowed the ships, which were built in Beaumont, to be abandoned or sold for its timber and iron for a 0.0040% of what the entire ship had cost to make.

"The reason that you find these in the Neches is because when the war ended, the ships sort of lost their purpose," said Amy Borgens, the state marine archaeologist with the Texas Historical Commission. "And it was really difficult for the government to find buyers for wooden-hulled ships at that time. And so these vessels, many of which were constructed at a cost of $250,000 each, some of these were sold for just $1,000, just for the salvage of wood and iron."

Citing an article from 1924, an official with the Ice House Museum indicated the five ships that were discovered by Milner caught fire that same year in the Neches River, burning down to their waterline.

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Ramaswamy Hits Back After Eminem Files Cease-And-Desist Over GOP Hopeful's Use of 'Lose Yourself'

The 38-year-old GOP 2024 hopeful recently performed Eminem's third-best-selling song at the Iowa State Fair, during which over a million people descended on the area in order to familiarize themselves with the 2024 Republican candidates.

Vivek Ramaswamy, a contender vying for the GOP nomination in the 2024 election cycle, responded to a recent cease-and-desist letter issued at the request of American rapper Eminem, explaining he used one of the musician's song as he felt he could relate to the artist's rise to success.

Addressing the controversy to US media, Ramaswamy first jokingly asked "will the real Slim Shady please stand up?" before laughing at his own joke.

"Eminem, in his rise, used to be a guy who actually stood up to the establishment and said the things the establishment didn't want him to say," the Republican presidential candidate said. "I think the fact that my political viewpoints may differ from his—I think people change over the

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course of their lives. But I have hope for him that one day he will rediscover the renegade that made him great."

According to Ramaswamy, the song has been a longtime favorite. He claims to have picked the song as his “life's theme song” while he was studying at Harvard in 2006, and reportedly raps the hit song at open mic nights and karaoke bars.

“I saw myself, honestly, making it big through American capitalism, and that’s why the Eminem story spoke to me,” Ramaswamy said in late July.

“I didn’t grow up in a trailer, but I also didn’t grow up in the same circumstances that most of my peers at Harvard did, either. I aspired to achieve what many of their parents did. It kind of spoke to me, I would say,” Ramaswamy explained, comparing his own life story to that of Eminem’s.

The 50-year-old rapper did not attend college, and his childhood was reportedly marked by poverty and abuse. Ramaswamy, on the other hand, was raised by a lawyer and a psychiatrist, and attended an elite private high school in Cincinnati where tuition (today) would cost over $16,000 a year. The GOP candidate’s parents even created a stock portfolio for him that generated hundreds of dollars in dividends before he graduated high school, and then thousands of dollars while he was attending Harvard.

Soren Baker, author of "The History of Gangster Rap," told a New York journal: "What Vivek is doing is trying to align himself with the struggle of overcoming adversity. From what I know of Vivek's policies, objectives and goals, they're not in alignment with Eminem at all."

Eminem sent a cease-and-desist letter to Ramaswamy after the GOP candidate publicly performed his own rendition of the rapper’s song “Lose Yourself.” The rapper’s song, which he performed last year to a roaring crowd at the Super Bowl LVI halftime show, was first released in 2002.

Ramaswamy’s campaign was issued the cease-and-desist letter by Broadcast Music Inc., a music licenser, at Eminem’s request. The letter was reportedly written last Wednesday after the licensing group said it received a communication from “Marshall B. Mathers, III, professionally known as Eminem, objecting to Vivek Ramaswamy campaign’s use of Eminem’s musical compositions.”

According to BMI, Eminem revoked the biotech multi-millionaire's rights to use the music while making campaign appearances. “BMI will consider any performance of the Eminem Works by the Vivek 2024 campaign from this date forward to be a material breach of the Agreement for which BMI reserves all rights and remedies with respect thereto," the letter read.

Occurrences of artists sending conservative politicians cease-and-desist letters, or similar objections, are not rare. In 1984, singer Bruce Springsteen chided then-President Ronald Reagan for planning to use "Born in the USA" for his campaign.

Then in 2016, former President Donald Trump was reprimanded by musical artists Adele, Aerosmith, the Rolling Stones, and R.E.M. when his campaign used their music without their knowledge. Neil Young even sued Trump for using “Rockin' in the Free World” and “Devil’s Sidewalk” for his campaign. The former president, who is running for a second shot at the presidential seat in 2024, attempted to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities while he was in office.

Most recently, rapper Dr. Dre sent a cease-and-desist letter to conservative congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene when she used one of his songs in a promotional video.

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US Announces Over $450Mln in Funding to Combat Drug Overdose Epidemic – White House

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) – The White House announced more than $450 million in funding on Thursday to address the nationwide epidemic of drug overdoses, according to a release.

"Today, in support of President Biden's Unity Agenda efforts to beat the overdose epidemic and save lives, the Biden-Harris administration is announcing more than $450 million to strengthen prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery support services and crack down on illicit drug trafficking," the release stated.

The new funding will be directed to various initiatives to strengthen prevention efforts, support state and local treatment and recovery efforts, and dismantle illicit drug trafficking organizations.

The announcement came on International Overdose Awareness Day and amid Biden's declaration of August 27 to September 2 as Overdose Awareness Week to raise awareness of overdoses of illicit fentanyl and other drugs.

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Ukraine Important Part of Discussions During High-Level Week - UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, August 31 (Sputnik) - Ukraine will be a crucial topic during the United Nations high-level week, the US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday.

"A high-level week is about many different issues … ," Thomas-Greenfield told journalists. "But Ukraine, of course, is going to be an important part of what we will be discussing. I understand, Albania will host during the high-level week, a meeting on Ukraine."

The United States is wrapping up its presidency of the UN Security Council for month of August. Thomas-Greenfield said that Russia has tried to obstruct the work of the Council but they 'failed'.

Albania will be presiding during September. September is the busiest month for the United Nations because of the high-level week and especially the General Assembly debate, starting on September 19, when all world leaders gather in New York.

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White House Asks Congress to Adopt Short-Term Measure to Fund Federal Government

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration asked US Congress to adopt a short-term measure to fund the federal government and to avert a potential shutdown, the Washington Post said on Thursday.

The White House requested Congress to address the issue earlier in the day. The administration also asked lawmakers to support funding for a number of "cash-starved" programs. That includes an additional $1.4 billion to prevent a potential disruption in nutritional aid for low-income families, the report said.

"Although the crucial work continues to reach a bipartisan, bicameral agreement on fiscal year 2024 appropriations bills, it is clear that a short-term continuing resolution (CR) will be needed next month," a spokeswoman for the Office of Management and Budget said, according to the report.

The measure would provide lawmakers additional time to consider a spending deal to avoid a government shutdown, it added.

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Almost 40% of Americans Concerned Over School Safety - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) – Nearly 40% of Americans expressed concern over their children's school safety amid a spike of gun violence in the country, a new Gallup poll said on Thursday.

"Parents of school-aged children in the U.S. remain more apprehensive than usual about their child's physical safety at school, as 38% say they fear for their child's safety," the poll said.

While this number is down slightly from the 44% measured in 2022, the survey noted that it remains among the highest readings since 1977. "The historical high, 55%, was measured immediately after the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, in which two students killed 12 students and a teacher before committing suicide," it added.

