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**9/5/23 Tuesday**

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Federal Judges to Make New Alabama Election Map After Lawmakers Ignore SCOTUS Ruling

A federal court has rejected a new congressional election map created by Alabama lawmakers that flouted recommendations by the US Supreme Court, saying it will now redraw the map itself. It's the final act in a multi-year drama in a state infamous for defying federal racial equality efforts.

Three judges on a federal appeals court on Tuesday unanimously struck down the new election map presented by the Alabama Legislature for the November 2024 elections, finding state lawmakers made no serious effort to follow the US Supreme Court's June ruling on the subject.

"And we are struck by the extraordinary circumstance we face," the judge said in their opinion. "We are not aware of any other case in which a state legislature - faced with a federal court order declaring that its electoral plan unlawfully dilutes minority votes and requiring a plan that provides an additional opportunity district - responded with a plan that the state concedes does not provide that district," they wrote.

The high court found in June in Milligan v. Allen that the Cotton State had to create a second congressional district with an African-American majority or something "close to it." The state has seven congressmen in the US House of Representatives, but just one majority-Black district, despite 25.8% of its population being of African origin.

That ruling was based on the 1965 Voting Rights Act, a historic piece of legislation that banned essentially all practices that had been used to deny voting rights to African-Americans in the "Jim Crow" South - the colloquial name for the separate-but-equal system of white supremacy that had prevailed in the former Confederate states since the end of the Civil War, when the enslavement of Black people was abolished. The 1965 law requires those states with a history of racial discrimination to have their election rules verified by the federal government, including voting districts.

However, when the Alabama Legislature redrew the map in July, it left the single majority-Black district in place, with the remaining Black vote diluted by being spread out across several other districts that had white majorities. One district had its Black voter proportion increased from 30% to 40% - hardly "close to" a majority as the court ordered.

The appeals court's ruling on Tuesday was made all the more remarkable by the fact that two of the three judges - Judges Anna M. Manasco and Terry F. Moorer - were appointed by former US President Donald Trump, a Republican. The third, Judge Stanley Marcus, was appointed by Democratic former US President Bill Clinton.

In a statement following the federal court's ruling on Tuesday, the office of Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall said it believed the state had followed the high court's order.

"While we are disappointed in today's decision, we strongly believe that the Legislature's map complies with the Voting Rights Act and the recent decision of the US Supreme Court,"

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Marshall's office said. "We intend to promptly seek review from the Supreme Court to ensure that the State can use its lawful congressional districts in 2024 and beyond."
However, with just a few weeks to go before the October 1 deadline given by state officials for a new map to be in place for next year's election, the appeals court judges said there wasn't time for Alabama lawmakers to make yet another new map, and they would not give the Legislature "a second bite at the apple" after having failed to comply once already.
Instead, the judges themselves will draw the new map.
"We have no reason to believe that allowing the Legislature still another opportunity to draw yet another map will yield a map that includes an additional opportunity district," the judges wrote. "Moreover, counsel for the State has informed the Court that, even if the Court were to grant the Legislature yet another opportunity to draw a map, it would be practically impossible for the Legislature to reconvene and do so in advance of the 2024 election cycle."
In a statement, a group of plaintiffs whose lawsuit was consolidated into the ruling by the high court compared the Legislature's move to the 1963 attempt by then-Alabama Governor George Wallace, a vocal proponentof white supremacy, to block the integration of Black students into the University of Alabama.
"He moved only when the federal government forced him to do so," they wrote. "History is repeating itself and the district court's decision confirms that Alabama is again on the losing side. We demand that Alabama again move out of the way and obey our laws - we demand our voting rights."
The existing Black-majority district, the Seventh Congressional District, was also created by court order in 1992 according to the 1965 Civil Rights Act. When Earl Hilliard, Sr. was elected to Congress the following year representing the Seventh District, he was the first Black delegate sent to Washington, DC, by Alabama since Reps. Josiah Walls and Jerimiah Haralson, two former slaves, left office in 1877, 116 years earlier.

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China Reportedly Creates $40 Bn Semiconductor Fund to Blow Off Western Restrictions

As Beijing moves to provide its semiconductor chip manufacturing industry with financial support amid new attacks by the West, it is laying the foundational infrastructure for a new pool of high-tech talent and technology, an expert told Sputnik.
According to reports in US media on Tuesday, the People's Republic of China is preparing to launch a state-backed investment fund to bolster the country's semiconductor industry amid US attempts to block Chinese access to high-end microchips.
The reports, based on "two people familiar with the matter," indicate the fund aims to raise some 300 billion yuan ($41 billion), seemingly in line with past efforts to solicit capital for the industry. However, this would be the largest such effort thus far, outpacing the China Integrated Circuit Industry Investment Fund, also known as the Big Fund.
This comes amid an effort, now more than a year old, to block China's access to high-end microchips produced in the Netherlands, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and the United States.

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On Monday, US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo told US media the US was "not going to sell the most sophisticated American chips to China that they want for their military capacity," adding that the US was "going to be as strict as can be and as hardline as possible denying China the most sophisticated chips."

The US has pushed its partners to restrict or ban sales to China and to relocate its production facilities out of or away from China, especially to Europe or the United States. At home, the US has funneled huge amounts of money into its own semiconductor industry and is aggressively searching for new sources of rare earth metals, for which China is the world's top supplier at present.

Angelo Giuliano, a Hong Kong-based political and financial analyst, told Sputnik "the Chinese like to say: if there are measures there can also be counter-measures."

"This investment initiative is, for China, mainly about countering the aggressive US policies in the semiconductor industry. China has been given limited access to high-end microchips from the US/South Korea and Taiwan," he explained. "The US has issued the CHIPS and Science Act which is $280 billion comprising $39 billion in subsidies for chips manufacturing, $13 billion for semiconductor research and workforce training, and other massive tax incentives. So, China had to take serious steps to catch up with the CHIP alliance (South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, US)."

"One of the main challenges is to get the photolithography machines for semiconductors which come mainly from ASML, a Dutch firm which has the most advanced technology and that is not allowed to sell to China," Giuliano added.

Indeed, reports in Chinese media have indicated that several firms have filed for patents or have ongoing research efforts into several types of advanced lithography - the method for forging the smallest microchips - such as extreme ultraviolet lithography (EUV) and immersion deep ultraviolet (DUV) lithography. However, none have approached production of the minute size of the 5-nanometer microchips made by ASML, or even smaller.

"We have seen many times before that China has the ability to catch up quickly and might end up, in the long run, surpassing the current most advanced Western semiconductors technologies. The West made China withdraw from the airspace program - China then built its own," he noted.

"China has been proven to turn set-backs and attacks by the collective West into opportunities to enter into new industries and achieve a long term goal of self-sufficiency," he said.

"With the help of Chinese government funding and great foundations/infrastructures for the high tech industry," Giuliano said China could develop "a great and mature market, the largest pool of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM) graduates, high-tech hubs for research and development and great support from the state mainly through funding."

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‘Who Would Pay for It?’: Ukraine Has No Path to Long-Range Weapons Despite Minister’s Boast

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Despite the defense minister's big talk, Ukraine doesn't have the capacity to develop its own long-range missiles nor the clout to demand such weapons from the West, an expert told Sputnik on Tuesday.

During a recent interview just before it was announced he was leaving office, Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov said Ukraine needed to develop missiles with a range well beyond its present capabilities, to use for striking deep inside Russian territory.

"Of course, it should be done," Reznikov told Ukrainian state media about long-range missile development, "but there is a nuance: we do not need a missile that flies 15,000 kilometers, we do not plan to fight with partners who are 15,000 kilometers away,'" Reznikov said.

At present, the Ukrainian military only has a strike capability of about 190 miles, thanks to the Army Tactical Missile Systems provided to Kiev alongside their HIMARS rocket artillery launchers. However, reports indicate Ukrainian forces may have fitted Soviet-era Tu-141 reconnaissance drones with explosives and used them to attack Russian bases in Dyagilevo in Ryazan Region and Engels in Saratov Region, the latter of which is nearly 400 miles from the conflict zone.

Michael Maloof, a former senior security policy analyst in the Office of the US Secretary of Defense, said there was slim chance Reznikov's comments were realistic, but if they were, it would "call for a reevaluation of all assistance" being given to Kiev by Washington and NATO.

