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9/14/23 Thursday

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Germany Stops Admitting Migrants From Italy 'Until Further Notice'

The German Interior Ministry has paused acceptance of new migrants who arrived in Europe via Italy for the time being, reportedly over Rome's refusal to abide by a European Union agreement on refugees.

According to reports in German media on Thursday, Berlin has suspended admittance of new refugees from Italy "until further notice," citing "high migrant pressure." The change reportedly took effect late last month.

The reports indicate the contentious issue is the Dublin Regulation, a 1990 agreement governing how refugees are accepted for asylum in EU nations after applying for international protection under the Geneva Convention. Part of the agreement stipulates that the EU country of entry is responsible for processing the migrants' applications and for reaccepting them if they apply for protection in a second EU country.

According to German media reports, Rome told other EU member states in December 2022 it was canceling "for a limited period of time" its reacceptance of migrants from other countries due to "suddenly arising technical" issues related to its intake capacity. However, it has remained on hold ever since.

The change came about two months after Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni took office. The politician campaigned heavily against accepting more migrants, especially non-Christians, even calling for a naval blockade to stop the refugee craft from crossing the Mediterranean.

The protocol has strained heavily under the weight of the refugee crisis since 2015, which has been driven by conflicts in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and Nigeria, most of whom have entered the EU via Italy, Greece, and Bulgaria. EU nations have agreed voluntarily to accept a certain amount of refugees from the entry-point countries to "share the burden," prompting sharp disputes about how many migrants is "too many." The conflict in Ukraine, from which millions of Christians have fled to the EU, has only further complicated those debates.

Meloni's government declared a six-month state of emergency in April "to carry out with urgency extraordinary measures to reduce congestion" at Lampedusa, an Italian island off the coast of Tunisia that has become the main migrant entry point into the country. The government said it needs to build "new structures, suitable both for sheltering as well as the processing and repatriation of migrants who don't have the requisites to stay" in Italy.

Despite the situation, some 89,158 people have arrived in Italy on small boats from North Africa since the beginning of the year, equivalent to 5,000 per day at Lampedusa - a 115% increase over the same period in the prior year, according to the Italian Interior Ministry.

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Independent NASA Probe 'Did Not Find Any Evidence' UAPs Are Aliens

While the Pentagon has its own office for investigating unidentified aerial phenomena (UAPs), the US space agency NASA has also convened its own Independent Study Team to probe the rapidly expanding catalog of mysterious incidents.

The NASA panel delivered its report on Thursday, arriving at the same conclusion as a 2021 Pentagon study: there's no sign of aliens, although some UAP incidents presently defy explanation.

"The top takeaway from the study is that there is a lot more to learn," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said at a Thursday presser on the findings. "The NASA independent study team did not find any evidence that UAP have an extraterrestrial origin. But we don't know what these UAP are."

The panel, which only examined unclassified information, is seen as a counterpart to the Pentagon's All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO) because of its "extensive expertise" in the domains of data acquisition, advanced analysis techniques, a systematic reporting framework and reducing reporting stigma, and because of its "global reputation for scientific openness," the report said.

NASA suggested many of its present or planned assets and technologies could be applied to better understanding UAPs, including observation satellites, the NEXRAD doppler radar network commonly used for weather forecasting, large-sky surveys by ground-based telescopes, and synthetic aperture radar (SAR) technology.

Nelson also noted that NASA assets like the James Webb Space Telescope and the agency's Mars rovers can help aid in the universal search for extraterrestrial life by identifying potentially habitable planets.

David Spergel, who led NASA's UAP probe, issued a request to the Mexican government on Thursday for information on a presentation made in the Mexican Congress a day prior in which a self-proclaimed ufologist claimed to have discovered several "alien corpses" in a cave in Peru.

"When you have unusual things, you want to make data public," Spergel told reporters. "We don't know the nature of those samples that were shown in front of them … If you have something strange, make samples available to the world scientific community."

The US Congress has held several panels in recent years concerning UAPs, most of which have focused on the possibility that they are tests by other nations of advanced aircraft or weapons. However, one hearing in July saw David Grusch, a US Air Force veteran who once headed the AARO's predecessor agency, the Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena Task Force, tell lawmakers that the US government was concealing its possession of extraterrestrial technology and bodies.

Congress has required the AARO to issue annual reports on its UAP investigations.

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Ancient Carvings Depict Animal Tracks So Accurately Archeologists Can ID Species

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Imagine writing a how-to guide that was so accurate it could still be used thousands of years later. That's exactly what a group of Late Stone Age hunters in modern-day Namibia did with the tracks of the various animals they hunted.

The discovery and analysis of the ancient stone art is described in a new paper published in PLOS ONE, a peer-reviewed journal by the Public Library of Science, on Wednesday.

A news release described how the team of archaeologists from the Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nürnberg and the University of Cologne in Germany worked with indigenous trackers from the Nyae Nyae Conservancy in Tsumkwe, Namibia, to decipher the numerous stone carvings from the Doro! Nawas Mountains central-western Namibia that are believed to date to the first millennium BCE.

"Namibia's rock faces contain numerous Stone Age depictions of animals and humans, as well as human footprints and animal tracks. Until now, the latter have received little attention because researchers lacked the knowledge to interpret them," the authors wrote, saying they had now "examined several hundred of the tracks in more detail and discovered surprising details: the tracks cover a wider range of animal species than in conventional animal depictions and differentiated cultural patterns emerge in the representation of the various species."

They were able to identify the species, sex, age group, and even the specific leg of the animal or human print that had been carved in more than 90% of the 513 engravings they found. The included 40 different species of quadrupeds and birds, ranging from rabbits and aardvarks to giraffes, several species of rhinoceroses, and storks and ostriches. They depicted adult tracks more than juveniles and male more than female.

Notably, many are species that no longer inhabit the area, which has become much more arid in the 3,000 years since the hunters made their carvings, prompting the animals to flee to more humid regions.

The scientists said the find is further proof of the "tremendous capacity" of indigenous knowledge to advance archaeological research, and could provide valuable insights into understanding rock art from the time period that has been found across southern Africa.

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Closest Black Holes Are Likely Much Closer Than We Think, Astronomers Say

Only a couple dozen black holes have been found in our galaxy so far, but scientists believe there could be hundreds of millions inside our galaxy in addition to the supermassive black hole that sits in the center of the Milky Way.

A team of astronomers says they have found evidence that there is a group of black holes 10 times closer to Earth than any previously discovered.

The new research, published in the journal Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society this month, says there are likely two and possibly three small black holes in the center of the Hyades cluster, the closest star cluster to our solar system.

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The astronomers used data from the European Space Agency's star-mapping Gaia satellite to simulate 650 million years of star movement in the Hyades cluster. Their study contends the stars could not move the way they have unless there are, or at least were, two or three small black holes affecting their gravity.

The Hyades cluster consists of 724 star systems and is about 150 light-years (900 trillion miles) away from Earth. The next closest-known black hole is the Gaia BH1, about 1,500 light-years away.

The suspected black holes could only be stellar-mass black holes, the smallest classification of black holes. They contain between five and 10 times the mass of our sun. One scenario shown in the simulation that would explain the Hyades' star movements is that the black holes were there but were ejecting from the cluster around 150 million years ago.

"Our simulations can only simultaneously match the mass and size of the Hyades if some black holes are present at the center of the cluster today (or until recently)," lead study author Stefano Torniamenti said in a statement.

If that is the case, they'd likely be just outside of the cluster at this point and would still easily be the closest known black holes to Earth.

"This observation helps us understand how the presence of black holes affects the evolution of star clusters and how star clusters in turn contribute to gravitational wave sources," Mark Gieles, a member of the University of Barcelona Department of Quantum Physics and Astrophysics said. "These results also give us insight into how these mysterious objects are distributed across the galaxy."

Black holes are nearly invisible to scientists unless they are actively consuming matter. When they add to their size by swallowing interstellar gas, dust and even stars, they emit bright flashes of light that can be seen across vast expanses of the universe.

However, when they are not feeding, they emit no light, and are very difficult to spot directly. Instead, astronomers look for the gravitational pull they have on other objects, particularly stars.

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Explosion at World's Largest Railway Yard Forces Evacuation in Nebraska

Union Pacific's Bailey Yard is the world's largest trainyard, spanning around 1,000 yards wide on average. Around 139 trains and 14,000 railroad cars pass through the facility every day. It sits about halfway between Omaha, Nebraska, and Denver, Colorado.

An explosion and subsequent fire at the world's largest railyard caused a temporary evacuation on Thursday of the surrounding area in North Platte, Nebraska.