Every seventh parent, or 14%, said that their child expressed fears about school safety, according to the survey. This is less than the 20% reported a year ago but above the average 12%.

"Although the federal government took steps to address gun violence and school safety…, the issue continues to be a problem. More than 20 shootings have occurred on K-12 school grounds so far this year, including one resulting in six deaths at a Christian school in Nashville, Tennessee, in March," the survey said.

The poll was conducted by phone from August 1-23 among 219 adults with school children in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

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

Fed's Inflation Tracker PCE Index up 3.3% in Year to July - Commerce Department

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) - The Personal Consumption Expenditure (PCE) Index, a US inflation indicator closely followed by the Federal Reserve, rose by 3.3% in the year to July, slipping further from the central bank's annual 2% target for price growth, Commerce Department data showed on Thursday.

"From the same month one year ago, the PCE price index for July increased 3.3 percent," the department's Bureau of Economic Analysis said in a statement.

The growth in the PCE Index was precisely as forecast by economists polled by US media. It was also a touch higher than the July annual growth of 3.2% in the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which serves as a broader measure of inflation. In other comparison, the PCE Index grew by 3.0% in June.

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More Than 300,000 Homes in US Have No Power After Hurricane Idalia

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) – More than 300,000 utility customers in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina are still suffering power outages after Hurricane Idalia devastated the southeastern US states, the Poweroutages.us website tracker said on Thursday.

The most significant impact of the storm was registered in Florida, where almost 146,000 people have no power. Another 107,000 customers still have no electricity in the state of Georgia.

Idalia also affected North and South Carolina, where more than 57,000 people are still facing power outages, according to the website.

Hurricane Idalia made landfall as a Category 3 storm in Florida Wednesday morning before weakening as it moved towards Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator Deanne Criswell warned on Wednesday that residents in the affected areas may experience the impacts of the hurricane throughout the weekend.

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BRICS Not Aiming to Confront Other Blocs, Create New Cold War - Ex-World Bank Official

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) - The expansion of BRICS is not aimed at confronting other trade blocs or to create a Cold War type of standoff between countries, former executive

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director of the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank Rogerio Studart told Sputnik.

"I don't like the narrative that... this is a bloc that is expanding to confront another bloc," Studart said. "I think it's much more complex. We have a collective failure in addressing the most important issues that we have in front of us, from inequality, geopolitical issues, climate change, poverty, that is, for me, the heart of the problem, not that we have two blocs trying to establish another Cold War or something like that."

Studart adds that he is hopeful the BRICS expansion is going to lead to better cooperation in the international community because the world is too much in trouble when it comes to inequality, climate change, and geopolitical tensions.

"The main problem is that the multilateral system has been failing countries for too many years," Studart said. "The IMF [International Monetary Fund], the World Bank, they have not responded in the way that many countries would have expected, particularly after the 2009 [financial] crisis."

The creation of the BRICS itself was a response to frustrations over the shortcomings of multilateral institutions, developed to provide the capacity to accommodate different interests of those countries, particularly emerging market nations, Studart said.

Last week, the BRICS group of major emerging economies - Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa - announced that its membership is more than doubling. Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia were invited to join the group; their membership will take effect on January 1, 2024.

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BRICS Objective Not to Dethrone Dollar, Designed to Expand Trade - Ex-World Bank Official

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) - The BRICS expansion does not have its sights set on dethroning the US dollar, instead it seeks to expand access to trade and financing for developing countries, former executive director of the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank Rogerio Studart told Sputnik.

"I don't think that the objective of the extension of the BRICS was to dethrone the dollar, but you make sure that the bloc can have access to finance and to trade that the dollar is not providing anymore for different reasons," Studart said.

Studart, as an example, explained that Argentina has plenty of energy resources but it's constrained by its huge debt crisis and it needs dollars at the moment in order to continue to export it.

"So to have an agreement that allows Argentina or any other developing country to continue increasing trade and creating employment and bringing investment without going to a currency that has become scarce and controlling - it's the solution," Studart said.

Last week, the BRICS group of major emerging economies - Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa - announced that its membership is more than doubling. Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia were invited to join the group; their

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membership will take effect on January 1, 2024.

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G7 Must Act on Debt Crisis to Maintain Global Influence - Ex-World Bank Official

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) - The Group of Seven (G7) countries should address the debt crisis around the world if they expect to maintain the same global influence and partnership with other countries, former executive director of the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank Rogerio Studart told Sputnik.

"If they [the G7] want to keep having the partnership and influence they have had for many years, they have to address some issues, some concerns of the existing BRICS countries, but [also] other ones. I'm going to mention one that I've been talking about: the debt crisis," Studart said.

The debt crisis is an issue the G7 does not seem to be addressing well, Studart said, emphasizing that it is a major problem for developing countries.

The coronavirus pandemic plunged some developing countries into a debt crisis, leaving them in need of access to unavailable resources to stabilize their economies, Studart said.

"Some countries are just stopping, stagnating, they don't know where to go... The World Bank is not addressing other issues when it comes to developing countries needs," Studart said.

Studart suggests G7 countries need to begin crafting a solution to deal with the debt crisis before these Western-led multilateral institutions and countries become less relevant for the international community.

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US OKs First Ever Defense Aid for Taiwan Under Sovereign State Finance Program - Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) - US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul applauded the Biden administration announcing aid for Taiwan that for the first time ever will come through Foreign Military Financing (FMF), a program usually reserved for sovereign states or international organizations.

“I am glad the administration is further implementing our bipartisan Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act by finally providing FMF to Taiwan. These weapons will not only help Taiwan and protect other democracies in the region, but also strengthen the US deterrence posture," McCaul said in a statement on Wednesday.

McCaul also said the move will ensure US national security against China.

According to the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency, the FMF is offered to eligible "partner nations" to buy defense articles and services.

The African Union is the only other non-nation-state to receive military aid through FMF, US

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officials told AP. According to the report, the officials said the move does not change US policy with respect to Taiwan's status.

The State Department notified Congress of the sale on Wednesday, the report added. Although the initial sale is a mere $80 million of unspecified supplies, the move is sure to "infuriate" China, the report said.

Taiwan has been governed independently from mainland China since 1949. Beijing regards the island as its province, while Taiwan maintains that it is an autonomous entity but stops short of declaring independence. Beijing opposes any official foreign contacts with Taipei and regards Chinese sovereignty over the island as indisputable.

The Biden administration has repeatedly said it does not consider Taiwan independent.

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Ex-World Bank Official Says Does Not Expect US Response to BRICS in Near Future

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) - Former executive director of the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank Rogerio Studart told Sputnik he does not expect the United States to have some sort of response to the BRICS expansion, at least not until Washington addresses certain urgent security issues.

Last week, the BRICS group of major emerging economies - Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa - announced that its membership is more than doubling. Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia were invited to join the group - their membership will take effect on January 1, 2024.

"The United States understands the subtleties and they understand the problems, of course, they have their own narrative that tries to make this another sign of confrontation, but I don't think the United States is going to respond in the short run, that's my feeling," Studart said. "What it's going to try to do is, first of all, try to address its own security issues."

Studart said he doesn't expect any countries to have any immediate reaction to the BRICS expansion because they understand it's beyond the discourse of confrontation and looking more at the long term.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said that the admission of the six new members to BRICS is the first phase in the process of the group's expansion.