"Their industries are pretty well depleted, and if they showed signs of that, I think Russia would hit them very hard," Maloof told Sputnik. "I don't think they have the industrial base. They're not going to be getting missiles from the West. So I have no clue what he's talking about. If they want to have some showpiece, where are they going to get the money? Who would pay for it?

"I mean, if you're going to develop something like that and develop the factory to make it, who pays for it? The United States? The United States doesn't support long-range or medium-range missiles for Ukraine that have the capability of being shot into Russia and creating a further escalation. And I think if there's evidence of that, then the funding would certainly be cut off after that - and it should be, because the last thing the world needs is an escalation of this conflict. So I think if that's the case, then this is going to call for a reevaluation of all assistance to the Ukrainians."

On the other hand, it could be that Kiev would seek to pressure NATO into arming them with such long-range weapons, which might include ballistic missiles or cruise missiles like the Tomahawk, the latter of which is nuclear-capable and has long aroused the ire of Moscow since potential launch sites based on the AEGIS system were built in Romania and Poland.

"They can insist, but they're not going to get it," Maloof said. "Look, the war will stop immediately when the supplies stop, and I think that that's going to be happening here very, very soon. This is the only way you're going to bring it to a close, because Ukrainians don't want to settle. They don't want to compromise. And Russia is going to hold on to what it has. And it's clear to me that now if the Ukrainians want to continue doing this, they're just going to get bashed even more and they're going to have further battlefield defeats, and that's going to be reflected very clearly in the press. And that will send signals to the West to put that pressure on them to finally stop the flow of resources to Ukraine."

"I have some real questions on the credibility of the Ukrainian minister's statements on where they are in terms of any counteroffensive or what capabilities they're trying to build back up. They don't have the industrial base and they don't have any money. All the money that they're

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getting now is coming from the West. All the supplies, again, are coming from the West to fight this war. And I just don't see how they can justify its existence, number one," he said of a long-range missile program, "but then even justify its necessity when the world is basically calling on Ukraine and Russia to sit down and negotiate. But it doesn't appear to be the case. So I think Russia is going to have to mount its counteroffensive."

"The other thing that's lingering in the background that people conveniently like to forget - that's the weather. The [bad] weather is going to be coming in here very soon. We're already approaching fall and it's projected to be rather severe in Europe, the United States and elsewhere. And I think that this is going to be another indicator of the effectiveness. They're already losing in this counteroffensive. What's the fall and the winter going to bring?

"It's going to be a disaster for the Ukrainians, certainly. Once they wake up and can smell the coffee and agree to settle down, this is going to mean, of course, politically, that [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky is a dead man walking."

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Australia 'Compromised' by National Bank Rule Closing Accounts for 'Speech Violations'

A new forthcoming rule by the National Australian Bank (NAB), expected to be implemented in November, would allow the bank to close customers' accounts for a wide range of speech-related offenses. A banking expert said it was an abuse of human rights and "antithetical to democratic values."

According to a news release by the bank about the updated terms and conditions, the rule will allow bank administrators to investigate and close the accounts of people reported to have used "coercive or controlling behavior to limit a person's access to or use of funds; making profane, derogatory, discriminatory or harassing comments to any person; making or promoting threatening or abusive language to any person," and "making or threatening physical or psychological harm to any person."

The rule change is in keeping with guidance issued by Canberra in June that seeks to bring various government institutions' functioning in line with national law.

The move has aroused the fury of defenders of free speech, which does not have the same legal foundations as it does in the United States, where speech by and large is legally restricted only by its potential to imminently provoke violent or illegal behavior.

Daniel Freiheit, a Counsel at Rousseau Mazzuca LLP and a Law Society of Ontario Certified Specialist in Corporate and Commercial Law, was one such person who spoke out.

"The entire Commonwealth is compromised," Freiheit wrote on X (Twitter) when news about the NAB rule change broke. "Look into dual citizenship & consider moving your savings to countries that respect property & speech."

Sputnik asked the attorney about his thoughts about free speech and how the rule could affect the banking sector.

"I said the entire Commonwealth is compromised because the use of bank freezes appears to be part of a common pattern - in Canada and Australia now - going against basic human rights

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(free speech)," he said on Tuesday. “Of course, there are and ought to be limits on speech, but this approach of freezing money is quite harsh, escapes due process, and is very difficult to challenge."
"This notion - not being able to criticize our government - is antithetical to democratic values, and to me indicates our Commonwealth system has been 'compromised,'" he added.
"When money is frozen, it makes it hard to challenge the decision - because the person has no money to retain legal counsel," Freiheit observed.
"I can't speculate how this will evolve, but one way this could play out is if an Australian routinely criticizes the Australian government (or an Australian criticizes an individual working for the government, e.g. a politician), that politician can in theory notify the bank of said individual being 'profane' and the bank could then freeze the person's bank account. All for the 'crime' of being too critical of the government."

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US First Lady Jill Biden Tests Positive for COVID Again

At a town hall in July 2021, Biden infamously told the crowd “You’re not going to get COVID if you have these [COVID] vaccinations.”
The First Lady of the United States tested positive for COVID-19 on Monday, following a three-day weekend she spent with US President Joe Biden.
“This evening, the First Lady tested positive for COVID-19," Jill Biden’s communications director Elizabeth Alexander said in a statement late Monday. Alexander added that Jill Biden is remaining at the Biden home in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware.
The President returned to Washington D.C. on Monday.
This is the first lady’s second time being diagnosed with COVID-19. In the summer of 2022, both Joe and Jill Biden tested positive. Both recovered after experiencing mild symptoms.
Joe Biden was tested for the virus but his test came back negative. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement that the President will continue to test regularly throughout the week.
The United States is finishing up a three-day weekend, with Labor Day being observed on Monday. It was estimated to be the third-largest travel day of the year.

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Report: Ukraine Paid $17.6 Million for Faulty Drones

The conflict in Ukraine is the first time two military forces with significant drone detachments have faced off directly, showcasing the nature of warfare in the 21st century.

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The Ukrainian government has reportedly spent at least $17.6 million on drones that have largely shown to be faulty.

According to a report by a Ukrainian investigative outlet, Ukrainian Aviation Systems (UAS) failed to meet a deadline to provide the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) with 55 HAWK reconnaissance drones (not to be confused with the American produced Global HAWK), only managing to deliver four and of which just one was accepted by the AFU.

Of the three that were rejected, reporters who previewed the trial of the deliveries drones reported that one drone frequently lost connection with its operator, another lost its wings mid-flight and crashed, and the third never managed to take off at all.

The contract called for 55 HAWK drones for a price of nearly $22 million, $17.6 million of which was paid upfront. According to reports, the company later managed to deliver 11 more drones to the AFU but the Ukrainian outlet says it remains unclear how they performed in testing, or if they were tested at all. Each drone reportedly costs 14.5 hryvnia, or nearly $400,000.

Ukrainian Aviation Systems is linked to Borislav Rosenblat, a former MP of Ukraine and a close associate with former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. Rosenblat was at the center of several corruption scandals, including a 2017 investigation into illegal amber mining and trading which resulted in him being stripped of his parliamentary seat.

This is not the first issue the AFU has had with UAS; in fact, the company first signed a contract to provide drones to the AFU in 2018, but the first batches weren't delivered until the start of the special military operation. The pair were previously embroiled in a legal fight over missed deadlines and inflating costs of the drones. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense claims it has not received any complaints about the efficiency of the drones on the battlefield.

However, the contract itself caused a rift within UAS, with Rosenblat taking control of the trademark and administrative parts of the company, while co-founder Konstantin Pozhidayev took over the manufacturing. The dispute reportedly started over the drones' inflated prices, which the outlet says included a 30% kickback for Defense Ministry officials offered by Rosenblat.

That dispute also led to changes in how the drones were produced with many components being replaced. Rosenblat described the changes as an "upgrade" but admitted in August the company has only finished 12 drones and has enough components to make 18 more, which still falls far short of the 55 drones the UAF paid mostly upfront for.

Rosenblat blames the delay on a corruption probe that has frozen assets held by UAS. However, the poor performance and corruption scandals have not resulted in the AFU canceling the contract, opting instead to move the deadline to October.

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White House Rejects 'Ridiculous Claim' That Staffers Treat Biden 'Like a Baby'

At 80, Joe Biden is the oldest person to ever serve as president of the United States. The first book covering his time as president is nearing its release and published excerpts have already begun to alarm some observers.