Videos posted on social media showed large plumes of smoke rising from the Bailey Yard, which the local fire department described as "heavy toxic smoke," in a post on X. People within a one-mile radius were evacuated from the area and US Highway 30 was temporarily shut down.

The fire was extinguished around 5:30 p.m. local time, according to Union Pacific, which runs the facility.

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No one was injured in the explosion and the cause of the explosion has not yet been determined, a spokesperson for Union Pacific told US media.
One of the containers involved in the explosion contained perchloric acid which is used for a host of tasks, including cleaning food equipment and in the manufacturing process of LCD screens. It is also used in explosives and is highly volatile when it comes into contact with organic material like paper.
Witnesses said they saw two plumes of smoke, indicating there were likely two explosions.
“The east plume was like black smoke. The west plume was orange smoke, something like I’ve not seen from a fire,” an eyewitness recalled.
Union Pacific employees continued working during the fire in other parts of the facility, according to reports. After the fire was extinguished, the entire facility opened back up.
Railroad safety has become a larger issue over the past year after a train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, caused the evacuation of nearby residents. In that case, toxic chemicals were released into the air, water and soil after officials decided to detonate the derailed cars in a controlled explosion.
Per a local news report from last month, some residents are still seeking treatment from health complications related to chemical exposure.

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'Go F***ing Ahead': McCarthy Reportedly Dares Republicans to Boot Him From Speakership

A motion to vacate would remove Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) from his position as House speaker, a leadership post he fought hard for in early January. In fact, it took 15 voting sessions before McCarthy was confirmed by the House to serve.
US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) reportedly dared the House Freedom Caucus and other hard-right members of the Republican House to try and oust him from his leadership position amid growing threats from the fractured lower chamber.
“You guys think I’m scared of a motion to vacate. Go f***ing ahead and do it. I’m not scared,” McCarthy said during a closed caucus meeting early Thursday, according to a lawmaker who spoke to US media on the condition of anonymity.
The majority of Republicans still support McCarthy, but the GOP as a whole holds only a slim majority in the House. A vote to remove the Republican would require a majority from the House overall. If House Democrats joined with even a few hardliners in the Republican party, McCarthy could lose a potential vote to vacate. However, there have been no indications from Democrats they plan to join the Republican hardliners in removing McCarthy.
It is unclear if doing so would even be advantageous to them outside of making Republicans look chaotic. A new speaker would also require a majority vote in the House. Democrats would either have to agree on a new speaker with the hardline Republicans - something that is unlikely given their political differences, or join with other elements of the GOP to choose a speaker after just voting to remove one they support.

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Failing both options would leave it up to House Republicans to come to a deal; however, ultraconservative Republicans have made it clear they will not vote for a House speaker more palatable to Democrats than McCarthy.

Despite how messy it could be for both parties to remove McCarthy, tensions have been rising in the Republican House Caucus over the looming government shutdown, which lawmakers have until September 30 to avoid.

On Wednesday, House Republicans failed to pass a procedural vote on funding the Defense Department, normally one of the least controversial spending bills in Congress. Officials also failed to pass an agricultural bill in July, another provision that usually passes little resistance.

In total, 12 appropriation bills need to be passed to avoid a shutdown, and many are expected to be more difficult than the Defense Department and agriculture bills. Meanwhile, the Senate has already cleared all 12 of its funding bills past the procedural vote and is expected to vote on three of them next week.

If their spending bills are passed before the House, Republicans fear the Democrat-controlled Senate will have the upper hand in negotiating the final spending bill.

The primary concern of the House Freedom Caucus and other Republicans who have spoken out against McCarthy is that they say they still haven't been told how much the 12 appropriation bills will cost in total, which they say McCarthy promised them.

"There currently is not an appetite to just, I would call it, blindly move forward with any one piece of the puzzle until we can actually look at the picture of the puzzle that we're actually trying to assemble," Rep. Chip Roy (R-TX) said. "I have no interest in grabbing a piece and just sticking it on a board and hoping."

On Tuesday, McCarthy announced an informal impeachment inquiry into US President Joe Biden for, in the words of McCarthy, "allegations of abuse of power, obstruction and corruption."

Democrats have claimed that the impeachment inquiry is an attempt by McCarthy to placate the hardliners in the Republican party. However, said hardliners have been adamant that the impeachment is a separate issue from their support for funding bills. Their Wednesday vote backs that assertion.

US Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) is a member of the Freedom Caucus and one of McCarthy's most vocal critics. He previously said that if McCarthy tried to push forward spending bills without fulfilling the promises he made to hardline Republicans, he would file a motion to vacate.

"The path forward for the House of Representatives is to either bring you [McCarthy] forward to immediate and total compliance or remove you," Gaetz said. "If we have to start the day with the prayer, pledge and the motion to vacate, so be it."

Gaetz dismissed McCarthy's impeachment inquiry on Tuesday as "baby steps" and accused him of acting like a "valet" to Biden's agenda.

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Pentagon Using Ukraine as Testing Ground for Electronic Warfare, Says US Commander

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The British Royal United Services Institute and other military expert organizations have cited Russia's electronic warfare capabilities as a key factor for explaining why Ukraine's three-month-long counteroffensive has failed so miserably.

The Pentagon is "taking notes" on the electronic warfare (EW) tactics being used by Russia and Ukraine during the special military operation as a means to prepare for any future direct hostilities, a US military official has revealed.

US Military Commander Josh Kozlov was quoted as saying such during the Air, Space and Cyber Conference in Maryland by a military-focused US media outlet.

The leader of the US Army 350th Spectrum Warfare Wing, which was established two years ago to catch the US military up with its rivals in electronic warfare, said that both sides of the conflict in Ukraine have shown impressive abilities in the field.

"The agility being displayed by both parties, in the way that they're executing operations in the spectrum, is awesome," Kozlov said. "Both sides are doing the cat-and-mouse game very, very well.

"In the future, for us, if we do confront a peer, being agile and being rapid is the key to success in the spectrum," he added.

Russia EW tactics have prevented drones from attacking inside of Russia, affected Western targeting systems and disrupted communications between Ukrainian forces.

Ukrainian leadership has attempted to entice Western countries to supply more weapons by pointing out that it can act as a testing range for weapons.

In June, then-Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov said that "for the military industry of the world, you can't invent a better testing ground," than the battlefield in Ukraine. Who the lab rats are in this experiment was left unsaid.

If Ukraine is viewed as an experiment, it seems that Western weapons are failing the test. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on Tuesday that 71,000 Ukrainian troops have been killed or injured since the start of Ukraine's failed counteroffensive, along with 18,000 armored vehicles and 543 tanks, including German-made Leopard-2 and UK-produced Challenger-2 tanks.

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'They're Red Flags': Libertarian Party Eyes Conservatorship for Biden, McConnell

Conservatorships have come to the forefront of the public consciousness after celebrity Britney Spears began a long legal battle to end hers. Amanda Bynes, the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson and former NFL star and the subject of the 2009 film "The Blind Side," Michael Oher, are some notable celebrities that either are or were under a conservatorship.

The Libertarian Party announced on late Wednesday that they plan to file a conservatorship for US President Joe Biden and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) over concerns their age and mental stumbles make them unfit to serve in office.

A conservatorship is a legal status in which a judge appoints an individual to manage the finances and personal affairs of a minor or incapacitated person. It is unclear what kind of power

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the conservatorship would theoretically give the Libertarian Party of the American president and Senate minority leader, but according to the post on X, the intention is to showcase to the American people that “the mental health of our leaders is a priority that should transcend political affiliations.”

The announcement calls on the reader not to dismiss the action as political theater and provides a list of concerning actions by both politicians.

“We're all aware of the gaffes, the lapses in memory, the freezes, and the incoherent statements made by these two powerful men,” the statement reads. “These aren't mere quirks; they're red flags. The decisions made in the Oval Office and on the Senate floor have far-reaching implications, affecting both domestic policy and international relations. If the individuals making these decisions aren't at their cognitive best, the consequences could be dire.”

In explaining their justification for a conservatorship over Biden, the Libertarian Party pointed to Biden forgetting names, stumbling over words, “speaking gibberish,” and the president attempting to shake hands with thin air.

For McConnell, the Libertarian Party points at “contradictory statements,” a lack of focus, and his now-infamous penchant for freezing during news conferences.

McConnell has frozen twice during public addresses, seemingly unable to answer questions or respond to his aides. The attending physician of Congress released a letter one day later pronouncing the senator fit to serve and blaming the incidents on "dehydration" and lingering "lightheadedness" of a concussion he suffered in March.

The statement attributes a variety of issues the United States is facing to the cognitive decline of the nation’s leaders.