On Thursday, a State Department spokesperson said the United States believes that countries are free to choose partners and groupings with whom to associate and will continue to develop bilateral and multilateral relations.

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Pentagon Awards Raytheon $276Mln for 155mm Artillery Shells Used in Ukraine

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WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) - The US Army ordered more than $276 million in additional 155mm heavy artillery shells from Raytheon, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

In March, the military announced that the US Army would boost production of 155mm artillery shells by more than 600% to replenish stockpiles of ammunition going to Ukraine. The Pentagon said it aims to expand 155mm artillery production from 14,000 a month to over 24,000/month in 2023 and 85,000/month in five years.

"Raytheon Company Missile Systems [of] Tucson, Arizona was awarded a $276,536,844 modification... contract for procurement of 155 mm projectiles," the release said on Wednesday.

The contract's target completion date is the end of April 2024, the release added.

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Russia Vetoes UN Security Council Draft Resolution on Extending Sanctions Against Mali

UNITED NATIONS, August 31 (Sputnik) - Russia vetoed the UN Security Council draft resolution, co-authored by France and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to extend the sanctions regime on Mali.

"Based on these considerations the Russian Federation is not in a position to support this draft resolution, we would urge our [Security] Council colleagues to demonstrate wisdom and pragmatism and to support our alternative residual resolution because it takes into consideration the African countries' view," Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Wednesday evening.

The draft resolution provided for the extension of the sanctions regime, introduced in 2017, for one year - until August 31, 2024.

In addition, the draft resolution proposed extending until September 30, 2024 the operation of the group of UN Security Council Sanctions Committee experts, who have monitored the implementation of the sanctions and determined which persons would be sanctioned. The sanctions have included asset freezes and travel bans on those identified by the Sanctions Committee experts as impeding implementation of the 2015 peace agreement.

Russia prepared an alternative draft resolution calling for extending the sanctions for the last time until August 31, 2024 and proposing to immediately disband the group of experts. Russia's draft was not adopted because it did not receive the needed number of votes for it to pass.

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Biden Proposal Guarantees Overtime Pay for Workers Making Under $55,000/Year - Labor Dept.

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WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) - The Biden Administration introduced a potential new regulation that would extend overtime pay to over 3.5 million workers on salary, the Labor Department said in a press release.

"The US Department of Labor today announced a notice of proposed rulemaking that would restore and extend overtime protections to 3.6 million salaried workers. The proposed rule would guarantee overtime pay for most salaried workers earning less than $1,059 per week, about $55,000 per year," the release said on Wednesday.

Issued by the Department of Labor, the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) would make individuals in salaried positions making between $35,568 and $55,000 eligible for overtime pay after working more than 40 hours in a week. Additionally, the rule would account for automatic updates to the salary level for eligibility every three years based on wage data.

The new rule, which would only affect salaried workers, as hourly workers are already entitled to overtime pay, revitalizes an Obama-era policy that raised the threshold for exempting salaried workers from overtime pay but was done away with during the Trump presidency. Since January 2020, only salaried workers who are paid up to $684 per week, or $35,568 annually, qualify for overtime pay.

The rule-making process dictates that there will be a 60-day comment period for interested parties to respond before any changes go into effect.

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US Air Force Pays Raytheon $7Mln to Continue Developing GhostEye MR Radar - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) - Raytheon has won a $7 million US Air Force contract to further develop its GhostEye MR radar sensor for the National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System, its parent company RTX announced in a press release.

"Raytheon ... has been awarded $7 million to advance development and assessment of the company's GhostEye MR radar, an advanced medium-range sensor for the National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System, or NASAMS," the release said on Wednesday.

The deal is the first government contract for GhostEye MR, a multi-mission radar designed and developed by Raytheon via internal research and development investments, the release said.

"Funding will support continued radar development and then an operational assessment at White Sands Missile Range later this year," the release said.

The experiment at White Sands in the US state of New Mexico will assess the operational performance of GhostEye MR, with the radar providing effective surveillance cues and integrating with the NASAMS air defense system, the release added.

An operational assessment in September will build upon the capabilities demonstrated in Andoya by utilizing the US Air Force's relevant command and control to link GhostEye MR with the NASAMS system, according to the release.

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US National Archives Records Reveal Ties Between Hunter Biden, Vice President's Office

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) - A number of emails obtained from the US National Archives and Records Administration revealed more than 1,000 emails between the office of then-Vice President Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden's advisory firm Rosemont Seneca Partners, America First Legal said in a statement.

"We obtained new docs from our lawsuit against the National Archives revealing over 1,000 emails between Rosemont Seneca and the Office of Vice President," the statement said on Wednesday. "The vast majority of these emails consisted of direct communications between Rosemont Seneca employees, including Hunter Biden, and the Office of the Vice President."

The emails contradict Joe Biden's claims that there was a wall between personal and government business, the statement said.

Hunter Biden was intimately involved in planning for high-profile White House events despite lacking any official role, the statement said.

The "Biden name" was used to gain access to the White House for Rosemont Seneca and their associates, the statement said.

The newly released emails come amid an investigation by House lawmakers into alleged criminal activity by the Biden family, including foreign bribery and influence peddling.

The White House asserted executive privilege to withhold 200 emails entirely to protect confidential talks between the president and his advisers, the statement added.

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UNSC Did Not Adopt Russian Draft Resolution on Sanctions Regime Against Mali

UNITED NATIONS, August 31 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council did not adopt Russia's draft resolution, which proposed extending sanctions against Mali for a year for the last time, as well as disbanding a group of experts monitoring the implementation of restrictive measures, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

The final vote was 1-1-13, with China abstaining. Earlier, Russia vetoed a French and UAE drafted Mali sanctions resolution in a vote China abstained.

The document did not get the required 9 votes out of 15 in the Security Council. The sanctions regime against Mali has been in force since 2017. It has been renewed annually. The draft resolution stated that the UN Security Council decided to extend the sanctions until August 31, 2024 "for the final period."

The sanctions include asset freezes and travel bans on those identified by the UNSC Sanctions Committee Panel of Experts as impeding implementation of the 2015 peace agreement. Earlier, the Russian Federation vetoed a draft French resolution - that document proposed extending the sanctions for a year, as well as extending until September 30, 2024 the operation of a group

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of experts of the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee.

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DeSantis Says No Confirmed Fatalities Due to Hurricane Idalia, But That May Change

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis said the state authorities do not have any confirmed information about fatalities caused by Hurricane Idalia, but this situation may very well change.

"We do not necessarily have any confirmed fatalities yet, but that very well may change," DeSantis told reporters on Wednesday afternoon.

The governor said many residents have learned the lessons from previous disasters and took precautionary measures that may well save their lives and property.

The authorities have to deal with supporting the needs of the residents who are facing difficulties, DeSantis said.

Hurricane Idalia, which made landfall in Florida on Wednesday morning, has caused electricity outages affecting some 280,000 people, according to the Poweroutages.us website tracker.

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Russia Vetoes UNSC Draft Resolution on Mali Sanction Regime

UNITED NATIONS, August 31 (Sputnik) - The Russian Federation vetoed the United Nations Security Council draft resolution on Mali which would extend the sanction regime against Mali, co-authored by France and the UAE.

The final vote was 13-1-1 with China abstaining.