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White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre recently said claims that US President Joe Biden is treated like a baby by White House staff are “ridiculous.”
The comments came during a Tuesday press briefing after Jean-Pierre was asked about excerpts from a new White House biography by author Franklin Foer, titled The Last Politician: Inside Joe Biden’s White House and the Struggle for America’s Future.
In the book, Foer writes that Biden complained to friends about being treated like a “toddler” after White House staffers had to walk back statements he made about Russian President Vladimir Putin.
“Rather than own his failure,” Foer writes, “[Biden] fumed to friends about how he was treated like a toddler. Was John Kennedy ever babied like that?”
When asked why the White House staff treats the president of the United States like a baby, Jean-Pierre called the assertion “ridiculous.”
“No one treats the United States president, the commander-in-chief, like a baby. That’s ridiculous, that is a ridiculous claim,” she said.
The press secretary further added that the White House had seen the excerpts with more context and asserted that the quote was making the “opposite overall point” and lauded the value of his “experience and wisdom.”
In March 2022 during a speech in Warsaw, Poland, Biden discussed the conflict in Ukraine. During his speech, he made comments about Putin that seemed to advocate for regime change, “for god’s sake this man cannot remain in power,” Biden proclaimed.
White House officials quickly walked back the statement, claiming: “The president’s point was that Putin cannot be allowed to exercise power over his neighbors in the region. He was not discussing Putin’s power in Russia, or regime change.”
Foer asserts in his book that Biden “knew that he had erred, but then resented his aids for creating the impression that they had to clean up his mess.”
A late August poll indicated 75% of registered voters believe Biden is too old to run for a second term, including two-thirds of Democrats. Another poll showed 70% of Americans do not want Biden to run for a second term, with half citing age as a major factor. Foer said during a media tour for the book that it "wouldn't be a total shock" if Biden dropped out of the 2024 presidential race.
Biden has downplayed his age as an impediment to his performance as president. “I can't even say I guess how old I am, I can't even say the number. It doesn't register with me.”

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Goldman Sachs Grows Confident US Will Avoid Recession Next Year

After record breaking inflation and several bank failures, many economists predicted the United States was headed toward a recession; however, that trend has started to reverse. Last week, the Federal Reserve’s staff forecasted the economic downturn was unlikely.
US financial giant Goldman Sachs’ confidence that a recession for the American economy will not happen is growing, a new note by the investment firm has revealed.

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The Monday-published note, titled “Soft Landing Summer,” stated the Wall Street bank now gives a 15% chance that the United States will enter a recession over the next 12 months, marking a significant decrease from their March prediction of 35% following the collapse of multiple mid-sized banks.

Many economists - some of whom continue to do so - warned that increased interest rates from the US Federal Reserve could steer the economy into a recession. However, job numbers remain strong and inflation has slowed significantly compared to last year.

The Goldman Sachs report said it is also growing in confidence that the Fed is done raising interest rates, and indicated the central bank may have threaded the needle perfectly.

“We strongly disagree with the notion that a growing drag from the ‘long and variable lags’ of monetary policy will push the economy toward recession,” Jan Hatzius, chief US economist for Goldman Sachs, wrote. “In fact, we think the drag from monetary policy tightening will continue to diminish before vanishing entirely by early 2024.”

He added in the report that the Fed’s GPDNow forecasting model prediction of 5.6% growth in the third quarter of 2023 likely overstates the economy’s momentum. The report predicts that as the student loan payment resumption and increased mortgage rates ripple through the economy, a slowdown will occur but he says it is likely to be short-lived and shallow.

Unemployment numbers also rose in August, from 3.5% to 3.8% typically an indicator of a weakening economy, but the report says that is largely due to more people looking for work rather than people losing jobs.

Meanwhile, Wall Street’s most talked about recession indicator, the inverted yield curve, is still predicting a recession is looming.

The inverted yield curve has correctly predicted every US recession since 1955. It deals with the return yield on 3-month and 10-year US Treasury bonds. When the 3-month Treasury bonds give better returns than the 10-year bonds, that is called an inverted yield.

In May, the 3-month bond was outperforming the 10-yield bond by 2 points, but that has since narrowed to 1 point, a development known as a re-steepening. Since at least 1955, re-steepening events have always coincided with or preceded a recession.

The last four recessions occurred shortly after a re-steepening event, indicating that one could still be around the corner, but other economic indicators remain positive, hinting the inverted yield curve may be wrong for the first time.

That could be because the economy was so upended by the pandemic and geopolitical tensions affecting global trade, particularly between the US and China, that previously reliable economic indicators are no longer useful.

However, the lived experience of Americans paints a darker picture of the economy. A recent poll of 1,500 registered voters stated that only 36% of voters believe the economy is either “excellent” or “good” compared to 63% who rated it as either “not so good” or “poor.” The cost of housing (86%) and inflation (74%) were the most common concerns.

Concerning things that could actually change the minds of Americans on the economy, rather than arcane economic charts, the Goldman Sachs report had some good news on that front. Hatzius predicts real wages, that is wages with inflation factored in, will rise over the coming months.

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Tropical Storm Lee Likely to Turn Into 'Major Hurricane' by Week's End

Lee is the 13th named storm in the Atlantic this hurricane season. To date, only four other years on record have had 13 or more named storms by September 5: 2005, 2011, 2012 and 2020.
Forecasters are predicting that the recently-formed Tropical Storm Lee is expected to rapidly accelerate into a Category 4 hurricane with wind speeds of up to 145 miles per hour (MPH), effectively turning into a major cyclone by week's end.
Lee formed in the Atlantic Ocean over the week and is moving towards the Leeward Islands on the edge of the Caribbean and the Western edge of the Atlantic Ocean.
According to the National Hurricane Center, Lee's current wind speed has reached up to 50 mph, an increase from 40 mph earlier Tuesday. That trend is expected to increase rapidly over the coming days until Lee becomes an “extremely dangerous” hurricane by Friday.
At present, most models predict Lee will skirt just north of the Leeward islands and turn eastward before making landfall in the United States. However, the models are not 100% confident that is the case, and a few scenarios result in Lee hitting Florida and the Carolinas in 7-10 days after plowing through several Caribbean islands, while a couple scenarios predict Lee could make landfall in the Northeast region of the United States in 10 to 12 days.
Outliers should not be entirely discounted. In 2017, Hurricane Irma formed in the southern Atlantic Ocean and skirted along the line of the Caribbean and the Atlantic Ocean.
It was predicted to pull northwest and miss the United States, but a few outliers predicted it would make landfall in the United States and those outliers proved right. The Category 5 hurricane smashed into the Caribbean and the Southeastern US, causing over $77 billion in damage and at least 134 deaths.
Where Lee ends up largely depends on the Azores High, a semi-permanent high-altitude pressure that acts as a steering wheel for storms in the Atlantic Ocean. If it remains weaker, then Lee should turn northwest before it reaches the United States, but if the Azores High strengthens over the coming days it could push Lee West, making it a danger to the Caribbean and United States.

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Saudi Arabia to Face Fiscal Deficit of 1.2% in 2023 After Surplus of 2.5% in 2022 - IMF

WASHINGTON, September 6 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects Saudi Arabia's fiscal deficit at 1.2% of GDP in 2023, following a surplus of 2.5% last year, according to a report published on Wednesday.
"Taking into account higher expenditures—including the estimated non-recurrent one-off spending made in 2022—staff estimates a deficit of 1.2 percent of GDP in 2023," the report

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said.

The deficit may increase to 1.6% next year, the IMF estimates.

Fiscal accounts are still projected to stay close to balance in the medium term, according to the IMF.

Risks to the outlook remain balanced.

"On the upside, higher oil prices—as expectations of strong oil demand for the rest of the year persist—possible change in OPEC+ oil production cuts and accelerated structural reforms and investment could spur growth. Conversely, too rapid a rise in non-oil investment could further raise domestic demand, thereby adding pressure on prices and external accounts," the report said.

On the downside, lower oil prices due to subdued global activity pose a key short-term risk while a quicker shift in demand for fossil fuel could hamper growth in the medium to long term, the IMF warned.

The fund welcomed Saudi Arabia's ongoing economic transformation, which has helped to create high growth, record low unemployment, and contain inflation. They also noted "impressive non-oil revenue mobilization efforts" initiated by the government.

The IMF also called for careful calibration of investment programs to support the economy and avoid private sector crowding out.