“Beyond the easily observable mental and physical instabilities of both men, the indefensible incurrence of $4.8 Trillion in debt, continued involvement in an unwinnable proxy war in Ukraine, questionable and potentially criminal business and political affiliations, and lack of awareness to the state of the United States domestically make these conservatorships a matter of utmost urgency.”

Notably, 90-year-old Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) was not mentioned in the post.

The statement concludes by noting that the party is seeking legal representation in Washington, DC, to help them file the conservatorship. “We invite you to join us in this critical endeavor. The future of our nation depends on the mental fitness of those at its helm. Let's act before it's too late.”

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US, ROK Promise ‘Decisive Response’ On Any Nuclear Attack By DPRK – Statement

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) – Any nuclear attack by the DPRK against South Korea will be met with a “decisive response” from Washington and Seoul, the two sides said in a joint statement on Friday.

“Both sides reaffirmed that any nuclear attack by the DPRK against the ROK will be met with a

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swift, overwhelming, and decisive response," the statement said.

Washington called "unacceptable" North Korea's nuclear attacks against the United States or its allies, adding that it would result in "the end of the Kim regime."

The US and South Korea held the 4th annual high-level Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) meeting in Seoul on September 15, according to the document.

"Both sides shared their assessments and concerns about the DPRK's threatening and irresponsible rhetoric and behavior, including its ongoing missile launches and continued pursuit of destabilizing and illicit WMD [weapons of mass destruction] and ballistic missile programs," the statement said.

Both delegations confirmed their commitment to use "all available levers" to strengthen deterrence and reinforce the US security commitment to the ROK. That includes diplomatic, informational, military, and economic tools, it added.

The two countries agreed on the necessity of the complete denuclearization of the DPRK in accordance with the relevant United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. They also pointed out that Pyongyang's ballistic missile launches and other illicit activities undermine regional and global security.

Washington and Seoul expressed their "strongest concern" about cooperation between North Korea and Russia. The US and South Korea agreed on the importance of upholding and fully implementing all relevant UNSC resolutions, the statement said.

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US Welcomes First Houthi Delegation to Saudi Arabia for Peace Talks - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The White House welcomed the first official visit by Houthi representatives to Saudi Arabia on Friday for peace talks to end the war in Yemen, according to a release.

"We welcome the arrival of a senior Houthi delegation to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. This is the first official visit by Houthi representatives to Riyadh since the war in Yemen began nearly a decade ago," National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said in the release.

Sullivan commended the leadership of Saudi Arabia and Oman for facilitating the talks.

He added that the US called on all parties in the Yemen war to "further solidify and expand on the benefits" of the UN-mediated truce that went into effect on April 2 last year.

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Hurricane Lee Expected to Reach Canada's East Coast on Weekend – New Brunswick Govt.

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) – Hurricane Lee is on its way to Canada's East Coast and its impacts are expected in New Brunswick during the weekend, the province government

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said on Friday.

"According to Environment and Climate Change Canada, Hurricane Lee is expected to bring wind and rain to most of the province [New Brunswick] beginning Saturday morning through Sunday afternoon. The exact track of the system will determine the extent to which areas will be the most impacted," a hurricane update on the government website said.

Throughout Saturday the province will experience strong winds between 60-80km/h, whereas coastal areas could see air gusts of up to 100 km/h, the update said, adding that Lee will bring up to 100mm of rainfall.

In addition, the hurricane will elevate water levels and create large tides of up to 6 meters on Saturday at Bay of Fundy, the update said.

"These kinds of conditions can lead to power outages, localized flooding and road closures," the updated added, noting that the impacts of Lee will not only be felt on its determined path, but up to 300km away from it.

The government of New Brunswick has encouraged its citizens to prepare for the coming hurricane by ensuring that households have emergency plans and emergency kits prepared.

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US Sanctions Iranian News Outlets – Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury imposed new sanctions on Iran on Friday, targeting various individuals and major news outlets, according to its website.

The news outlets include the Fars news agency, Press TV, and the Tasnim news agency.

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AUKUS Pledges to Sustain Indo-Pacific Peace, Stability on 2nd Anniversary - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The United States, the United Kingdom and Australia marked the second anniversary of their trilateral security pact AUKUS on Friday, promising to "sustain peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific," according to a joint leader statement.

"Today, as we mark the second anniversary of AUKUS, we recommit ourselves to these values and look forward to continued progress as our nations stand together to help sustain peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and around the world," the statement said.

The statement highlighted AUKUS' support for Australia's acquisition of conventionally-armed, nuclear-powered submarines (SSN), including the graduation of the first Australian military personnel from the US nuclear power school in July and the USS North Carolina's first SSN port visit to Australia.

It also noted trilateral efforts to streamline defense collaboration, modernize defense trade

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systems, and strengthen protection of critical technologies.

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Zelenskyy to Visit US Congress Next Week - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Volodymyr Zelenskyy will visit the US Congress next week after addressing the UN General Assembly in New York, Punchbowl News reported.
The visit is reportedly tentatively scheduled for September 21, a Punchbowl News reporter said on Thursday.
Zelenskyy's visit to Washington comes as the Biden administration seeks to build support for its supplemental request for $24 billion in additional assistance for Kiev.
House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, however, is reportedly considering leaving out Ukraine aid from a stopgap spending bill that needs to be passed by September 30 to avert a government shutdown. McCarthy wants the Ukraine aid considered separately so that Republicans can demand changes to border policy and an increase in border security funds in exchange for more funds for Kiev, according to media reports.

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US Looking at Supplying Ukraine With ATACMS This Fall - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is looking at supplying Ukraine with long-range missiles ATACMS this fall, The Wall Street Journal reported on Friday, citing US officials.
The move is intended to boost Ukraine’s counteroffensive amid its slow progress, the report said.
President Joe Biden is yet to approve the transfer, according to the report.

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NORAD Detects Russian Military Aircraft Near Alaska, Not Considered Threat - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) said in a press release that it recently detected Russian military aircraft operating in international airspace near Alaska, but they did not pose a threat.
"The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) detected and monitored Russian military aircraft operating in the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) on

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September 14, 2023," the release said on Thursday.
According to the release, the Russian aircraft remained in international airspace and did not enter US or Canadian sovereign airspace.
NORAD said Russia's activity in the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone occurs regularly and is not considered a threat.

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Maine's Governor Declares Emergency for Hurricane Lee, Seeks Presidential Aid - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Maine Governor Janet Mills declared a state of emergency and called on President Joe Biden to issue an order to free up federal resources before Hurricane Lee hits, her office said in a statement.
"In preparation for Hurricane Lee's impending landfall tomorrow night, Governor Mills today declared a State of Emergency... and requested that President Biden issue a Presidential Emergency Disaster Declaration to preemptively give the State of Maine access to Federal resources and personnel that could assist in the response to the storm," the release said on Thursday.
Mills in the statement highlighted that Hurricane Lee is expected, late Friday night, to bring sustained high winds, heavy rains, and pounding surf, posing an imminent threat to public safety and the potential for extensive damage to public and private property.
Furthermore, the proclamation grants authorization to the Maine Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) to activate and deploy all necessary resources for emergency response, the statement said.
Mills and MEMA issued a strong advisory to Maine residents, urging them to take necessary precautions and prepare for the approaching hurricane, the statement added.

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US Congresswoman Says Introduced Bill to Require Suicide Lifeline Information With Guns

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman Julia Brownley said in a statement that she introduced legislation to require firearms manufacturers to provide National Suicide Prevention Lifeline information with every unit sold.
"By labeling every firearm with the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, we can help provide a human connection when someone is in crisis, which we know is a critical tool to preventing suicide," the statement said on Thursday.
Two-thirds of gun deaths in the United States are from suicide, the statement said. Estimates place the number of US military veteran suicides at approximately 20 every day, 70% of which involve a firearm, the statement said.

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The legislation, dubbed the Gun Suicide Prevention Act, would require firearm manufacturers and retailers to provide the National Suicide Prevention hotline number with every firearm sold, the statement said.

The legislation is cosponsored by members of Congress including Grace Napolitano, Raul Grijalva, Seth Moulton and Rashida Tlaib.

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Bulgaria Buys 8 Lockheed Martin F-16 Fighting Falcon Combat Aircraft - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Bulgaria is buying eight new F-16 Fighting Falcon combat jets for its air defense, the US Defense Department announced.

"Lockheed Martin Aeronautics [of] Fort Worth, Texas was awarded a ... $151,360,000 contract for Bulgaria F-16 Block 70 production," the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

The contract provides for the production of eight F-16 Block 70 aircraft, the release said.