The draft resolution provided for the extension of the sanctions regime, introduced in 2017, for a year - until August 31, 2024, as was done in previous times. In addition, the blocked draft resolution proposed extending until September 30, 2024 the operation of a group of experts of the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee, which monitors how the sanctions are implemented, and also determines which persons to include in the sanctions list.

The sanctions include asset freezes and travel bans on those identified by the UNSC Sanctions Committee Panel of Experts as impeding implementation of the 2015 peace agreement. Russia, in turn, prepared an alternative draft resolution. Russia's draft says that the UN Security Council has decided to extend the sanctions until August 31, 2024 "for the final period." In addition, the Russian draft resolution proposes to "immediately disband the group of experts" of the sanctions committee.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 31 (Sputnik) -

COUP IN GABON

* The situation in Gabon, where the military seized power in the country, is a matter of deep concern, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.
* Gabonese President Ali Bongo Ondimba, who has been placed under house arrest after the military seized power, appealed to friends around the world to not ignore the current situation in the country.
* Ondimba resigned but will retain all civil rights, Head of Republican Guard Gen. Brice Oligui Nguema said.

UKRAINE DRONE ATTACKS IN RUSSIA

* Two Ukrainian aircraft-type drones were shot down over Russia's Bryansk Region and there are no reports of casualties or material damage, regional Governor Alexander Bogomaz said on Wednesday.
* Russian air defenses took down a cruise missile in the eastern part of Crimea, regional Governor Sergey Aksyonov said.
* US National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby told Sputnik on Wednesday that the United States continues to discourage strikes inside Russia.
* The Pskov airport will remain closed until the end of the investigation, which was launched after the overnight drones attack, and may resume operations on August 31, regional Governor Mikhail Vedernikov said,

HURRICANE IDALIA HITS UNITED STATES

* Hurricane Idalia made a landfall in the US state of Florida with wind speeds of up to 125 miles per hour (201 kilometers per hour), the National Hurricane Center said on Wednesday.
* President Joe Biden has directed federal agencies to pre-position personnel and resources to respond to Hurricane Idalia recovery efforts in affected US states, the White House said.
* Residents of Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina may feel the impact of hurricane Idalia until the weekend, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator Deanne Criswell said.

NIGER DEVELOPMENTS

* The Nigerien National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland announced the annulment of all security and military agreements with France, Al Arabiya reported on Wednesday.
* The rebels in Niger have canceled a curfew that was imposed in the country on July 27, the Al Arabiya reported.
* EU countries have started preparing a special sanctions regime against the participants of the coup in Niger, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.

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RUSSIAN ECONOMY

* Russia's GDP grew by 2.1% in the period from January-July, but slowed to 5% in July in annual terms from 5.7% in June, the Economic Development Ministry said on Wednesday.

* The annual inflation in Russia accelerated to 5.03% on August 28 compared to 4.88% a week earlier, the Economic Development Ministry said.

* The unemployment rate in Russia in July reached a new historical low of 3%, the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) said.

ENERGY MARKETS

* Russia is fulfilling its obligations under the OPEC+ deal and is not ruling out extension of its voluntary reduction of oil exports to October, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Wednesday.

* The Russian government will soon approve a list of special petroleum product exporters in order to establish control of the so-called gray exports, Novak said.

* The Russian government expects that the deal on the sale of foreigners' share in the the Sakhalin-2 oil and gas project will be finalized by the end of 2023, Novak said.

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UN Security Council Puts on Hold Meeting on Mali After Russia Requests Consultations

UNITED NATIONS, August 30 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Wednesday put on hold a meeting concerning the situation in Mali after Russia requested consultations.

During the meeting, the UN Security Council members were supposed to vote on two drafts of a sanctions regime against Mali. The first one was prepared by Russia and proposed extending sanctions against Mali one last time for a period of one year and disbanding the group of experts monitoring the implementation of the sanctions.

The second draft was prepared by France and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and provided an extension of the sanctions regime, which was introduced in 2017, until August 31, 2024. The second draft also proposed extending until September 30, 2024 the operation of the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee group of experts who monitor the sanctions' implementation.

At the beginning of the meeting, Russia asked for consultations on the document prepared by France and the UAE, but the United States insisted that the vote should proceed immediately.

Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia reacted to the United States' attempt to force a vote and addressed the US representative at the meeting.

"Why are you using rulings during this American presidency that are based on the opinion of some member states of the [Security] Council?" Nebenzia said, referring to the fact that the United States presides over the UN Security Council during the month of August.

Nebenzia then called for a procedural vote on whether to hold consultations ahead of the vote.

In response, Robert Wood, the US alternate representative for special political affairs at the

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United Nations, announced a break.

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Biden Left Fuming After Ad-Libbed Call to Depose Putin in Warsaw Speech - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden left his visit to Poland fuming to friends after the White House had to walk back an ad-libbed call to depose Russian President Vladimir Putin, Axios reported on Wednesday, citing an exclusive copy of Franklin Foer's new book "The Last Politician."

Foer's book, set to release on Tuesday, covers the first two years of Biden's presidency, using nearly 300 interviews over two and a half years.

Last year during a speech in Warsaw, Biden said that Putin "cannot remain in power." The White House later clarified the remarks, claiming Biden meant Putin cannot exercise power over neighboring territories, not within Russia itself.

Biden knew that the White House would have to correct his mistake, the book said. Biden left the trip feeling sorry for himself and fuming to friends about being coddled by his staff, the book said.

"Was John Kennedy ever babied like that?" the book quotes Biden as saying.

Biden resented that aides created the public perception that they were cleaning up his mess, the book said.

Earlier this year, Biden reportedly told leaders of the Bucharest Nine group of Eastern European countries that the United States is not seeking regime change in Russia, reaffirming the White House's clarification of his statement.

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Biden Says McConnell 'Friend,' Will Call US Senate Minority Leader Amid Health Concerns

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he will try to contact Mitch McConnell as a friend, after the Senate Minority Leader again froze due to lightheadedness during a press event.

"We have disagreements politically, but he's a good friend, and so I'm going to try to get in touch with him later this afternoon," Biden said during a press conference, when asked about whether he is concerned about McConnell's health.

Earlier on Wednesday, McConnell momentarily froze while taking questions at a press conference in Kentucky. The incident followed a similar event during a presser in Washington earlier this year. Both incidents were purportedly due to lightheadedness.

McConnell intends to see a doctor before any more public events, a spokesperson said following the incident on Wednesday.

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McConnell, 81, also sustained a concussion during a fall earlier this year. However, a McConnell spokesperson told Sputnik in July that the senator intends to complete his term as the party's leader in the upper chamber.

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People in Hawaii Outraged by Biden's $700 Wildfire Relief Payment - Resident

LAHAINA, Hawaii, August 30 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The people living in Hawaii found it upsetting that US President Joe Biden offered a one-time payment of $700 to all those impacted by the wildfires amid a looming housing crisis and rising unemployment, a resident of Maui told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, Biden announced $95 million will go to harden Hawaii's electric grid in the wake of wildfires that erupted in Maui on August 8. The disaster has left at least 115 dead while 388 are still missing, according to officials. The Lahaina fire, which remains 90% contained, burned an estimated 2,170 acres.

"People in Hawaii laughed about Biden's pledge to send $700 to all wildfire impacted residents," the resident said. "There is a looming housing crisis… The entire island is also starting to fire people."