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US Sanctions Two Senior Commanders of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces

WASHINGTON, September 6 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned on Wednesday Abdelrahim Hamdan Dagalo for his leadership of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), according to a release.

"Today's action demonstrates Treasury's commitment to hold accountable those responsible for serious and extensive human rights abuses in Sudan," Brian E. Nelson, under secretary of the treasury's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, said. "The United States urges both sides of the conflict to cease the hostilities and violence perpetuating Sudan's dire humanitarian crisis."

Dagalo is a high-ranking RSF leader and brother of RSF Commander Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo.

According to the Treasury, RSF members have engaged in acts of violence and human rights abuses, including the massacre of civilians, ethnic killings, and use of sexual violence.

Since the beginning of conflict between the RSF and Sudanese armed forces in April, both sides have failed to implement a ceasefire, and the RSF and allied militias have been credibly accused of extensive human rights abuses in Darfur and elsewhere, the Treasury said.

The Department of State also announced on Wednesday that it was imposing visa restrictions on RSF General and West Darfur Sector Commander Abdul Rahman Juma for his alleged involvement in a gross violation of human rights.

On June 15, RSF forces led by Gen. Juma kidnapped and killed the governor of West Darfur,

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Khamis Abbakar, and his brother, the State Department said, citing "credible sources."

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Blinken Says Ukraine Counteroffensive Making 'Good Progress'

WASHINGTON, September 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Wednesday that Ukraine's counteroffensive against Russia was making "good progress."

"We've seen good progress in the counteroffensive," Blinken told reporters during his visit to Kiev.

Blinken also affirmed that Ukraine has a "strong partner in the United States."

He said the US wanted to ensure Ukraine had what it needed not only to succeed in the counteroffensive but for the long term as well.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said on Tuesday that Ukrainians were suffering heavy losses on the battlefield and echoed President Vladimir Putin's assessment of the counteroffensive as "a failure." Kiev has lost more than 66,000 troops and 7,600 pieces of military equipment since the beginning of the counteroffensive, according to Shoigu.

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Blinken Meets With Danish Prime Minister on Way to Kiev to Discuss F-16s – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen on Wednesday on his way to Kiev to thank the country for donating F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine, the State Department said.

"Secretary Blinken and Prime Minister Frederiksen discussed the war in Ukraine and emphasized the importance of the U.S.-Danish Alliance to transatlantic security ... Secretary Blinken thanked Prime Minister Frederiksen for Denmark's leadership in the F-16 coalition of partner nations to train Ukrainian pilots, and for its decision to donate F-16 jets to Ukraine," the statement said.

Denmark and the Netherlands will start the transfer of F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine within the upcoming months, following the appropriate training of pilots in the United States, the Pentagon said in August.

The US will start training Ukrainian pilots on F-16s in October once they complete their English language training in September, according to the Pentagon.

Blinken is currently in Kiev on an unannounced visit. He is expected to meet with Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal for talks on Ukraine's ongoing counteroffensive and future reconstruction efforts. Blinken will also announce over $1 billion in new aid to Ukraine, according to media reports.

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UN Chief Says World Leaders Must Find Climate Solutions as Summer Heat Bites

UNITED NATIONS, September 6 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on Wednesday called on world leaders to find climate solutions as hot summer days are "biting."

"Dog days of summer are not just barking, they are biting," Guterres said in a statement on the allegedly hottest summer on record. "Leaders must turn up the heat now for climate solutions."

Guterres claimed that the climate breakdown has begun and world leaders must seek solutions to climate change.

The UN chief recently participated in the Africa Climate Summit in Kenya, where he urged the global community to act together to make Africa a global leader in renewable energy and help the region address climate change.

Guterres also called on the G20 member states, which are responsible for some 80% of global greenhouse gas emissions, to assume their responsibilities in tackling climate change.

The first Africa Climate Summit is taking place in Nairobi, Kenya, from September 4-6. US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen have been scheduled to attend the event.

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US Official Meets With OAS Chief to Discuss Peaceful Transition of Power in Guatemala

WASHINGTON, September 6 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Richard Verma has met with Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary-General Luis Almagro to discuss the peaceful transition of power in Guatemala after the recent presidential election there, the State Department said.

Guatemala held a presidential election on August 20 in which Bernardo Arevalo won with 58.01% of the vote and runner-up Sandra Torres, who contested the results due to alleged irregularities in the first round of voting, received 37.24%. Torres' complaint led to a temporary suspension of the vote, but Arevalo's win was eventually confirmed.

"[Verma expressed the] full commitment of the United States to support the will of the Guatemalan people in electing Bernardo Arevalo as the country’s next president," the State Department said in a press release said on Tuesday.

The two officials discussed the importance of a smooth transition of power in Guatemala for the country itself as well as for the region, the release said.

The meeting particularly highlighted the significance of upholding democratic principles in South and Central America and the Caribbean, the release added.

Verma and Almagro affirmed their shared commitment to the Inter-American Democratic Charter, reinforcing their dedication to promoting democratic values in Guatemala and on the

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American continent, according to the release.

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China Hopes Conditions Can Be Created With US for 'High-Level Interactions' - Embassy

WASHINGTON, September 6 (Sputnik) - The United States and China have maintained communications but Beijing is hopeful the two countries can create conditions for "high-level interactions," a spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Washington told Sputnik.

"The two sides have maintained communication," the spokesperson said on Tuesday. "We hope both sides can create atmosphere and conditions for high-level interactions."

The spokesperson provided the comment after being asked about the invitation extended by the US government to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in August that the United States had extended an invitation to Wang and expects an opportunity to avail itself for a meeting with the Chinese foreign minister.

Wang, who served as the top Chinese diplomat from 2013-2022, recently assumed the post again after his successor Qin Gang was removed.

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US Court Sentences 'Proud Boys' Leader Tarrio to 22 Years for January 6 Crimes - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 6 (Sputnik) - A US court sentenced Proud Boys group leader Enrique Tarrio to 22 years in prison for crimes linked to the January 6, 2021, US Capitol riot, CBS News reported.

Judge Timothy Kelly of the US District Court for the District of Columbia sentenced Tarrio to 22 years in prison for seditious conspiracy in helping orchestrate the breach of the US Capitol on January 6, among other offenses, the report said on Tuesday.

The sentence is the longest handed down to date in connection with the events of January 6. Prosecutors requested a 33-year sentence while the defense team asked for less than 15 years in prison, the report said.

Tarrio was not present at the US Capitol on January 6 but was charged alongside other Proud Boys members who were in Washington on that day.

Last week, several other Proud Boys members received sentences ranging from ten to 18 years in prison for crimes linked to the January 6 events at the US Capitol.

The sentences come as former President Donald Trump battles charges of alleged crimes linked to efforts to overturn the 2020 US presidential election.

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US Has $5.75Bln Remaining in Ukraine Aid Funding for 2023 - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 6 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has an estimated $5.75 billion in available funding to continue providing Ukraine with military assistance through this year, US Defense Department spokesperson Lt. Col. Garron Garn said.

"As of August 29, there is approximately $5.75 billion in restored Presidential Drawdown Authority that remains available for Ukraine," Garn said in a press release on Tuesday.

The Biden administration has provided more than $43 billion in military assistance to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022.

President Joe Biden recently made a request to Congress for an additional $24 billion to continue assisting Ukraine in 2024.

A number of Republicans in Congress have opposed providing further military assistance to Ukraine.

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Manhunt for Escaped Killer Forces Closure of 2 School Districts in Pennsylvania - Police

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - The authorities in the US state of Pennsylvania have expanded the manhunt for escaped murderer Danelo Cavalcante and closed two school districts after the fugitive was sighted on local trail cameras, the Chester County District Attorney said on Tuesday.

"Superintendents in the areas were notified immediately with the updated information and the schools in Unionville Chadds-Ford and Kennett Area Consolidated school districts closed for the day," the Chester County District Attorney said in a post on social media.

The decision to expand the manhunt and close the school districts came about after a security camera on Monday evening recorded Cavalcante at Longwood Gardens, which is located south of the originally established search zone.

Police initiated a reverse 911 call in English and Spanish to residents within a three-mile radius, urging vigilance and cooperation with law enforcement.

Cavalcante, a citizen of Brazil, escaped from the Chester County Prison on August 31 after being convicted in the killing of his former girlfriend.