Work on the program will be performed at Fort Worth, Texas; and Greenville, South Carolina, over the next four years and is expected to be completed by September 30, 2027, the release added.

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New Record High of 327 Shootings Reported in US Schools in 2021-2022 - Report

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The number of shootings in American elementary and secondary schools that resulted in injury or death reached a new record in the year 2021-2022 school year amid an overall increase in gun crimes across the country, a new statistical data report compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics revealed.

A total of 327 school shootings at public and private elementary and secondary schools were documented in 2021-2022, including 188 incidents with casualties and 139 without any injuries or deaths, the report said on Thursday.

In the same school year, 57 school shootings resulted in death and 131 shootings ended with injuries only, the report said.

The new data set a new annual record number of shootings in US schools over the past 21 years. For comparison, the next highest number of school shooting incidents was recorded in 2020-2021 with a total of 93 shootings in schools, the report added.

For the period since 2000, the lowest number of school shootings was documented during the school year of 2009-2010 with only 14 incidents, according to the report.

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Biden Spoke With US Auto Firms, Union on Status of Talks Amid Strike Threat - White House

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has spoken with major US auto companies and the head of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union to discuss the status of their negotiations concerning wages as a deadline approaches for a strike on Friday, the White House said.

"President Biden spoke with Shawn Fain, President of UAW, and leaders of the major auto companies to discuss the status of ongoing negotiations," the White House said in a statement on Thursday.

The UAW has presented a series of demands in their negotiations with the so-called "big three" automakers, including Ford, Stellantis and General Motors. Among these demands are a substantial 46% wage increase and a reduced workweek to 32 hours, alongside other provisions.

The dissatisfaction of the UAW with the previous contract offers from the big three automakers has heightened the possibility of a large-scale strike.

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Ford CEO Farley Says UAW Made No Counteroffer Pre-Strike

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Ford CEO Jim Farley said the company had yet to receive any counteroffer from the United Auto Workers (UAW) less than eight hours before the potential strike.

On Wednesday, UAW President Shawn Fain said the union is poised to strike against the US' three largest automakers due to an impasse in reaching an agreement. Fain has called previous offers from the automakers "shameful and insulting."

"We've received no counteroffer from Shawn Fain in the UAW, nothing at all," Ford said in an interview for CNBC on Thursday. "We've never seen it before. In 80 years, we've always been able to work through these differences."

The UAW has presented a series of demands in their negotiations with the Big Three automakers, including Ford, Stellantis, and General Motors. Among these demands are a substantial 46% wage increase and a reduced workweek to 32 hours, alongside other provisions.

The dissatisfaction of the UAW with the previous contract offers from the Big Three automakers has heightened the possibility of a large-scale strike.

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

General Motors Makes Another Bid to Avert Autoworkers Strike on Friday - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - General Motors announced that it has made a new bid to increase wages for its autoworkers as it seeks to avert a potential strike on Friday.

"Today, we put a compelling and unprecedented economic package on the table that reflects the significance of this critical moment," General Motors said in a release on Thursday. "We have been bargaining in good faith to deliver a better package with historic wage increases and manufacturing commitments."

The new package proposes a 2% wage increase over the life of the agreement, including a 10% increase in the first year, the release said.

On Wednesday, United Auto Workers (UAW) President Shawn Fain said the union is poised to strike against the United States' three largest automakers due to an impasse in reaching an agreement.

The UAW demands equitable contract offers from Ford, Chrysler and General Motors, often referred to as the "big three," including a substantial 46% wage increase and a reduced work week to 32 hours, among other provisions.

The automakers presented their proposals in response to the UAW's demands. General Motors offered a 10% wage increase, Stellantis - which owns Chrysler - offered 14.5%, and Ford proposed a 9% wage increase and a 6% lump sum to be added later. Fain called these offers "shameful and insulting."

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ANALYSIS - US Political System Frozen by Soviet-Style 'Aging Crisis'

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - The leaders of the United States are ageing with no replacement in sight amid unbreakable political gridlock, reminiscent of the conditions prior to the fall of another superpower three decades ago, experts told Sputnik.

Last week, former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, now 83, announced she would run for reelection again next year, while Senator Diane Feinstein, 90, continues to sit in the Senate with no thought of retirement even though her own daughter had to take power of attorney to pay her bills. Last week, 81-year-old Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, addressing concerns about his health following episodes of freezing in public, vowed to finish out his term.

In addition, a recent CNN poll revealed that 75% of Americans are concerned about President Joe Biden's age and mental competence, while 67% of Democrats do not want him to run again.

Constitutional historian Dan Lazare suggested these developments are part of a generational illness afflicting an out-of-touch US governing elite that stayed too long in power, not unlike what happened to the Soviet Union during the 1980s, when the Kremlin was plainly at a loss in responding to a declining economy and dysfunctional political system.

"Basically, the United States is caught in a Soviet-style age crisis," Lazare said. "Remember

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what Ronald Reagan said? When asked why he didn't talk with Soviet leaders, he replied: 'Because they keep dying on me.' He was right."

However, while Reagan's line got a good laugh, Lazare added, the joke is on the United States with elderly lawmakers feebly holding on to Senate seats, not to mention Biden's "growing senility."

"After one superpower descended into gerontocracy, how is it that another one is doing the same thing 40 years later? The answer to this question is political gridlock," Lazare said. "Everyone is terrified of what change might mean."

Deepening gridlock has led to 30 years of trench warfare on Capitol Hill, Lazare pointed out. And thanks to this deadlock, the lineup barely shifts from one year to the next, he added.

However, Lazare warned, history has proven this cannot go on forever. In the Soviet Union, he explained, the "ice eventually broke" with the appointment of premier Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 - but the change came too late.

"The ice will eventually break in the United States as well, but the results could be just as explosive," Lazare said.

VESTED INTERESTS RESIST CHANGE

The experts argued that the US age crisis is unlikely to be resolved any time soon, especially when control of the White House and Congress is at stake.

Lazare said Democratic Party leaders right now are especially vulnerable to exacerbating the age crisis by backing Biden regardless of the ramifications or opposition within his own party.

For Democrats frightened that former President Donald Trump would chew them up and spit them out, the message to Biden is to hold on "at all costs," Lazare said. Trump, although wounded, is still alive and appears energized - especially compared to his opponent, he said.

"If Donald Trump still seems hale and hearty, it's because he's only 77," he said. "In terms of American politics, that's practically a kid."

In way of other examples, Lazare said a Feinstein resignation could set off a bruising intra-party battle among Congress members. So Democrats would prefer that Feinstein hold on until the end of her term so voters can decide matters at the polls in 2024.

The Republicans, in turn, Lazare added, have McConnell supporters who are worried that if he steps down, Democratic Governor Andy Bashear will try to defy a 2021 state law requiring him to appoint another Republican to take his place.

As a remedy to the situation, California State University Professor Emeritus of Political Science Beau Grosscup said the United States urgently needed to pass age limits for top public officials - but the power of established interests was too great.

Grosscup said the crisis reveals the degree to which seniority in Congress matters - including party leadership and the control of the committee system. The old so far wield institutional power to choose those they approve of - and they tend to choose their age-old friends, he added.

"It also reveals the institutional pushback to the progressive agenda on issues of civil rights, patriarchy [and] what those younger politicians, especially as advocates of a changing world, face as they climb-up the institutional ladder," Grosscup told Sputnik. "[It is] the war between generations."

Retired Brown University Assistant Professor of Economics Barry Friedman said the United States now needed additional preventive safeguards to counteract the undue influence of

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seniority in politics as well as other sectors like the military and economy. The established interests, Friedman warned, are blocking the emergence into the spotlight of newer and better - but perhaps riskier - faces and ideas.

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Nebraska Authorities Call for Evacuation Due to Train Explosion Toxic Smoke - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - Residents in the vicinity of the rail yard explosion in North Palette, Nebraska, should prepare to evacuate the area due to the presence of hazardous smoke, the North Platte Volunteer Fire Department (NPVFD) announced.

"Houses between Homestead and Front and between Hwy 30 and West A, be prepared to evacuate in the next one to two hours due to wind and weather changing," the NPVFD said in a statement via social media on Thursday.

Slightly after noon local time, an emergency evacuation was initiated in the area between Splinter and Front streets in North Palette, north of the Union Pacific Railroad Bailey Yards.

This evacuation was prompted by a fire incident at the railroad during which substantial amounts of toxic smoke was released.

The NPVFD said the Fire and Hazardous Materials team went on the scene and quickly contained the fire.

"They are monitoring the situation and the weather, adjusting their tactics and evacuations to keep responders and citizens safe," the statement said, adding that residents should stay alert to any changes that may come.