It cost $7,000 per month for an average family of four just to make it paycheck to paycheck, the source added.

The real estate websites in Maui mostly provide a rent range for a one-bedroom apartment in Maui of approximately $2,000. According to the source, an average house for four people is about $3,000 - 4,000 per month. And on average a decent hotel room is now $700 per night.

According to Maui officials, the blaze torched about 3,000 housing structures. Also many people spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing.

"Maui can not build houses fast enough. I think they will keep putting people in the hotel rooms otherwise the hotel rooms will go bankrupt," the source said.

The resident also believes that there are much more displaced people than the government is claiming.

According to the source, the federal aid to the island has not been very strong but there are a lot of private donations or international organizations which drive the majority of the aid distribution.

The island, in addition to all above, is half empty. The source added that it feels like during COVID-19 when it was a "ghost town." Also all the planes on the way to Maui are more than half empty. This is very bad news for Maui because economists estimate that about 40 percent of its GDP is tourism dependent.

Maui is an island about 6 hours away from the closest US mainland's airport, and therefore, food products are very expensive. All needs to be imported. Gallon of milk costs nearly $10.00, eggs $8.00, and a pack of cherry tomatoes $5.00

According to the World Population Review and its cost of living index - Hawaii ranks first in the US, even ahead of California and New York.

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Right after the fires, the Federal Emergency Management Agency said it pledged more than $5.6 million in aid to about 2,000 affected households in Maui.

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Biden Announces $95Mln to Bolster Hawaii's Power Grid

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - The US government will provide nearly $100 million to Hawaii to bolster its power grid following devastating wildfires on Maui Island, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday.

"Today, I am announcing that $95 million from the bipartisan infrastructure law is on the way to Hawaii to harden the ground power, to harden the grid," Biden told reporters at the White House.

These investments will make sure that the electricity can continue to reach homes, hospitals, and other infrastructure even during intense storms, he added.

The wildfires broke out due to dry and hot weather and were exacerbated by strong winds brought by Hurricane Dora earlier in August. The blaze destroyed several settlements on Maui, including the popular tourist town of Lahaina.

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White House Condemns N. Korea's Latest Missile Launch, Calls for Dialogue - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - The White House condemns North Korea's latest missile launch but remains committed to adopting a diplomatic approach to engaging in dialogue with Pyongyang, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

"We've been very clear about this condemning the DPRK's [North Korea's] latest ballistic missile launch. This launch is in violation of multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions and poses a threat to the DPRK's neighbors and international community. We remain committed to a diplomatic approach to the DPRK and calling DPRK to engage in dialogue as we have for some time now," said Jean-Pierre during a press briefing.

The statement by Jean-Pierre comes after North Korea launched two short-range ballistic missiles toward its eastern waters on Wednesday, seemingly in response to the US and South Korea performing joint military exercises involving at least one US B-1B strategic bomber.

The air force drills were part of the ongoing South Korea-US Ulchi Freedom Shield and Warrior Shield field exercises that started earlier this month.

Last week, North Korea attempted to launch a military reconnaissance satellite and said it would attempt a third launch in October.

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Florida, Georgia, Carolinas May Feel Hurricane Idalia's Impacts Until Weekend - FEMA

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) – Residents of Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina may feel the impact of hurricane Idalia until the weekend, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator Deanne Criswell said on Wednesday.

"Remnants of the storm are still affecting Florida. As we speak, the storm is over Georgia and moving to South Carolina. People there and in the Carolinas will continue to experience impacts throughout the day today and possibly into the weekend," Criswell told reporters during the White House press briefing.

The FEMA chief said she would travel to the affected areas in Florida later in the afternoon at the direction of US President Joe Biden. Criswell said she would assess the situation on the ground along with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

"This is still very much an active situation," she said, adding that Idalia is the strongest storm to make landfall in this part of Florida in more than 100 years.

Idalia made landfall in Florida Wednesday morning and is moving towards Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina. The hurricane has already caused widespread power outages in Florida and Georgia, with more than 400,000 people reporting outages in Florida and Georgia.

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US Crude Oil Stocks Down 3rd Week in Row as Refiners Max Runs Before Summer Travel Peak

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - US crude oil stockpiles fell by 10.6 million barrels last week, the country's Energy Information Administration, or EIA, said Wednesday, reporting a third straight week of such inventory declines as refiners maxed out fuel processing to prepare for next week's peak in summer travel.

The upcoming Labor Day holiday on September 4 unofficially brings to a close US road trips for this summer. The EIA's Weekly Petroleum Status Report showed that refiners maintained an extraordinarily high 93.3% run rate on their capacity for the week ended Aug. 25.

Exports of US crude also remained solidly within the 4.0-5.0 million barrel-per-day mark, suggesting that American energy firms were finding more demand overseas from a supply vacuum caused by Saudi and Russian production cuts. Last week alone, US crude exports were at 4.528 million barrels, above the 4,258-million barrel shipment noted for the week ended August 18.

The net result of the refining runs and crude exports pulled some 10.584M barrels from inventories during the week ended August 25, the EIA said. Prior to this, the agency reported a 6.135 million drawdown for the week to August 18 and a 5.960 million pull for the week ended August 11.

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On the gasoline inventory front, the EIA reported a decline of 0.214 million barrels, after a slide of 1.467 million barrels last week. Analysts had forecast a decline of 0.933 million for last week. Automotive fuel gasoline is the No. 1 US fuel product.

With distillate stockpiles, there was a build of 1.235 million that added to the prior week's gain of 0.945 million.

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US Senate Minority Leader McConnell Freezes Again During Press Conference in Kentucky

(Updates with more details, background in paras 6, 7)

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell on Wednesday froze again during a press conference in Kentucky, after previously losing his ability to speak earlier this year during an event in Washington.

"What are my thoughts about what?" McConnell said when asked about reelection. The senator then froze in silence after the question was repeated.

Another attendee then braced McConnell, claiming that they would "need a minute" to recover. McConnell resumed speaking after several moments of silence.

In July, McConnell similarly fell silent partway through a press conference in Washington alongside other Republican lawmakers. McConnell briefly departed that presser before later returning, claiming he felt fine.

Earlier this year, McConnell sustained a concussion during a fall. The Minority Leader stepped away after feeling lightheaded, one of McConnell's aides said at the time.

The pause during Wednesday's press conference was again due to McConnel feeling lightheaded, a spokesperson for the senator said in a statement. McConnell feels fine but will consult a doctor prior to his next public event, the statement said.

In July, a McConnell spokesperson told Sputnik that the senator intends to serve in his party leadership role through the remainder of his term.

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Judge Orders Giuliani to Pay Fine in Georgia-Related Defamation Case - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge on Wednesday ordered Rudy Giuliani, a former attorney of ex-President Donald Trump, to pay more than $130,000 in a defamation lawsuit brought by two Georgia election workers, court documents revealed on Wednesday.

The election workers had alleged Giuliani falsely accused them of participating in attempts to commit fraud during the 2020 US presidential election.

Election workers Ruby Freeman and her daughter, Wandrea' ArShaye Moss, sued Giuliani in

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2021 for defaming them by stating that they had committed fraud while counting ballots in Atlanta, Georgia, during the 2020 presidential election.