Since Cavalcante's escape last Thursday, multiple credible sightings have prompted law enforcement to intensify their efforts to bring him back into custody.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 6 (Sputnik) -

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

* Saudi Arabia will extend the voluntary reduction in oil production by one million barrels per day until the end of 2023, the Saudi Press Agency reported on Tuesday.
* Russia will extend its voluntary cut in oil exports by 300,000 barrels per day until the end of 2023, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.
* The volume of voluntary reduction in Russia's oil production will be reviewed monthly depending on the situation in the global oil market, Novak said.
* Turkey expects to create a gas hub similar to centers in London and Hamburg and intends to discuss the plan with Russia, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Ukraine has suffered about 400 soldiers killed and wounded in the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia directions over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday.
* Human Rights Watch told RIA Novosti that it has collected evidence of the killing of Izyum residents by Ukrainian shelling with cluster munitions in 2022.

US MILITARY COOPERATION WITH UKRAINE

* US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will continue to work closely with Ukrainian defense leaders after Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov was replaced, Pentagon spokesperson Patrick Ryder said on Tuesday.
* Ryder said he has nothing to announce regarding reports that the United Stated plans to send depleted uranium munitions to Ukraine.

GRAIN EXPORTS AGREEMENT

* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Tuesday that he plans to meet with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres during the UN General Assembly in New York to discuss the possible resumption of the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative.
* Agreements on grain are multilateral processes, and it is difficult to agree on anything concrete at the moment in bilateral contacts between Moscow and Ankara, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
* The United States welcomes Turkey's efforts to reach a deal with Russia and renew the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, US State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said.

DRONE ATTACKS IN RUSSIA

* A Ukrainian drone was shot down by Russian air defense over the Belgorod Region, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday.

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* One civilian was killed and one wounded in the Kozinka settlement of Russia's Belgorod Region due to shelling by Ukraine, Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said.
* Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan discussed the attempted drone attacks on ships guarding Russia's gas pipelines - TurkStream and Blue Stream, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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Oil Closes at Above $90 a Barrel on Saudi, Russia Cuts Plan

NEW YORK CITY, September 5 (Sputnik) - Crude prices hit $90 per barrel on Tuesday the first time in 10 months after the world's two largest oil exporters, Saudi Arabia and Russia, both announced production cuts through the end of the year that would remove some 1.3 million barrels per day combined from the market.

Saudi Arabia, in an announcement by state news agency SPA, said it would extend its voluntary cut of 1 million barrels per day for another three months until the end of December. The Saudi cuts began in July, with the kingdom saying it would extend or deepen the reductions as necessary at each monthly review — a position it maintained on Tuesday.

Separately, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said in a statement that Moscow would extend its voluntary reduction in oil exports by 300,000 barrels per day until the end of the year to maintain stability and balance on oil markets.

The total daily reduction of 1.3 million barrels till the year-end had not been anticipated by most traders — many had expected a month-by-month announcement — and the maneuver designed to jolt the market higher did its job.

London-traded Brent crude settled at $90.04 per barrel, up $1.04, or 1.2%, on the day. It earlier hit a session peak of $91.14, its highest since August 2022. Last week Brent rose 4.8%. That was after a combined 2.3% drop over two prior weeks. Even before that, the global crude benchmark rose for seven weeks in a row, gaining a total of 18%.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, crude settled up $1.14, or 1.3%, at $86.69 per barrel after a 10-month peak at $88.03. That extended last week's 7.2% gain for the US crude benchmark. Prior to that, the WTI experienced a combined 4% drop over two weeks as the economy in top oil importer China sputtered. Even before that, WTI gained 20% over seven weeks.

Oil's ascent to $90 a barrel happened with less than three weeks left for summer, the season Americans like driving the most. With the fall season of lower oil usage set to begin on September 23, crude prices would typically retreat a little, sometimes meaningfully, in the world's largest consuming country.

But that may not happen this time, with the Saudis ultimately targeting $100 a barrel or beyond. Controlling much of the world's oil exports, they have been fixated on triple digit pricing since losing that advantage in August 2022, when Brent crude hovered above $105. Prior to that, the global crude benchmark reached nearly $140 in March last year, right after Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine.

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The question is whether demand will be supportive to sustain such pricing, a challenge the Saudis are trying to meet in a different way.

US driving activity routinely lessens with the advent of fall or autumn season and the deceleration heightens as the weather turns colder, heading into winter. The chill will, of course, bring its own attendant demand for heating. Even so, the period between now and late October/early November, known as the 'shoulder season' between end-summer and advanced fall, typically sees less demand for oil and, correspondingly, lower prices for crude.

While demand is usually the driver for the pricing of anything, in this case, the Saudis and their allies are using supply to overwhelm the buying component in the oil market to skew market balance in their way. The idea is to create such an artificially short supply that the trade simply cannot function in its usual way.

Key to this is the one-million-barrels-per day in additional cuts, on top of other existing production rationing, that the Saudis have been carrying out since July. By extending this till the year-end — and widening it with Russia's help — the kingdom is hoping to create a different sort of market phenomenon for pricing.

"You have an odd situation where the Saudis are trying to create a supply situation even lower than the seasonal lows in demand," said John Kilduff, founding partner of New York-based energy hedge fund Again Capital. "But fuel uptake for this summer is still very much down to earth, higher than a year ago, yes, but still below pre-pandemic levels."

The four-week average of US gasoline consumption — the best gauge of fuel demand — was at 9.033M barrels per day for the week ended Aug. 25 versus the year-ago level of 8.874M. But consumption is still well below pre-pandemic levels, with 9.777M barrels used daily for the comparative week to Aug 23, 2019.

In China, government and private surveys offered mixed signals on manufacturing activity, as the world's largest oil consumer struggles to shore up a post-COVID economic recovery. Those long oil are, instead, hoping that Beijing will release more stimulus measures in the coming weeks to further support growth. Focus this week is also on Chinese trade data to gauge just how well crude demand is holding up in the country.

Some are looking at the start of the North Atlantic hurricane season as one factor that could be supportive for oil, especially if there are serious disruptions in production and damage to oil installations in the US Gulf Coast of Mexico. But history has been on the kinder side of late to America where hurricane damage is concerned.

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China-US Economic Cooperation, Trade in a 'Difficult Patch' - Chinese Embassy

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - Economic cooperation and trade between the United States and China is in a difficult patch, Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu said on Tuesday.

"Now the economic cooperation, trade between the two countries are in a difficult patch," Liu said during a press briefing. "The reasons include the 301 tariffs, unilateral sanctions, tightened

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export controls and new restrictions on the two-way investments."

For the first time in 15 years, Liu said, China is no longer the biggest source of imports for the United States and Chinese investment in the United States peaked in 2016, but it has kept plummeting ever since.

However, Liu added that China and the United States still remain each other's major trading partner.

Post-COVID economic recovery will be "bumpy" from time to time, Liu said, but China's long term growth will remain good and unchanged.

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McConnell Returns to US Senate After Health Concerns, Says Has Been 'Productive'

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell on Tuesday delivered his first speech to the upper chamber of Congress since returning from the August recess, saying that he and his staff have been productive despite concerns about the lawmaker's health.

Last week, McConnell froze during remarks to reporters in Kentucky, appearing briefly unable to speak. The incident follows a similar freeze during a press conference in July.

"One particular moment of my time back home has received its fair share of attention in the press over the past week, but I assure you that August was a busy and productive month for me and my staff," McConnell said during a press briefing.

McConnell shows no signs of having suffered a stroke, seizures or Parkinson's disease, US Congress attending physician Brian Monahan said earlier on Tuesday.

Lawmakers are returning to Congress following the August break, as they prepare to negotiate a continuing resolution to fund the US government and avoid a shutdown before the end of the month.

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Alex Murdaugh's Defense Seeks New Trial Over Jury Tampering Claim - Filing

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - Attorneys representing Alex Murdaugh, the South Carolina lawyer who was previously convicted of killing his wife and son, filed a motion for a new trial with the South Carolina Court of Appeals on Tuesday, alleging jury tampering by the Colleton County Clerk of Court.

"Specifically, during trial the Colleton County Clerk of Court, Rebecca Hill, instructed jurors not to be 'misled' by evidence presented in Mr. Murdaugh's defense. She told jurors not to be 'fooled by' Mr. Murdaugh's testimony in his own defense," the motion said.

As of now, neither Rebecca Hill nor the State Office of the Attorney General has issued any

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comments on the allegations.