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Biden Says He Will Reduce Gas Prices

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden during a speech on Bidenomics in Maryland promised to reduce gas prices in the country.

"I am going to get those gas prices down again," Biden said on Thursday.

He agreed that the United States is facing "pretty tough" times in recent years but said the country did not give up.

Biden emphasized that his administration provided $70 billion for contracts to small disadvantaged businesses.

"Now we have the fastest economic growth from the pandemic of any world economy," he said, adding that the US also has the lowest inflation rate among major states.

US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said in late August that gas prices in the country are more than $1 higher than they were on Biden's first day in office.

The US average national regular gas prices were $3.858 per gallon, with the highest record

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$5.505 in California, the American Automobile Association said on Thursday. A year ago, the average price was $3.703 per gallon, it added.
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Biden Reflects on Previous Meeting With Putin During Economic Speech on Thursday

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden during a speech about the American economy reflected on a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin soon after he became US president.
"I had a long talk with my counterpart, who I've known for 25 years, Vladimir Putin, and he said to me since early on when I first got elected - we're talking about strategic doctrine and keeping nuclear weapons out of space, etc, in Geneva," Biden said during his speech in Maryland on Thursday.
Biden said he was making the US case on the issues mentioned, when Putin apparently expressed he is reluctant to speak with the Biden administration because they expect Russia to always attempt to persuade China to join their strategic talks as well.
"I said I don't expect you to bring China along," Biden said he told Putin. "You got essentially a 6,000 mile border with China, your tundra is melting in the Arctic Circle, methane is coming out, you got a lot of problems, and China doesn't respect you that much."
Biden added that he further told Putin that the United States is the most heterogenous nation in the history of the world and laid out that the United States is surrounded by Canada, Mexico, and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.
Biden did not explain why he mentioned to Putin the geographical details of the United States.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) -

NEW WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA
* The United States has imposed new Russia-related sanctions on 24 individuals and 142 entities, the US Treasury Department announced on Thursday.
* The United States imposed sanctions on Russian automakers Sollers and Moskvich as well as on the Russian diamond miner AGD Diamonds as part of a new massive package of sanctions, the Treasury Department said.
* Currently there is no universal solution to the issue of cars already imported into the EU from

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Russia, and member-states must act guided by their own rules regarding the matter, European Commission spokesman Daniel Sheridan Ferrie told Ria Novosti.
* Moscow does not understand the logic behind the introduction of sanctions and their lifting by the European Union against Russian businessmen, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN TENSIONS
* Moscow is concerned over the fact that tensions between Yerevan and Baku are not decreasing, but even rising in some areas, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.
* The United States believes it is too early to tell whether Armenia is looking to move away permanently from Russia and toward the West, acting Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Yuri Kim said.
* The United States is making every effort to "rebalance" Caucasian nations and turn them away from Russia, Kim said.

US-RUSSIA DIPLOMATIC ROW
* Russia declared two employees from the US embassy in Moscow personae non gratae and they have to leave Russia within seven days, the Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Thursday.
* The State Department plans to summon Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov in response to Russia's expulsion of two employees from the US Embassy in Moscow, spokesperson Matthew Miller said.
* The United States will respond to the expulsion of two US diplomats from Russia, the US Embassy in Moscow said.

NORTH KOREA-RUSSIA RELATIONS
* Russian President Vladimir Putin has accepted North Korean leader Kim Jong Un’s invitation to visit North Korea, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.
* There are no plans to hold another meeting between Putin and Kim during the latter's visit to Russia, Peskov said.
* Putin has informed members of the Security Council about his meeting with North Kim, Peskov said.
* Moscow and Pyongyang intend to develop relations in all areas, Peskov said when asked about military cooperation between Russia and North Korea, describing the issue as "sensitive."

UKRAINE CONFLICT
* US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley will travel to Germany next week to participate in a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.
* Ukraine tried to attack Russian hovercraft Samum using an unmanned boat in the Black Sea, which was destroyed by fire from the ship, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* The Ukrainian forces have lost approximately 440 soldiers in the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia directions in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said, adding that the Russian forces have repelled 11 attacks in these areas.

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* The naval aviation of Russia's Black Sea Fleet has detected and destroyed an unmanned boat of the Ukrainian armed forces in the Black Sea, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

SLOVAKIA EXPELLS RUSSIAN DIPLOMAT

* The Slovakian Foreign Ministry announced on Thursday that it is expelling an employee of the Russian Embassy in Bratislava.
* Russia will respond to Slovakia's decision to expel an employee of the Russian embassy, the Foreign Ministry told Sputnik.

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US Court Releases Indictment Charging Hunter Biden With 3 Criminal Counts - Filing

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - A US federal court on Thursday released a three-count indictment charging the President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, with federal firearm-related charges, court documents revealed.

The three charges are related to Hunter Biden's alleged false statements in the purchase of a firearm and he faces up to 25 years in prison if convicted on the charges, according to the court documents.

The indictment details that Hunter Biden is accused of lying on a firearm background check form and illegally possessing a firearm while under the influence of illegal drugs.

According to court documents, Hunter Biden, when purchasing a Colt Cobra 38SPL revolver in October 2018, allegedly falsely stated he was not an unlawful user of illegal drugs.

Court documents also claim Biden was illegally in possession of the firearm from October 12, 2018 to October 23, 2018.

The charges were set to be resolved by a plea deal and pre-trial diversion agreement, however, the arrangement collapsed and the parties have since reached an impasse in attempting to reach a new deal.

The Special Counsel involved in the Hunter Biden investigation previously said Hunter Biden would be indicted by September 29.

Biden is also under Republican-led congressional investigations over his alleged corrupt foreign business dealings.

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Seattle Officer Investigated for Laughing Remarks Over Woman Killed by Police SUV - Police

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - Daniel Auderer, a Seattle police officer, is under investigation for a recorded conversation in which he can be heard laughing while speaking

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about a woman killed by a police vehicle, the Seattle Police Department said.

On January 23, Auderer was dispatched to the scene where another officer struck and fatally injured 23-year-old Jaahnavi Kandula in a crosswalk while responding to a call. The following day, on January 24, Auderer's body-worn camera captured a recorded phone conversation in which he discussed the accident, according to the footage.

Auderer is heard confirming that the pedestrian died and laughing in response to the person on the other end of the call, with only his side of the dialogue heard. Auderer, who is the vice president of the Seattle Police Officer's Guild (SPOG), was reportedly on a phone call with SPOG President Mike Solan.

During the call, Auderer suggests "just" writing an $11,000 check, noting that Kandula's life had a "limited value," according to the footage.

"The following video was identified in the routine course of business by a department employee, who, concerned about the nature of statements heard on that video, appropriately escalated their concerns through their chain of command to the Chief's Office which, following a review of the video, referred the matter to OPA [Office of Police Accountability] for investigation into the context in which those statements were made and any policy violation that might be implicated," the Seattle Police Department said in a statement on Monday.

SPD added it has maintained communication with the family of the victim pedestrian and continues to respect their request for privacy during this difficult time.

Following the scandal, Auderer reportedly said that his remarks on the woman's value were intended to be a mockery of city lawyers, "imitating what a lawyer tasked with negotiating the case would be saying and being sarcastic to express that they shouldn't be coming up with crazy arguments to minimize the payment."

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President of Libyan Presidential Council Not Able to Attend UNGA Due to Flooding

UNITED NATIONS, September 14 (Sputnik) - The Libyan president of the Presidential Council will not be able to attend the 78th UNGA in New York due to local floods, the Libyan Ambassador to the UN Taher El-Sonni on Thursday.

"We want to take advantage of the High Level Week in order to gain or get the support... [U]nfortunately, immediately after this crisis, I was informed that the president of the Presidential Council will not be able to lead or to be present in New York, due to the responsibility of taking over this task," El-Sonni told reporters.

That also applies for the Prime Minister, who is at the same time the acting Foreign Minister, he added.

Earlier on Wednesday, Mayor Abdulmenam Al-Ghaithi said that the death toll from flooding in the city of Derna in eastern Libya may reach 18,000 or 20,000. Torrential rains hit Libya on September 10, brought by Storm Daniel. According to the latest official data, the number of flooding casualties in Dena, alone surpassed 7,000.

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US Troop readiness, National Security to Be Ensured in Case of Govt. Shutdown – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) – All measures will be taken to ensure troop readiness and protect national security in the event of a US federal government shutdown, Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"If there is a shutdown, we will take the proper measures in order to ensure that we can keep operating, we can still ensure our readiness, that our national security interests are still protected and intact," Singh said during a press briefing.