Judge Beryl Howell said the fine was necessary because Giuliani failed to perform his duty as a defendant and turn over information requested by Freeman and ArShaye Moss.

"Donning a cloak of victimization may play well on a public stage to certain audiences, but in a court of law this performance has served only to subvert the normal process of discovery in a straight-forward defamation case, with the concomitant necessity of repeated court intervention," Howell said.

Howell's ruling paves the way for the case to move on to a federal trial in Washington that will determine if Giuliani must pay any damages.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Constraints on US Military Aid to Kiev Could Be 'Decisive' Factor in Ukraine Conflict

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - Resistance in Congress, depleted stockpiles, among other constraints on US military assistance could be decisive factors in the Ukraine conflict, with both sides committed to winning and no diplomatic path in sight, experts told Sputnik.

President Joe Biden is asking Congress for an additional $24 billion in security, economic, and humanitarian assistance to get Ukraine through next year, although Republicans in the House are opposing sending more aid to Kiev.

Earlier on Tuesday, the US unveiled a $250-million security assistance package for Ukraine that includes High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), AIM-9M and Javelin missiles, TOW anti-tank and Hydra-70 air-to-ground missiles in addition to other weapons and munitions.

NO PATH TO PEACE

Meanwhile, although Russia has repeatedly said it is willing to engage in negotiations, the White House and Kiev have clearly stated they are opposed to talks until Ukraine makes gains on the battlefield.

"I don't see it [conflict ending] happening soon because I think that Ukraine still thinks they can win, and I think Russia wants to wait till after the US election to see if [ex-President] Donald Trump comes back in," former US defense analyst Ivan Eland told Sputnik. "There's really not going to be a solution."

Eland said the conflict is probably going to "lock up" with neither side able to muster the resources to sustain the fighting.

"Either the peace is usually achieved by one side winning or the other side winning, or the two sides getting so exhausted that they call it a day," Eland said.

Former US Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland, whose memoir "The Envoy: Mastering the Art of Diplomacy with Trump and the World," recently published, said he does not see any path to peace talks.

"I don't think there is any interest [within the Biden administration] in beginning any serious discussions until the Russian military has been severely weakened beyond the point of where

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they are today," Sondland told Sputnik.

Winslow Wheeler, who served as a national security adviser for the US Senate and Government Accountability Office between 1971 and 2002, predicts that internal issues will stifle progress given reaching a deal will require comprise.

"That means major concessions by Ukraine, Russia and NATO, which for domestic political reasons no one is currently willing to make," Wheeler said. "Current US hysteria regarding China makes our picking up their proposals complicated, again mostly because of our domestic politics, but no viable avenue to serious negotiations should be spurned."

POTENTIAL GAME-CHANGING LIMITATIONS

The US has already provided Ukraine with more than $43 billion in military assistance since Russia's military operation started, but Kiev's requirements continue to grow. Meanwhile, Moscow continues to report that Russian forces have destroyed significant amounts of heavy weaponry and equipment the US has supplied Ukraine.

Eland indicated that eroding supplies, in addition to Republican resistance, are also a major constraint that could undermine the Biden administration's ambitious spending plans to support Kiev.

Sondland, in fact, believes that the US failing to meet Kiev's requirements could determine the outcome of the conflict.

"What the Ukrainians need to make this decisive, is they need the US to literally push all of our chips on the table," Sondland.

For example, Sondland said Ukraine needs include more long-range weapons, like Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS), and more Patriot missile defense systems.

Eland, however, pointed out that providing aid to Ukraine through the presidential drawdown authority is depleting US stockpiles.

"They're using ammunition at such a rate against Russia, that the defense industry is having trouble keeping up - they're depleting US stock [and] US stocks have to be replaced," Eland said.

As a result, Eland added, US readiness to defend NATO and East Asian countries is reduced since there may not be enough ammunition.

Moreover, Eland said Ukraine is a European issue. The United States does not have a genuine national security interest in Ukraine, he added.

"It should be more of a European effort. The United States is trying to pivot to Asia, and the Biden administration has done that, but there's a cost. We don't have unlimited resources, and the Europeans are all very rich," Eland said.

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US Private Employers Add 177,000 Jobs in August, Less Than Half of July - ADP Payrolls

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - US private employers added 177,000 jobs in August, doing less than half of the hiring carried out in July, as the labor market appeared to reach a saturation point following more than two years of post-pandemic boom, payrolls processor ADP

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said in a report Wednesday.

""This month's numbers are consistent with the pace of job creation before the pandemic," Nela Richardson, chief economist at ADP, said in a news release. "After two years of exceptional gains tied to the recovery, we're moving toward more sustainable growth in pay and employment as the economic effects of the pandemic recede."

Economists polled by US media had expected 195,000 new private payrolls in August, versus the 324,000 added in July.

The private payrolls data landed ahead of Friday's non-farm payrolls report for August from the Labor Department, which the Federal Reserve will be watching closely for its next interest rate decision on September 20.

The Fed has hiked rates aggressively over the past 18 months, going from a base of just 0.25% in March 2022 to 5.5%, to beat runaway inflation.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, hit four-decade highs of more than 9% per annum in June 2022 due to trillions of dollars of federal relief spending following the 2020 coronavirus outbreak.

While pandemic-related spending is in the rear-view mirror and the CPI has now stabilized at 3% per annum, a robust labor market has allowed Americans to continue spending, preventing the Fed from achieving its 2% per-year target for inflation.

Weekly jobless claims have continued to decline in the United States, with unemployment hitting more than 50-year lows, while average hourly earnings haven't contracted in a single month since April 2021.

Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said last week the labor market's rebalancing was "incomplete" and that getting inflation back down to the central bank's 2% goal will require "some softening in labor market conditions."

He also made clear that rates will follow inflationary pressure.

Wall Street economists polled by US media have predicted a non-farm payrolls growth of just 170,000 for August. If that turns out to be accurate, it would be the smallest growth in monthly jobs since February 2021, overwriting a similar milestone set in July when the 187,000 new payrolls then proved the lowest in 2-½ years.

Most money market traders think the Fed will leave the key US lending rate unchanged at 5.5% at its September 20 meeting. But some 43% in a poll said the central bank will likely opt for a 0.25 percentage point increase at its November policy meeting.

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US Senate Minority Leader McConnell Freezes Again During Press Conference in Kentucky

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell on Wednesday froze again during a press conference in Kentucky, after previously losing his ability to speak earlier this year during an event in Washington.

"What are my thoughts about what?" McConnell said when asked about reelection. The senator then froze in silence after the question was repeated.

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Another attendee then braced McConnell, claiming that they would "need a minute" to recover. McConnell resumed speaking after several moments of silence.

In July, McConnell similarly fell silent partway through a press conference in Washington alongside other Republican lawmakers. McConnell briefly departed that presser before later returning, claiming he felt fine.

Earlier this year, McConnell sustained a concussion during a fall. McConnell stepped away after feeling lightheaded, one of the lawmaker's aides reportedly said at the time.

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Biden Directs Pre-Positioning Personnel, Resources to Support Hurricane Idalia Response

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has directed federal agencies to pre-position personnel and resources to respond to Hurricane Idalia recovery efforts in affected US states, the White House said on Wednesday.