Murdaugh, a once-prominent South Carolina lawyer, was convicted earlier this year for the murder of his wife, Margaret, and their youngest son, Paul, in June 2021. He received two consecutive life sentences without the possibility of parole for these crimes. Murdaugh pleaded not guilty to the fatal shooting of his wife and son.

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US Continues to Seek Consular Access to Michael Leake Detained in Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to seek consular access to US national Michael Leake, who was detained in Moscow earlier this year on drug trafficking charges, but has not yet been granted access, State Department spokesman Vedant Patel said on Tuesday.

"We are monitoring the ongoing detention of Michael Travis Leake in Moscow. We are continuing to seek consular access to Mr. Leake and continue to insist that the Russian Federation allow consistent timely consular access to all US citizen detainees," Patel said during a press briefing.

Leake, a rock musician and former US paratrooper, was detained in June for organizing a drug trafficking business, according to Russian authorities.

Since arriving in Russia in 2010, the 51-year US citizen has taken part in several Russian music projects, including as a producer. Currently, he is the lead singer of the Lovi Noch' (Catch the Night) rock band.

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Biden Nominates Erik Woodhouse as US Sanctions Coordinator - White House

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is nominating State Department employee Erik Woodhouse to serve as the Head of the Office of Sanctions Coordination, the White House said on Tuesday.

"Today, President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate the following individuals to serve as key leaders in his Administration… Erik Woodhouse, Nominee for Head of the Office of Sanctions Coordination, with the rank of Ambassador," the White House said in a statement.

Woodhouse currently serves as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Counter Threat Finance and Sanctions in the State Department's Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, the statement said.

Woodhouse has also worked as an attorney, advising clients on US sanctions and anti-money laundering rules and regulations, the statement added.

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White House Says Claims Biden Administration Treats President Like Baby 'Ridiculous'

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - Allegations that staff of US President Joe Biden's administration treat him like a baby are ridiculous, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

Biden fumed to friends about being "babied" by his staff and expressed resentment about them creating a public perception that they were fixing his mistakes, US media reported last week, citing an excerpt from a new book covering the Biden administration's first two years.

"No one treats the President of the United States, the Commander-in-Chief, like a baby," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing, when asked about the claims. "That's a ridiculous claim."

Biden's frustration reportedly reached a head following a speech in Warsaw, during which Biden ad-libbed a line about the need to depose Russian President Vladimir Putin. The White House walked back the remarks, claiming Biden meant Putin cannot exercise power over neighboring territories.

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

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US Aware of Potential Leader-Level Talks on Russia-North Korea Arms Deal - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware that Russia and North Korea may potentially hold leader-level talks on an arms deal between the two countries, which is purportedly in the works, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Tuesday.

"We also have information, as we have indicated publicly, that North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un, has some expectation that those discussions will continue as we go forward, including leader-level discussions, perhaps even in-person leader-level discussions," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

Earlier this week, US media reported that Kim plans to visit Russia later in September to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Vladivostok to discuss bilateral military cooperation, the report said.

Last week, the Biden administration alleged that an arms deal between Moscow and Pyongyang was being actively advanced.

Sullivan said that North Korea would "pay a price" if it provides arms to Russia.

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US Has Nothing to Announce on Reports to Supply Depleted Uranium Rounds to Ukraine - Ryder

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder said on Tuesday that he has nothing to announce regarding the reports that the United Stated plans to send depleted uranium munitions to Ukraine.

On Friday, Reuters reported the United States will send armor-piercing depleted uranium rounds in a new upcoming aid package for Ukraine worth between $240 million and $375 million.

"I don't have anything to announce today," Ryder said during a press briefing when asked if the United States planned to send uranium munitions to Ukraine.

On Sunday, a White House National Security Council spokesperson told Sputnik that he could not confirm the reports that the United States would provide Ukraine with depleted uranium armor piercing munitions.

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GOP Voters Maintain Strong Support for Trump Despite Criminal Charges Concerns - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump continues to lead the GOP field of candidates as the campaign season approaches, with a minority of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents concerned that the criminal charges he is facing may undercut his ability to win the 2024 election, according to a CNN poll published on Tuesday.

Trump's continuing favor among GOP voters is highlighted by the fact that over 4 in 10 potential GOP primary voters have definitively committed to supporting him for the nomination, the survey conducted by SSRS said.

Moreover, the poll also revealed that a significant portion of GOP-aligned voters do not view Trump's criminal charges as a substantial obstacle to his potential presidency.

However, 44% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents harbor concerns that the criminal charges Trump faces might have a negative impact on his prospects of winning the 2024 election should he secure the Republican nomination.

Former President Trump currently faces four separate criminal cases, including charges in New York related to hush money payments and in Florida for allegedly hoarding classified documents.

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US Welcomes Turkey's Efforts to Renew Black Sea Grain Agreement - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes Turkey's efforts to reach a deal with Russia and renew the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, US State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Tuesday.

"We welcome the efforts of our Turkish partners, including President [Recep Tayyip] Erdogan, to try to convince Russia to return to the deal," Patel said during a press briefing.

Patel accused Russia of withdrawing from the agreement and thus hurting the most food-vulnerable countries in the world.

The spokesperson also noted that the United States continues to engage with the United Nations as well as Turkey on the issue.

Patel thanked the NATO ally for playing what he called an "important role" in the efforts to get the Black Sea Initiative back on track.

On Monday, Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in the Russian city of Sochi, with the grain agreement being high on their agenda. After the talks, Erdogan said Ankara is preparing a new package of proposals to revive the agreement after consulting with the United Nations.

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Austin Will Work Closely With Ukrainian Defense Leaders After Reznikov Replaced - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will continue to work closely with Ukrainian defense leaders after Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov was replaced, Pentagon Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder said on Tuesday.

"Secretary Austin and the department look forward to continuing to work closely with Ukrainian defense leaders," Ryder said during a press briefing. "We will continue to support Ukraine with security assistance and to enable them on the battlefield. And so I don't have anything to announce right now in terms of potential future meetings or calls, but certainly one can assume that we will work closely with Ukrainian defense leaders."

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US State Department Declines to Confirm Whether Blinken Will Visit Kiev on Wednesday

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) – US State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel on Tuesday declined to comment on Ukrainian media reports that Secretary of State Antony Blinken plans to visit Kiev this week.

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"I have no updates on the additional travels of State Department personnel," Patel told reporters when asked about the matter.

Earlier in the day, Ukrainian media, citing diplomatic sources, reported that Blinken will visit Kiev on Wednesday. The reports did not provide any further details about the potential trip.

Blinken last visited Kiev in September 2022 on a visit that was not announced in advance.

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US to Conduct ICBM Test on Wednesday Morning - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is going to conduct a test of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on Wednesday morning, Pentagon Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder said on Tuesday.

"An operational test launch of an Air Force Global Strike Command unarmed Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile is scheduled for September 5, 2023 from 11:47 pm to September 6 5:47am Pacific Time from North Vandenberg Space Force Base," Ryder said during a press briefing. "The purpose of the ICBM test launch program is to demonstrate the readiness of US nuclear forces and provide confidence in the legality and effectiveness of the nation's nuclear deterrent. This test is routine and was scheduled years in advance."

The United States has notified the Russian government in advance about the test launch.

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Sullivan Says Does Not Expect Russia to Change Position on Ukraine in G20 Final Statement

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - Russia is unlikely to change its position on the Ukraine war this year that can be reflected in the Group of Twenty (G20) joint statement on the matter, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Tuesday.

"I don't expect that Russia is going to flip its position on the Ukraine war this year," Sullivan said when asked whether progress has been made since the G20 summit in Bali regarding bringing all member states to the same position on Ukraine.

Sullivan emphasized that getting an "absolute consensus" on a joint statement on Ukraine is challenging because Russia is seated at the table.

Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022 in response to calls by the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to protect them from intensifying attacks by the Ukrainian military. Russia has said that the special operation targets Ukrainian military infrastructure and aims to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine.

The countries of the collective West have imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia and

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have supplied weapons and financial aid to Ukraine in excess of $150 billion.

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Sullivan Says US Prepared to Negotiate Sanctions Relief With Venezuela for Fair Elections

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to negotiate sanctions relief with Venezuela in exchange for election reform efforts, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Tuesday.