Both Republicans and Democrats in the House of Representatives want to avoid an eventual shutdown, Singh said, and so does the Pentagon. She declined to further comment on the matter, saying she would leave it to Congress to work through the process of allocating government funds.

Congress must pass a continuing resolution, appropriations bills or an omnibus package before the end of the month in order to avoid a federal government shutdown on October 1.

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Austin, Milley Traveling to Germany on September 18 for Ukraine Contact Group - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley will travel to Germany next week to participate in a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"Secretary Austin and Chairman Milley will travel to Ramstein, Germany on September 18 to host an in-person meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group," Singh said during a press briefing.

The meeting will be the group's fifteenth since forming in April 2022, Singh said.

Austin and Milley will join defense ministers and other officials from nearly 50 nations to discuss the situation in Ukraine and coordinate assistance, Singh said.

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Terror Threat to US Remains High From Violent Extremists Radicalized in US - DHS

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - The terror threat to the US mainland remains high partly due to violent extremists radicalized in the United States, the Department of Homeland

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Security (DHS) said in a report released on Thursday.

"Terrorism, both foreign and domestic, remains a top threat to the Homeland, but other threats are increasingly crowding the threat space," DHS said in its 2024 threat assessment report. "During the next year, we assess that the threat of violence from individuals radicalized in the United States will remain high, but largely unchanged, marked by lone offenders or small group attacks that occur with little warning."

Regarding foreign terrorist groups, the report said al-Qaeda and the Islamic State terrorist groups (both outlawed in Russia) are seeking to rebuild overseas and they maintain worldwide networks of supporters that could seek to target the United States.

However, the report noted that illegal drugs produced in Mexico and sold in the United States are expected to continue to kill more Americans than any other threat to the US mainland, such as fentanyl.

The DHS report also mentioned that domestic and foreign adversaries will likely continue to target US critical infrastructure over the next year. DHS also pointed out that with the 2024 election coming up, it could potentially lead to violence and foreign influence targeting US election infrastructure, processes, and personnel.

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Virginia Resident Convicted of Illegally Exporting US Goods to Iran - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - A Virginia resident has been convicted by a federal jury of defying mandated sanctions and illegally smuggling goods from the United States to Iran without a license, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"A federal jury has convicted Jalal Hajavi of... smuggling goods from the United States, unlawfully exporting and reexporting goods from the US to Iran without a license, and unlawfully engaging in transactions and dealings based on his participation in a scheme to unlawfully export heavy equipment from the US to Iran by routing the shipments though the United Arab Emirates," the department said in a press release.

Hajavi, through his company JSH Heavy Equipment conspired with an individual in Iran to export US heavy machinery indirectly to Iran without first obtaining the required licenses from the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), the Justice Department said.

Hajavi was also accused of conspiring to violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) and the Iranian Transactions and Sanctions Regulations (ITSR), the release said.

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Paul Whelan's Family Regrets That Biden Did Not Meet With His Sister - Statement

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WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - The family of Paul Whelan, a US citizen who is serving a 16-year prison sentence in Russia for espionage, expressed regrets on Thursday that President Joe Biden had been unable to meet with Paul's sister Elizabeth to discuss the case.

"Unfortunately, President Biden did not meet with Elizabeth this week as she had sought. A meeting would have reinforced the message to the Kremlin, already sent by Ambassador [Lynne] Tracy's visit and Secretary of State [Anthony] Blinken's phone call that Paul's case remains a top priority for the US government," the Whelans said in a statement.

A potential meeting would have also reassured the Whelan family that Biden is aware of their concerns regarding the situation Paul is in, the statement said.

However, the Whelans said that despite the meeting not having materialized, no doubts have been created that Paul's release remains a priority for the Biden administration.

The Whelans also said in the statement that they appreciate Tracy's efforts to visit Paul in prison.

"It is good for him to hear directly from the US ambassador that his release remains a priority," the statement said.

On Wednesday, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said that Elizabeth Whelan was to meet with White House officials during her trip to Washington.

Paul Whelan, a former US Marine, was arrested in Moscow in December 2018 and subsequently sentenced to 16 years in prison on charges of espionage. Whelan, who is also a citizen of Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom, has maintained his innocence, insisting that he came to Russia to attend a friend's wedding.

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Georgia Judge Orders 2 Different Trials for Defendants in Trump Election Case - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - A judge in Fulton County, Georgia, has set an October trial date for two of the defendants involved in the election interference case, while the other seventeen defendants, including former President Donald Trump, will have more time to prepare for a later trial, The New York Times reported on Thursday.

Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee set a date of October 23 for attorneys Kenneth Chesebro and Sidney Powell, who worked on the Trump Campaign and stated preferences for speedy trials in addition to filing motions to sever their cases from those of their co-defendants, the report said, citing court documents.

McAfee added that he hopes for the state to be finished with jury selection by early November, according to the report.

Trump had also filed a motion to sever his case from those of his co-defendants earlier last week, but no formal decisions have been forthcoming on the matter.

Trump and the co-defendants face 41 criminal counts related to the alleged attempt to overturn the 2020 US presidential election in Georgia.

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State Dept. to Summon Antonov in Response to Russia's Expulsion of 2 US Diplomats - Miller

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - The State Department plans to summon Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov in response to Russia's expulsion of two employees from the US Embassy in Moscow, spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.
"We regret that Russia has taken this path and you can certainly expect that we will respond appropriately to their actions with that," Miller said during a press briefing.
Miller made the comment in response to a question about whether the US government would question Antonov about the expulsion of the two US embassy employees.

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Biden, Zelenskyy Will Meet at UN General Assembly Next Week - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Volodymyr Zelenskyy will meet at the UN General Assembly in New York next week, NBC News reported on Thursday.
Zelenskyy is set to attend UNGA, although it is unclear when the meeting with Biden will occur, the report said, citing a senior Ukrainian official.
Biden last met with Zelenskyy during a NATO summit in Lithuania in July. The White House declined to provide any comment on the purported meeting with Zelenskyy, the report said.
UNGA will hold its annual high-level general debate on September 19-23 and 26. UNGA President Dennis Francis told RIA Novosti that he would be open to meeting with Zelenskyy if the Ukrainian leader requests such an encounter.

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US Court Releases Indictment Charging Hunter Biden With 3 Criminal Counts - Filing

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - A US federal court on Thursday released a three-count indictment against the US president's son Hunter Biden, court documents revealed.
Biden's three charges are related to his alleged false statements in the purchase of a firearm and he faces up to 25 years in prison if convicted on the charges, according to the court documents.

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Sullivan Discusses With S. Korean, Japanese Counterparts Putin-Kim Meeting - White House

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in a phone call with his South Korean and Japanese counterparts discussed the recent meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, the White House said on Thursday.

"National Security Advisor Sullivan held a trilateral call with National Security Secretariat Secretary General Akiba Takeo of Japan and National Security Office Director Cho Tae-yong of the Republic of Korea to exchange views on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), including the recent summit meeting between Russian President Putin and DPRK leader Kim," the White House said in a press release.

The three officials, according to the release, acknowledged that any potential arms exports from North Korea to Russia would directly violate multiple UN Security Council resolutions.

Moreover, they discussed efforts related to the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the release said.

Putin and Kim met earlier this week in Vostochny Cosmodrome to discuss a range of matters. On Wednesday, Kim said that he discussed with Putin the situation in Europe and the Korean peninsula.

Moreover, Kim extended an invitation to Putin to visit North Korea soon, which he accepted, according to the Kremlin.

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CIA Identifies Second Undercover Officer in 1979 Iran Hostage Crisis

WASHINGTON, September 15 (Sputnik) - CIA on Thursday revealed the identity of its second undercover officer who was sent to Tehran, Iran, in 1979 to rescue six US diplomats who managed to evade being taken hostage in the US embassy.

"The second officer was Ed Johnson, a fellow CIA exfiltration specialist - someone with years of experience in quietly getting people out of dangerous places," CIA said in the podcast "The Langley Files" on Thursday.

CIA launched an operation to retrieve the six diplomats using a cover story of scouting locations to film a science fiction movie. The operation was dramatized in the 2012 film "Argo," but merged the two officers into one character, Tony Mendez, who was played by actor Ben Affleck.

In reality, Johnson and Mendez both flew to Tehran for the operation. While the CIA had acknowledged the involvement of a second officer, Johnson's name remained classified until today's revelation.

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Podcast co-host and CIA spokesperson Walter Trosin told US media that Johnson had preferred to keep his identity secret, but he managed to convince Johnson earlier this summer to allow him to tell his story via the podcast.

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FBI Creates Special Unit Due to Threats Against Agents in Hunter Biden Probe - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - The FBI has established a special unit to investigate and mitigate threats against agents after they experienced harassment and threats in the probe of US President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, NBC News reported on Thursday.