"Ahead of Hurricane Idalia making landfall in Florida, President Biden directed the federal government to pre-position personnel and resources to immediately support the response and recovery efforts in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina," the White House said in a statement,

Idalia made landfall in Florida on Wednesday morning and is now moving into Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina. The hurricane has already caused widespread power outages in Florida and Georgia.

The White House said Biden is expected to deliver remarks to address the situation later on Wednesday.

The government deployed more than 1,500 federal personnel and 540 urban search and rescue specialists on the ground, and the American Red Cross has pre-positioned resources to support sheltering 20,000 people, the statement said.

In addition, the US Coast Guard has positioned teams and assets to help support search and rescue efforts, the statement added.

The US government is also ready to deliver critical supplies, including more than 1.3 million meals and 1.6 million liters of water, pending requests from the affected states, according to the statement.

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Meta Admits Censorship Policy Too Rigid, Will Allow Greater Political Discussion - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - US social media company Meta (banned in Russia) admitted that its censorship policies were too rigid and will allow greater discussion of controversial topics and groups moving forward, The Intercept reported on Wednesday.

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Meta is updating its policies on Dangerous Organizations and Individuals (DOI) to allow social and political discourse on them, but not glorification, the report said, citing internal materials.
Meta's previous policy put a blanket ban on praising, supporting or representing any DOI on the company's social media platforms. Meta recognized the faults in its previous approach in the internal documents, the report said.
References to DOI will now be permitted so long as they fall into one of 11 acceptable categories of discourse, which includes peace and conflict resolution, humanitarian relief, humor and journalism, the report said.
The onus will be on users to explicitly place mentions of DOI in one of the approved categories, the report added.

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UN Chief Calls on Gabonese Army to Guarantee President's Physical Integrity - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, August 30 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is calling on the Gabonese army to guarantee the physical safety of the country's President Ali Bongo Ondimba and his family, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.
"He [Guterres] also calls on the national army and security forces to guarantee the physical integrity of the president of the republic and his family," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

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Canadian Armed Force to Scrap Mandatory Duty to Report Policy - National Defense

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) will repeal the Duty to Report policy to address one of the recommendations made in the Independent External Comprehensive Review (IECR) by former Supreme Court Justice Louise Arbour, National Defense said on Wednesday.
"Today, the Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of National Defence, announced that DND and the CAF are initiating a process to repeal the regulations on Duty to Report and will be strengthening and updating policies, orders, and directives to ensure appropriate reporting. Repealing the Duty to Report regulations addresses Recommendation #11 of the Independent External Comprehensive Review (IECR), led by Louise Arbour, as well as recommendations received in other external reviews," the ministry's statement said.
Scraping the reporting policy is aimed at restoring relationships with military personnel who've been affected by sexual misconduct, sexual harassment or who've been discriminated based on their sex, the statement added.
The ministry noted that repealing the policy will not hinder CAF personnel ability to report instances of misconduct involving them and is rather aimed at providing the possibility for

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“survivor-centric” and evidence-based approach to denunciations.

“The repeal will help DND/CAF move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to misconduct,” the statement continued, adding that it would allow personnel to have discretionary power to choose the best way forward with their reports.

The measure will begin to be enforced during winter 2023-2024, the statement said, after following an in-depth review of regulations, policies, and directives.

In April 2021, the Department of National Defense (DND) announced that Arbour was to conduct the IECR to address cultural issues within the Canadian military, notably those on sexual misconduct and the way such behaviour was to be reported.

The report was submitted in May 2022, and highlighted 48 eight recommendations, most of which were accepted by then Minister of National Defense Anita Anand who said CAF would be implementing them.

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UN Chief Condemns Coup in Gabon, Calls for Restraint - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, August 30 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres condemns the coup in Gabon and calls for restraint, the UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"He firmly condemns the ongoing coup attempt as a means to resolve the post electoral crisis. The Secretary General reaffirms his strong opposition to military coups," Dujarric told a briefing. "The Secretary General calls on all actors involved to exercise restraint, engage in an inclusive and meaningful dialogue and ensure that the rule of law and human rights are fully respected."

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UN Security Council 'Investigating' Situation in Gabon - US Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, August 30, (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is investigating the situation in Gabon and members are discussing the next possible course of action, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Wednesday.

"We're still investigating the situation. It's ongoing right now and we don't have all the details but we are consulting with other members of the Council on what action we might take," Thomas-Greenfield said.

The US ambassador noted that the UN Security Council conducted an emergency meeting when the coup took place in Niger.

Earlier on Wednesday, Gabonese President Ali Bongo Ondimba was reelected for a third term after securing 64.2% of the vote. The Gabonese military then delivered a televised address, declaring the election results canceled and all institutions dissolved.

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Ondimba has been placed under house arrest and his son detained, according to media reports.

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US Envoy to UN Calls on N. Korea to Accept One of 'Numerous Offers' for Dialogue

UNITED NATIONS, August 30, (Sputnik) - The United States calls on North Korea to refrain from provocative actions and engage in one of many diplomatic offers for negotiations, the US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Wednesday.

"We call on the DPRK to refrain from engaging in provocative behavior, and instead, accept one of our numerous offers for dialogue," Thomas-Greenfield told the journalists.

Earlier today, the US National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said that discussions between Moscow and Pyongyang on North Korean arms supplies to Russia are "actively advancing."

Earlier in August, North Korean Defense Minister Kang Sun Nam said that the country's leader Kim Jong Un had emphasized during his meeting with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on July 28 that Pyongyang intends to further develop security cooperation with Moscow. Kim and Shoigu discussed during the meeting the development of tactical and strategic defense cooperation between Russia and North Korea.

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Center of Hurricane Idalia Moves Toward US State of Georgia - NHC

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - The center of Hurricane Idalia is moving toward the US state of Georgia after making landfall in Florida, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) said in a statement on Wednesday.

The hurricane is currently moving in the north-northeast direction at near 20 miles per hour, the statement said.

The hurricane's center will move across Georgia and will reach South Carolina later in the day and North Carolina on Thursday, the statement said.

"Idalia is then expected to move east-southeastward over the western Atlantic on Friday," the statement added.

More than 275,000 residents in Florida have no electricity due to the hurricane, according to the Poweroutages.us website tracker.

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

US B-2 Spirit Bomber Conducts 'Historic' Hot Pit Refueling in Norway - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - A US B-2 Spirit bomber aircraft out of Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri conducted a historic hot pit refueling in Norway earlier this week, the 393rd Expeditionary Bomb Squadron said on Wednesday.

"A B-2 Spirit bomber from Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo., conducted a historic hot pit refueling at Orland Air Base, Norway on Aug. 29, 2023. The occasion marked the first time that the B-2 has landed in Norway, signaling the shared commitment between the US and Norway to deter threats and strengthen the NATO Alliance," 393rd Expeditionary Bomb Squadron said in a statement.

Hot pit refueling involves getting fuel to an aircraft immediately after landing and while one engine stays running, minimizing time spent on the ground. The ability to hot pit refuel in strategic locations provides the US and its allies the ability to increase combat air power over Europe, the statement said.

The refueling exercise highlights US-Norway cooperation and the ability of US forces to collaborate with partner nations to confront a broad range of global challenges, the statement said.

Three US B-2 Spirit bombers are forward deployed from Whiteman Air Force Base to Keflavik Air Base in Iceland in support of Bomber Task Force Europe 23-4, the statement added.