"The administration's position has been clear and consistent for a long time: we are prepared to engage in discussions about specific sanctions relief in return for concrete steps that lead us towards a free and fair election," Sullivan said during a press briefing, when asked about sanctions relief talks with Venezuela.

The approach applies to both Venezuela and other countries as well, Sullivan added.

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US Looking for Opportunities to Dissuade DPRK From Sending Arms to Russia - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to look for ways to dissuade North Korea from providing Russia with weapons, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Tuesday.

"We will continue to look for opportunities to dissuade the North Koreans from taking this step, to get others to do the same and to report to the world what we are seeing in terms of the actively advancing discussions that are taking place between these two countries," Sullivan told reporters.

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United Airlines Says All Aircraft Held at Departure Airports Over Systemwide Tech Issue

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - United Airlines said on Tuesday that it is experiencing a systemwide issue and holding all aircraft at their departure airports.

"We are experiencing a systemwide technology issue and are holding all aircraft at their departure airports," the company said in a statement. "Flights that are already airborne are continuing to their destination as planned. We will share more information as it becomes available."

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Sullivan Says Biden Will Emphasize Enduring Nature of US Support to Ukraine at G20

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will emphasize the enduring nature of the United States' support for Ukraine amid its conflict with Russia during an upcoming Group of Twenty (G20) summit in India, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Tuesday.

"As he has done before, President Biden will call for a just and durable peace – one founded in respect for international law, principles of the UN Charter, the precepts of territorial integrity and sovereignty – and he will continue to emphasize that the United States will support Ukraine for as long as it takes to redeem these principles," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

Biden will travel to India from September 7-10 to attend a G20 summit in New Delhi. Leaders are also expected to make progress on issues related to climate change, health and technology, Sullivan said.

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Biden Again Tests Negative for COVID-19 on Tuesday After First Lady Infected - White House

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has tested negative for COVID-19 after First Lady Jill Biden got infected, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

"President Biden tested negative last night for and tested negative again today," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing. "He is not experiencing any symptoms."

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Biden to Meet With Modi in India on Friday - White House

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will hold a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on September 8, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Tuesday.

Biden will travel to India from September 7-10 to attend the G20 leaders' summit.

"On Friday, President Biden will participate in a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Modi of the Republic of India," Sullivan told reporters.

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United Airlines Issues Nationwide Ground Stop Due to Equipment Outage - FAA

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - United Airlines has issued a nationwide ground stop due to an equipment outage, the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said on Tuesday.
"REASON: COMPANY REQUEST / EQUIPMENT OUTAGE," the FAA said in a notice, adding that the ground stop applies to all airports.

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Father of Wildfires Victim Sues Maui County, State of Hawaii Over 'Negligence' - Law Firm

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - The father of a woman who died in the Maui wildfires is suing the County of Maui and the state of Hawaii for "gross negligence" in a first-of-its-kind case, a litigation firm involved in the case said on Tuesday.
Harold Dennis Wells, the father of a 57-year-old woman named Rebecca Rans who died while trying to escape the Maui wildfires that ravaged Lahaina last month, filed the suit on Monday in state court and alleges that the defendants were aware of the wildfire risks but squandered years away before taking appropriate preventative measures, Bickerton Law Group LLLP said in a statement.
The plaintiff claims that Maui County officials were underprepared for the fire and should be held liable for failing to warn its residents of the fire's imminent approach, which may have given Rans and others enough time to flee the area, the statement said. The suit also cites lack of vegetation management and failure to implement preventative measures in vulnerable locations in parts of the county.
The plaintiff also names the state's electric utility, Hawaiian Electric Company, which is already facing several lawsuits, including one brought by the state of Hawaii, over the fires. The suit alleges that Hawaiian Electric ignored warnings from the National Weather Service about the fire dangers in early August, and that the company should have deenergized their power lines to prevent the fire spreading, according to the statement.
Wildfires that erupted in Maui on August 8 have left at least 115 dead while 388 are still missing, according to officials. The Lahaina fire, which remains 90% contained, has burned an estimated 2,170 acres, the county of Maui said in its most recent update.

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UPDATE - Vinnik's Lawyer Says Will Ask US Court to Delay Trial Set For February

(Updates with additional comments from lawyer in paras 4-6, background in para 7)
WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) – The legal team of Russian national Alexander Vinnik will ask a US court to delay his trial set for February to allow more time to review the documents and evidence in the case, his lawyer Arkady Bukh told Sputnik on Tuesday.
"I do believe that the trial in February will be adjourned, or at least we will be asking for that," Bukh said, adding that it would be up to the judge to decide whether to approve the request.
The lawyer explained that he entered the case just several weeks ago and needs time to learn the details. "We are still working on the dates, but there is a good possibility we need to adjourn the trial, and we will be reviewing the documents," he said.
Bukh said the new defense team has filed a notice of appearance, and the prosecutor is now required to send them its evidence and information on the case.
When asked about the chance of Vinnik's involvement in a prisoner swap between Russia and the US, the lawyer said his client is "a very simple person" who has no links with the Russian government or officials.
"However, if, for whatever reason my client would be a part of any offer by the Russian government and would be able to avoid prosecution, of course, our office will be more than happy to give him the ability to avoid the trial in the US," Bukh said.
The US government accuses Vinnik of enabling criminal activity through the cryptocurrency exchange BTC-e by obscuring and anonymizing transactions and sources of funds. Vinnik denies the charges against him.

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Poland Buys US Army Missile Sensors to Expand Patriot Air Defense Capabilities - RTX

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - Poland has become the first international customer for US-built lower-tier air and missile defense sensors to guide Patriot anti-aircraft and missile interceptors, RTX announced in a press release on Tuesday.
"The Polish Minister of National Defense, Mariusz Blaszczak, approved a letter of acceptance with the US Army to expand its WISLA air and missile defense capabilities with the introduction of 12 lower-tier air and missile defense sensors, or LTAMDS, and the addition of 48 Patriot launchers," the release said. "The agreement sets the Foreign Military Sale into motion and makes Poland the first international customer to add the advanced 360-degree LTAMDS radar being built by Raytheon, an RTX business, to their air and missile defense architecture."
The sensor purchase will support the Polish government's WISLA Phase 2 program, building on the nearly completed first phase which culminated with the delivery and testing of four Patriot fire units, the release said.
Raytheon completed its delivery of the last two fire units to Poland earlier this year and the systems will complete system integration and check-out in October, the release said.
"Poland's expansion of its WISLA program will fortify the country's security and defense against

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a range of air and missile threats," Raytheon Land and Air Defense Systems President Tom Laliberty said in the release.

Poland will become the first country after the United States to complement the combat-proven Patriot with LTAMDS, which provides extended range and full, 360-degree coverage to detect and defend against complex, highly coordinated, multi-threat attack scenarios, Laliberty added.

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RFK Jr. Says US Lawmakers Ignorant About Impact of Ukraine Conflict on Economy

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - Some US lawmakers are ignorant about the toll of the Ukraine conflict on the United States' economy following the provision of billions of dollars in aid, Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said on Tuesday.

Kennedy's statement came in response to remarks from US Senators Mitt Romney and Richard Blumenthal praising US support for Ukraine as a good investment.

"Republican Sen. Romney + Democrat Sen. Blumenthal both are trumpeting that America is getting its 'money's worth' in Ukraine," Kennedy said in a statement via social media. "They also display total ignorance of the impact of this war on the American economy."

Kennedy questioned whether the billions of dollars in aid to Ukraine were worthwhile for US taxpayers and called the lawmakers' disregard for Ukrainian lives "revolting."

Kennedy considers Ukrainian membership in NATO an unnecessary provocation that risks sparking nuclear conflict with Russia, the candidate's press team told Sputnik earlier this year. Kennedy's team said he believes in pursuing de-escalation and a negotiated peace that respects the security and sovereignty of all parties.

Kennedy's statement also comes as lawmakers consider a multibillion-dollar supplemental funding request for further Ukraine aid, as well as US disaster assistance. In addition, lawmakers are set to negotiate a continuing resolution to temporarily fund the US government and avoid a shutdown before the end of the month.

The Pentagon has said it is confident in the US' ability to continue supporting Ukraine through the end of the fiscal year and hopeful that Congress will approve the supplemental funding request.