In June, former FBI Executive Assistant Director of Human Resources Jennifer Moore informed the US House Judiciary Committee that the agency had established a so-called dedicated threat unit to address the threats received by FBI facilities, the report said.

The increase in threats against agents coincides with attacks on the FBI and the Justice Department by congressional Republicans and former President Donald Trump, the report said.

Those responsible for such actions believe that law enforcement officials need to be adequately rigorous in pursuing Hunter Biden, the report added.

Congressional Republicans, Trump as well as numerous other critics have accused the FBI and the Justice Department of being weaponized to undermine political opponents in the United States. Trump has called the indictments against him a continuation of the political witch hunt intended to prevent him from running in the 2024 US presidential election.

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State Dept Says 'Working Hard' to Turn Caucasus Nations Away From Russia

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is making every effort to "rebalance" Caucasian nations and turn them away from Russia, State Department Acting Assistant Secretary Yuri Kim said on Thursday.

"We are working hard to rebalance that in our favor," Kim said at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Nagorno-Karabakh.

She pointed out that the relationship of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and other countries in the region with Russia is dictated by geography and history.

"It is not just a history of a few years and Soviet years. It is generations and centuries here," she said.

Kim accused Russia of failing to deliver on its obligations under the three-way November 2020 agreement on Nagorno-Karabakh, which was struck with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

"That is part of the reason why you are seeing the Armenians beginning to question that relationship," Kim said.

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In an interview with La Repubblica in early September, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said Russian peacekeepers failed to implement the mission they assumed under the November 2020 tripartite agreement. He also shared his impression that Russia is "leaving" the region.

The Kremlin said it disagrees with Prime Minister Pashinyan's assessments. Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov reiterated that Russian remains an absolutely integral part of the region and "cannot go away somewhere."

Addressing the issue during the Eastern Economic Forum this week, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia is limited in what it could do in Nagorno-Karabakh after Armenia de-facto recognized it as Azerbaijan's sovereign territory.

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US Does Not View UN General Assembly as 'Competition Between Big Powers' - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, September 14 (Sputnik) - The United States does not view the UN General Assembly gathering next week as an event for a big power competition, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday.

"I don't see next week as being a competition between big powers," Thomas-Greenfield said during a press briefing.

On the other hand, the UN General Assembly is an opportunity for smaller countries to list their priorities, Thomas-Greenfield added.

The 78th session of the UN General Assembly is held in September at the United Nations headquarters in New York and the so-called High-Level Debate will take place from September 19-21.

One of the most anticipated topics of discussion is the session on sustainable development goals (SDGs). The situation in Ukraine will also be a major topic of discussion and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has expressed concern that a focus on the latter may dilute attention from other pressing issues.

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NASA UAP Researcher Says Mexican Government Should Share Samples of Alleged Alien Bodies

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - The Mexican government ought to share samples of the alleged alien bodies with the world scientific community for further verification, NASA unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP, also known as UFO) independent study team chief David Spergel said on Thursday.

“When you have unusual things, you want to make data public,” Spergel said during a press conference. “We don’t know the nature of those samples that were shown in front of them… If

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you have something strange, make samples available to the world scientific community."

On Tuesday, Mexican researcher Jaime Maussan presented two alleged alien corpses to the Mexican Congress. The bodies, found in mines in Peru, are purportedly 1,000 years old.

Scientists found that more than 30% of the bodies' DNA was unknown, Maussan said. However, Maussan has previously made disputed claims about the discovery of alleged alien corpses.

Mexican lawmakers also heard from former US military pilot Ryan Graves, who similarly testified to US lawmakers about UAP in July.

Spergel's statement came alongside the release of a report by NASA's UAP independent study team, which found no link between UAP and extraterrestrial life. Despite the lack of current evidence, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said during the press conference that he believes Earth-like planets and extraterrestrial life are likely to exist given the immensity of the universe.

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Latest US Sanctions on Russia Target 24 People, Dozens of Entities – Treasury Dept.

(Adds quote in para 2, provides additional details on paras 4, 6-12)

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) – The United States imposed new Russia-related sanctions on 24 individuals and 142 entities, including those based in Turkey and Finland, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Thursday.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is imposing nearly 100 sanctions on Russian elites and Russia's industrial base, financial institutions, and technology suppliers as the United States continues to leverage sanctions and economic restrictions to undermine Russia's capacity to wage its war against Ukraine," the department said in a press release.

Among sanctioned entities is the largest Russian car maker Avtovaz, Gaz Group, the Russian Highways State Company, also known as Avtodor, and one of the key producers of aircraft engines ODK Saturn, the press release said.

The United States imposed sanctions on Russian automakers Sollers and Moskvich as well as on the Russian diamond miner AGD Diamonds for operating in the Russian economy.

The new sanctions also affected two Russian commercial banks: Ak Bars and Sinko Bank, according to the release.

The United States designated Russian businessman Andrei Bokarev for being the president of major Russian manufacturer Transmashholding JSC and a board member of the Russian Association of Employers, the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RSPP), the release said.

The new sanctions also target Machine Building Plant Tonar, JSC Power Machines, JSC United Metallurgical Company, the press release also said.

The United States imposed sanctions on the Arctic Transshipment Company, its CEO, and two vessels associated with the company as well as the Russian Copper Company and its founder Igor Altushkin.

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The department also imposed sanctions on Russian Deputy Defense Minister Aleksei Krivoruchko and his wife Ekaterina Krivoruchko.

The OFAC has designated two Finland-based companies, Siberica Oy and Luminor Oy, for shipping electronics to Russia-based end-users, including UAV cameras, high-performance optical filters, and lithium batteries, according to the release.

The United States targeted two companies in Turkey, Margiana Insaat Dis Ticaret Limited Sirketi and Demirci Bilisim Ticaret Sanayi Limited Sirketi, for sending electronics, including sensors and measuring tools to Russian companies, the release added.

Parallel to the imposition of new sanctions, OFAC has issued a new general license that authorizes certain transactions related to the maritime transportation of crude oil from the Sakhalin-2 project to Japan till June 28, 2024.

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Biden Appoints Penny Pritzker as US Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he has appointed former US Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker as US Special Representative for Ukraine's economic recovery.

"Today, I am proud to announce that I am appointing Penny Pritzker to serve as the new US Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery," Biden said in a statement. "Working in lockstep with the Ukrainian government, our allies and partners, international financial institutions, and the private sector, she will drive the United States' efforts to help rebuild the Ukrainian economy."

Pritzker's public service and experience as a transformative industry leader have enabled her to have "deep familial ties to Ukraine," an asset to the role she was to play, Biden said.

In her new role, Pritzker would work to reopen export markets and businesses shut down by Ukraine's military conflict with Russia and mobilize public and private investment as well as shape donor priorities, Biden said.

"Special Representative Pritzker will also work with Ukraine's other international partners, including via the G7 coordination platform, to ensure that international efforts are complementary and mutually reinforcing, as well as to encourage international partners to keep stepping up their support for Ukraine's immediate economic recovery needs," Biden added.

The United States has provided Ukraine with more than $50 billion in economic, humanitarian and other assistance since the beginning of Russia's special military operation in February 2022. The United States has also assisted arming Ukraine and led a coalition of partners in support of Kiev.

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US Hopes Guterres to Revive Grain Deal After UNGA Meetings Next Week - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, September 14 (Sputnik) – The United States hopes that UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will be able to revive the Black Sea Grain Initiative after his talks with the Ukrainian and Turkish presidents, as well as Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov next week, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday.

"We appreciate the Secretary General continuing to actively engage on trying to find a path forward to bring the Russians back into the Black Sea Grain Initiative, and we hope that he succeeds in doing that in the meetings that he will be having next week with the various partners," Thomas-Greenfield said during a press conference.

On Wednesday, Guterres said he was going to meet with Volodymyr Zelensky, Turkish President Recep Erdogan and Minister Lavrov during the UN General Assembly high-level week.

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NASA Establishes New Position Director of UAP Research to Oversee Probe - Administrator

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - NASA has established a new position, Director of UAP Research, who will oversee the study of unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP or UFO), Administrator Bill Nelson said on Thursday.

"NASA's new Director of UAP Research will develop and oversee the implementation of NASA's scientific vision for UAP research, including using NASA's expertise to work with other agencies to analyze UAP and applying artificial intelligence and machine learning to search the skies for anomalies," Nelson said in a statement.

The announcement comes alongside the release of a report by NASA's UAP independent study team, which recommended further research on the matter by using government, commercial and private data.