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White House Claims Moscow-Pyongyang Talks on N. Korea Arms Supplies to Russia 'Advancing'

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - The discussions between Moscow and Pyongyang on North Korean arms supplies to Russia are "actively advancing," US National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We have new information, which we are able to share today, that arms negotiations between Russia and the DPRK [North Korea] are actively advancing," Kirby said. "Our information further indicates that following [Defense Minister Sergei] Shoigu's visit, another group of Russian officials traveled to Pyongyang for follow-on discussions about potential arms deals between the DPRK and Russia."

Kirby said the potential deals would provide Russia with significant quantities and multiple types of munitions to use in Ukraine and could also include the provision of raw materials that would assist Russia's defense industrial base.

"Any arms deal between the DPRK [North Korea] and Russia would directly violate a number of UN Security Council resolutions. We're continuing to monitor this situation closely. And we urge the DPRK to cease its arms negotiations with Russia and abide by the public commitments that

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Pyongyang has made to not provide or sell arms to Russia," Kirby said.
Earlier in August, North Korean Defense Minister Kang Sun Nam said that the country's leader Kim Jong Un had emphasized during his meeting with Shoigu on July 28 that Pyongyang intends to further develop security cooperation with Moscow. Kim and Shoigu discussed during the meeting the development of tactical and strategic defense cooperation between Russia and North Korea.

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White House Says Doesn't Know When Ukraine Conflict May End

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) -US National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby told reporters on Wednesday that the United States does not know how long the Ukraine conflict may last.
"We dont know," Kirby said when asked on timing of a possible end of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.
Saudi Arabia hosted Ukraine peace talks in Jeddah over the weekend, having invited representatives from some 30 countries, but not Russia. The Jeddah meeting is a follow-up to a similar conference held in Denmark in June. The Copenhagen meeting failed to produce any joint statements.
Moscow has said it is open to peace negotiations if Kiev recognizes the territorial gains Russia has made since the launch of its military operation in February 2022. Ukraine has banned its officials from engaging in talks with the Russian government as long as President Vladimir Putin is in power.

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US Following Gabon Military Coup 'Very Very Closely' - Kirby

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) – The United States is following the military coup attempt in Gabon “very, very closely,” National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said Wednesday.
“We're following this very, very closely,” Kirby said during a press briefing. “It’s deeply concerning to us … We will remain a supporter of the people in the region … and their demand for democratic governance."
Kirby added that it was too soon to say whether Africa was witnessing a domino effect with regard to a spate of recent coups.

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Hurricane Idalia Brings More Than 1,600 US Flight Delays, 900 Cancellations – FlightAware

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) – The US has seen 1,609 flight delays and 930 flight cancellations as of 10:45 a.m. EST on Wednesday, as Hurricane Idalia moves inland after hitting Florida's Gulf Coast, according to FlightAware data.

Tampa International Airport recorded the highest number of cancellations, with 193 departing flights and 146 arriving flights canceled. Orlando and Jacksonville's international airports each also recorded a total of more than 100 departing or arriving flights canceled. Among Florida airports, Orlando's recorded the highest number of delayed flights – 111 departing flights delayed and 100 arriving flights delayed.

Georgia's Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport and Savannah/Hilton Head International Airport, and North Carolina's Charlotte Douglas International Airport have also recorded high numbers of flight cancellations and delays.

The National Hurricane Center is warning of a "catastrophic" storm surge, even though Hurricane Idalia has weakened to Category 2 strength.

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Hurricane Idalia's Damaging Winds Spreading Into Georgia - National Hurricane Center

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) – The strong winds produced by Hurricane Idalia are spreading into the US state of Georgia, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) said on Wednesday.

"Damaging winds spreading into southern Georgia," the National Hurricane Center said in an updated advisory.

The maximum sustained winds near 105 miles per hour with even stronger gusts, the advisory added.

More than 20,000 households in Georgia have lost electricity, according to the poweroutages.us website tracker.

Hurricane Idalia made a landfall in Florida earlier on Wednesday morning.

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US Lawmakers Request Info on Potential Misuse of Air Force Two by Biden Family - Letter

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer and Congressman Byron Donalds sent a letter to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) on Wednesday to request records related to potential misuse of the Air

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Force Two plane by then-Vice President Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden.

"The Committee is concerned about then-Vice President Biden's role in his family's foreign business ventures and that he may have used his office to enrich his family. For example, recent reporting indicates Hunter Biden traveled to at least 15 countries with then-Vice President Biden," the letter said.

The lawmakers are requesting info from NARA on Biden's use of the Air Force Two and Marine Two aircraft during his time as vice president, the letter said. Specifically, the lawmakers are seeking documents and communications with Biden family members and associates related to travel on the aircraft, manifests for any trips on the aircraft that include such individuals, and any records of security incidents on the aircraft during Biden's time as vice president, the letter said.

NARA ought to turn over the requested documents no later than September 13, the letter added.

The letter comes amid a broader probe by House lawmakers into potential criminal activity by the Biden family, including foreign bribery and influence peddling.

"Then-VP Joe Biden abused Air Force Two by allowing his son to jet set around the world to sell 'The Brand' to enrich the Biden family," Comer said in a statement on the letter.

Earlier this month, Comer sent a separate letter to NARA requesting information on Biden's alleged use of pseudonymous emails to discuss foreign business. NARA has admitted to having approximately 5,4000 emails and records connected to the account, Comer said on Tuesday.

The lawmakers' probe would be impacted by a US government shutdown, which could occur if Congress fails to fund the government beyond the end of next month, according to Comer. However, the lawmaker has said he is optimistic that Congress will avoid a shutdown.

Biden has repeatedly denied discussing foreign business matters with his son.

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Trudeau to Visit Indonesia, India to Participate in ASEAN, G20 Summits - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 30 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will visit Indonesia and India to take part in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Group of Twenty (G20) summits as well as Singapore for meetings to advance bilateral cooperation, the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, today announced that he will travel to Jakarta, Indonesia to participate in the ASEAN Summit from September 5 to 6, 2023. This will be followed by a bilateral visit to Singapore from September 7 to 8, 2023. He will then participate in the G20 Summit in New Delhi, India, from September 9 to 10, 2023," the statement said.

In Jakarta, Trudeau will attend the ASEAN Summit during which he will encourage "rules-based" trade, food and overall security as well as economic growth, the statement said.

Trudeau will promote expanding Canada-ASEAN cooperation given that it views the organization as a key to its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Trudeau will also participate in the Canada-ASEAN Summit, where the agreed upon Strategic Partnership will be officially launched, the statement said.

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A meeting between with Indonesian President Joko Widodo is also set to take place to discuss food security, climate change and advancing a comprehensive economic partnership agreement with Indonesia, the statement said.

Trudeau will then depart for Singapore, where he is scheduled to meet with counterpart Lee Hsien Loong and private sector actors in a bid to enhance bilateral relations and promote Canadian exports, the statement said, noting that Canada is a destination of choice for Singaporean investments.

At the G20 Summit in Delhi, Trudeau will work with representatives from other member states to address current global challenges and advocate for the United Nations' sustainable development goals, the statement said.

Trudeau intends to promote the so-called "rules-based international order" and call for a collective response in holding Russian President Vladimir Putin accountable for the special military operation in Ukraine, the statement also said.

"Working collaboratively to tackle global crises while holding Russia accountable is essential to maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of the G20," the statement added.

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