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Vinnik's Lawyer Says Will Ask US Court to Delay Trial Set For February

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) – The legal team of Russian national Alexander Vinnik will ask a US court to delay his trial set for February to allow more time to review the documents and evidence in the case, his lawyer Arkady Bukh told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"I do believe that the trial in February will be adjourned, or at least we will be asking for that,"

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McConnell Shows No Evidence of Stroke Seizure Disorder, Parkinson's Disease - Doctor

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has shown no evidence of having suffered a stroke, a seizure disorder or Parkinson's disease, US Congress attending physician Brian Monahan said on Tuesday.
"There is no evidence that you have a seizure disorder or that you experienced a stroke, TIA [transient ischemic attack] or movement disorder such as Parkinson's disease," Monahan said in a notice.
Monahan explained that his examination of McConnell included an MRI imaging of his brain, an electroencephalogram (EEG) study as well as consultations with several neurologists.
"There are no changes recommended in treatment as you continue recovery from your March 2023 fall," Monahan said.
Monahan noted that the evaluation was conducted after McConnell’s "brief incident" on August 30, when the senator froze during remarks to reporters and appeared to lose his ability to speak. McConnell's spokesman said the pause was due to the senator feeling lightheaded.
In July, McConnell similarly fell silent partway through a press conference in Washington. He briefly departed the presser before later returning, claiming he felt fine.

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Exodus Begins From Nevada Festival in Sea of Mud as Organizers Lift Driving Ban

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - The organizers of the Burning Man festival in the US state of Nevada have lifted the driving restriction they had imposed earlier amid unusually heavy rainfalls thereby allowing the trapped attendees to leave the area in the difficult, muddy conditions.
"Take it slow and mind those directing traffic. Please be patient as you exit through Gate Road, and respect Burning Man staff who are working hard to make the Exodus experience as smooth and safe as possible," the organizers said in a statement issued on Monday.
Heavy storms complete with torrential rains hit the area in the Nevada desert where the festival is held, turning into a sea of mud that trapped thousands of attendees’ vehicles.
The organizers suspended the festival until conditions improved and urged attendees to conserve their essential supplies.

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One attendee described her experience via Twitter, likening the situation to scenes of chaos from the movie "Mad Max," which she renamed "Mud Max."

As of Monday noon, some 64,000 people were still on-site, leading organizers to suggest in the statement that they delay departing until Tuesday to ease the traffic congestion in the unusual circumstances.

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US House Lawmakers Request Information on Recent Air, Rail Safety Incidents - Letter

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - A group of US House Oversight Committee lawmakers led by Chairman James Comer sent a letter on Tuesday to US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, requesting information on efforts to address recent aviation and rail safety incidents.

"The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is conducting oversight of the Department of Transportation following a series of aviation and rail safety failures," the letter said. "Therefore, we request a briefing, documents, and communications related to the Department's efforts to investigate and remediate these issues to protect the safety of all Americans."

The recent incidents indicate a "disturbing pattern" of failures that place Americans at risk, the letter added.

There were 1,730 runway incursions in all of 2022, compared to 1,539 as of July 24, 2023, the letter said, citing Federal Aviation Administration data. The figure is on track to surpass any previous annual total for such incidents in the last two decades, the letter said.

The rail sector has also seen a pattern of safety failures in recent years, the letter said. There have been approximately 2,000 rail incidents, including 1,310 derailments and 146 collisions, since 2021, the letter said.

Recent failures may have been avoided if the Office of the Secretary of Transportation acted on numerous unresolved recommendations related to aviation and rail safety, the letter said.

"It appears from the Office of Inspector General's catalogue of long overdue and unresolved recommendations that the Department of Transportation's leadership is not prioritizing Americans' safety on air, land, and sea. These safety failures have eroded the public's confidence in air and rail safety and necessitates thorough investigation," the letter said.

The letter requested documents and communications from the Biden administration Transportation Department related to rail and aviation safety incidents, as well as open recommendations provided by the Office of Inspector General.

The lawmakers requested that the Transportation Department provide the information, as well as a staff-level briefing, no later than September 19, the letter said.

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Blinken Speaks with Abbas, Netayanhu Amid West Bank Violence – State Department

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken held separate calls with Palestinian Authority President Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on Tuesday amid ongoing violence in the West Bank, the State Department said.

In his call with Abbas, "Secretary Blinken expressed continued concern about ongoing violence in the West Bank," according to spokesperson Matthew Miller.

Blinken reaffirmed US support for measures to advance freedom and security and improve the quality of life for Palestinians. He and Abbas also discussed their support for a two-state solution and opposition to actions endangering its viability.

With Netayanhu, Blinken reaffirmed the strength of their bilateral partnership and the US commitment to Israel's security. They also discussed mutual interests, including expanding Israel's regional integration and countering threats posed by Iran.

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Trump Aide Meadows Waives Arraignment, Pleads Not Guilty in Georgia Election Case - Filing

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - Former Trump chief of staff Mark Meadows waived his right to a formal arraignment and pleaded not guilty to charges brought in the US state of Georgia over alleged efforts to overturn 2020 presidential election results, according to a court document filed on Tuesday.

"I do hereby waive formal arraignment and enter my plea of NOT GUILTY to the Indictment in the case," the filing said.

Meadows is one of 18 co-defendants listed alongside former President Donald Trump in the Georgia case. Last month, a US judge denied a request from Meadows to move his case to federal court.

Trump also declined to appear at an arraignment and pleaded not guilty to the charges against him.

The charges come ahead of the 2024 US presidential election, in which Trump is seeking the Republican Party nomination. Trump also faces charges linked to the 2020 election, as well as his handling of classified documents and other matters.

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Biden Announces Intent to Nominate Jacob Lew as Ambassador to Israel - White House

(Adds details in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will nominate former Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew to serve as the new US ambassador to Israel, the White House

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announced in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today, President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate Jacob J. Lew to serve as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the State of Israel," the statement said.

Lew is currently managing partner of US private equity firm Lindsay Goldberg and a visiting professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University. He was formerly secretary of the treasury under President Barack Obama from 2013 to 2017, the statement noted.

"In addition, he held positions as deputy secretary of state for management and resources and as chief of staff for the President," the White House said.

Lew was the director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) twice — under President Bill Clinton and President Obama. In both administrations, he was a principal at the National Security Council.

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UN Must Evolve With Times, Undertake Needed Reforms - General Assembly President

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - Csaba Korosi, president of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly, on Tuesday called on the United Nations to evolve with the times and undertake much needed reforms of key UN bodies.

"Times are evolving and this organization must evolve with them," Korosi said. "We must reform how the General Assembly functions. The same is true for the Security Council."

While the UN Charter does not make undertaking reforms easy, the United Nations task is to apply it until it is changed, particularly with regards to its selective application on conflict management as well as genocide and other war crimes, Korosi said.

"If we do not, the Security Council will be more of a problem than a solution," Korosi added.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in August that it is necessary to reform the UN Security Council and the entire Bretton Woods financial system to make them relevant to the contemporary global economic and political developments.

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US Congress Prepares to Address Government Funding, Avoid Shutdown by End of Month

WASHINGTON, September 5 (Sputnik) - The US Congress is preparing to spend September addressing government funding and attempting to avert a government shutdown before current funds expire at the end of the month.

The congressional leadership and the White House have both expressed support for a short-term funding measure to avoid a shutdown, despite opposition by some Republican lawmakers.

The Senate returns from its August recess on Tuesday and the House of Representatives will

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return later next week. US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has said he and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy agreed to work on a continuing resolution to fund the government beyond the September 30 deadline.

Lawmakers would continue working to pass full appropriations bills during any potential extension, the leaders said.

The White House also issued a statement in favor of passing a continuing resolution to give lawmakers time to reach a “bipartisan, bicameral” agreement on fiscal year 2024 appropriations bills.

However, the House Republican Freedom Caucus has expressed opposition to any stopgap funding bill that fails to address government spending. The group issued a statement expressing their commitment to restoring the 2022 topline spending of $1.471 trillion while maintaining adequate defense funding.

The Pentagon has said it has adequate funding to meet Ukraine’s needs through the end of the fiscal year. The White House sent a supplemental funding request to Congress amid the shutdown showdown, requesting $40 billion for spending on issues including Ukraine and disaster relief.

The Freedom Caucus said it will also oppose a “blank check” for Ukraine in any supplemental appropriations bill.

The US government has shut down 21 times since establishing the federal budget process in 1976, although many have been brief. The longest shutdown, 35 days, occurred under the Trump administration in late 2018 and into early 2019.

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