NASA Assistant Deputy Associate Administrator for Research Dan Evans said that the space agency has already named an individual to serve in the new position but will not reveal the person's name due to the potential for harassment of the independent study team.

The new role will be responsible for centralizing communications, resources and analytical capabilities to establish a database for future UAP evaluation, the statement said.

The position will also be tasked with leveraging NASA's expertise in artificial intelligence, machine learning and space-based observation tools to support the broader US government effort to understand UAP, the statement added.

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NASA Chief Says Earth-Like Planets With Potential for Life Likely to Be Discovered

(Adds details, background in paras 3-6, edits throughout)
WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - Scientists are likely to discover Earth-like planets and extraterrestrial life in the universe given its immensity, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said on Thursday.
"We are now beginning to discover, and somewhere out there we will discover, another medium size, stony planet, around a medium size sun or star at just the right distance, not too far, not too close, with a tilt in its axis that rotates, that has carbon, that will have a habitable atmosphere," Nelson said during a press briefing.
NASA scientists have determined that there are at least a trillion potential Earth-like planets in the universe, Nelson said, adding that he personally believes such a vast universe contains other forms of life.
Nelson's remarks coincided with the release of a report by NASA's independent study team on unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP, also known as UFOs), which recommended further investigation of the matter.
However, NASA has yet to see evidence linking UAP to extraterrestrial life, the report said.
NASA will be transparent about its findings on UAP and extraterrestrial life as it continues to gather information alongside other US government efforts, Nelson said.

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US Sanctions Russian Automakers Sollers, Moskvich – Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) – The United States imposed sanctions on Russian automakers Sollers and Moskvich as well as on the Russian diamond miner AGD Diamonds as part of a new massive package of sanctions, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Thursday.
The new sanctions also target Machine Building Plant Tonar, JSC Power Machines, JSC United Metallurgical Company, and major Russian rolling stock manufacturer Transmashholding JSC, the Department of the Treasury said in a press release.
The United States also imposed sanctions on the Arctic Transshipment Company, its CEO, and two vessels associated with the company as well as on the Russian Copper Company and its founder Igor Altushkin.

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Biden Appoints US Special Representative For Ukraine's Economic Recovery

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"Today, I am proud to announce that I am appointing Penny Pritzker to serve as the new US Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery," Biden said in a statement. "Working in lockstep with the Ukrainian government, our allies and partners, international financial institutions, and the private sector, she will drive the United States' efforts to help rebuild the Ukrainian economy."

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NASA Chief Says Earth-Like Planets With Potential for Life Likely to Be Discovered

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said on Thursday that the ongoing search for Earth-like planets with a potential for life is likely to materialize in the future.

"We are now beginning to discover, and somewhere out there, we will discover another medium size, stony planet, around a medium size sun or star at just the right distance, not too far, not too close, with a tilt in its axis that rotates, that has carbon that will have a habitable atmosphere," Nelson said during a press briefing.

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State Dept. Says 'Too Early to Tell' if Armenia Will Permanently Move Away From Russia

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - The United States believes it is "too early to tell" whether Armenia is looking to move away permanently from Russia and toward the West, Yuri Kim, acting assistant secretary of European and Eurasian Affairs at the State Department, said Thursday.

"I think it's too early to tell," Kim testified at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing about the humanitarian crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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Trudeau to Advance Climate, Security, Democracy Agendas at 78th UNGA Session - Statement

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WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will attend the 78th session of the UN General Assembly from September 19-21, where he will advance the climate, security and democracy agendas, the Office of the Prime Minister said in a statement on Thursday.

"The Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, today announced that he will travel to New York City, United States of America, from September 19 to 21, 2023, to participate in the 78th Session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly," the statement said. "He will work closely with our global partners to build a better world for everyone, including by advocating for ambitious climate action, global security, democracy, human rights and access to health care."

Trudeau is set to address the Sustainable Development Goals Summit to reiterate Canada's commitment and leadership on achieving the goals set by the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030, the statement said.

Trudeau will also convene a Global Carbon Pricing Challenge event in a bid to convince other countries on the usefulness and effectiveness of establishing a pricing on pollution in order to advance climate targets, the statement said.

In addition, Trudeau intends to further position Canada as a "reliable and consistent advocate" for the developing countries' needs emphasizing the necessity of reforming the current financial architecture and ensuring a better access to funds for emerging economies, the statement added.

The Canadian prime minister is scheduled to meet with allies and partners in an effort to enhance bilateral ties, renew support for Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation and help improve the situation in Haiti, according to the statement.

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Latest US Sanctions on Russia Target 24 People, Dozens of Entities – Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) – The United States imposed new Russia-related sanctions on 24 individuals and 142 entities, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Thursday.

Among sanctioned entities is the largest Russian car maker Avtovaz, the Russian Highways State Company, also known as Avtodor, and one of the key producers of aircraft engines ODK Saturn, the Treasury said in a press release.

The new sanctions also affected two Russian commercial banks: Ak Bars and Sinko Bank, according to the release.

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'Americans Deserve Truth, Transparency' – McCarthy on White House Letter to Media

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WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) – US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said on Thursday that the American Public deserves "truth and transparency" after the White House sent a letter to media demanding them to thoroughly scrutinize House Republicans.

"After its loss in court on Friday, you'd think the White House would have learned its lesson about silencing speech. When it comes to Washington, Americans deserve truth and transparency—nothing less," McCarthy said in a statement.

The House Speaker noted that in an "act of desperation", the Biden administration called on media to increase their scrutiny of House Republicans, even though corporate media have always shown political bias, pointing out to their attempts to bury the Hunter Biden laptop story.

McCarthy added that if the White House was ready to command media how to report facts, they could have done the same with Hunter Biden's case by requesting the Department of Justice how to handle it.

The House Speaker remarks come just a day after White House sent a letter addressed to media organizations demanding that they increase their scrutiny of House Republicans for having opened an impeachment investigation against President Joe Biden that was "based on lies".

The letter said that if even among the GOP there were some who though there was no evidence of Biden's wrongdoings, media should me alarmed and should ensure they are not "disserving" the American public by spreading disinformation.

Media were exhorted to hold House Republicans accountable for lurching toward impeachment on unfunded and disproven allegations and were distributed a 14-page appendix detailing "7 key lies" spread by the House Republicans.

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RTX Cancels Deal With Saudi Company Scopa Defense Over Sanctions Concerns - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - The US defense manufacturer RTX called off a multi-billion-dollar deal with the Saudi company Scopa Defense earlier this year over concerns that the latter was doing business with sanctioned Chinese, Russian and Belarussian entities, the Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday, citing unnamed sources and documents.

Two companies affiliated with Scopa Defense - Tal Military Industries and Sepha Military Industries - engaged with sanctioned Chinese, Russian and Belarusian entities, which prompted the retired US military personnel on Scopa's board to resign, the report said.

Scopa Defense also fired its chief executive officer, US Navy veteran Nasr Alghrairi, after he raised concerns with the company's Saudi owner Mohamed Alajlan.

Scopa Defense is the highest-profile company set up in Saudi Arabia in 2021 to shift the country away from importing arms and build up its own military sector.

Alajlan denied dealing with companies facing international sanctions and with Russian companies, the report said.

RTX and Scopa Defense signed a memorandum of understanding last year to set up a factory in Saudi Arabia to produce air defense systems against drone and missile threats. The US government has expressed concern that its weapons systems could be undermined if its

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technologies incorporated in Scopa Defense's weaponry were acquired by Chinese or Russian entities and reverse engineered.

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NASA Says AI Technology Could Play Critical Role in Analyzing UAP Data

WASHINGTON, September 14 (Sputnik) - The NASA independent study team tasked with researching unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP, also known as UFOs) said on Thursday that technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning could play a critical role in analyzing UAP sightings.

"Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) have proven to be essential tools for identifying rare occurrences within vast datasets. These methodologies, combined with NASA's extensive experience and expertise, should be utilized to investigate the nature and origins of UAP by examining data from sources such as satellites and radar systems," the team said in a report.

However, AI and ML technology are only effective when provided with high quality data, the report said. UAP analysis is currently more limited by quality of data than availability of techniques, the report said.

The NASA independent study team was tasked with studying UAP from a scientific perspective, in conjunction with the Pentagon's All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO). Once AARO and NASA accumulate a catalog of baseline data, they can train neural networks to detect deviations from normal, the report said.

NASA and its observational assets are well positioned to contribute to UAP studies, the report said. The independent study team recommends that the United States leverage those assets, as well as commercial assets and public sources of data, to further the scientific understanding of UAP, the report said.

UAP pose a "self-evident" threat to US airspace, the report said. There is no reason to believe that UAP have an extraterrestrial source, the report added.

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