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9/18/23 Monday

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Yellen Says US on 'Sustainable Course' as National Debt Hits $33 Trillion

In the time since 2001, the US federal government has never run a surplus, thanks to the spending hikes but also massive tax cuts, which in US politics are commonly credited with increasing economic activity and bettering the lives of citizens.

The US Treasury Department revealed the national debt reached $33 trillion on Monday, marking a milestone amid tense political negotiations over spending in Washington.

The debt is made up of a mixture of intergovernmental holdings and debt owed to the public via savings bonds. It has grown steadily over the years as borrowing against the government has been used to fund government operations, accelerating since the early 21st century amid a slew of new US wars, governmental programs, and economic crises into which the federal government has stepped to stabilize and restart the economy.

The national debt has become a major political battleground, with Republicans who are ideologically opposed to further federal spending on various programs refusing to agree to lift the debt ceiling - a congressional spending limit - without Democrats agreeing to considerable budget cuts. The most recent showdown in the spring of 2023 saw the federal government come within days of defaulting on its debt before the two parties agreed to a deal that would allow the government to spend more money servicing its debts.

The close call led to a further downgrade of the US government's credit rating, raising new fears of an economic downturn in the future as lenders might come to see the government as a risky investment.

Another budget showdown in Washington playing out this week is part of the fallout of the June debt ceiling deal, as lawmakers struggle to agree on a set of spending bills that are necessary to keep the federal government operating beyond September 30, the end of the fiscal year. Without a deal, major parts of the federal government will be forced to halt operations until new spending can be arranged.

Speaking to US media on Monday, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said she was comfortable with the current state of the federal budget.

"Certainly greater deficit reduction is possible," Yellen said. "The president has proposed a series of measures that would reduce our deficits over time while investing in the economy and this is something we need to do going forward."

"We have to make sure that we do keep deficits under control going out," she also said. "The statistic or metric that I look at most often to judge the fiscal, our fiscal course is net interest as a share of GDP [gross domestic product]. And even with the rise we've seen in interest rates, that remains at a very reasonable level of around 1%, but we'd need to be careful about what we do going forward in order to make sure we stay on this sustainable course."

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US Space Force Sets Rapid Deployment Record With 27-Hour Satellite Launch

The US Space Force (USSF) was created amid anxieties about the vulnerability of US space assets in a shooting war, including their hefty price tags and yearslong deployment process. While defending satellites has become a priority, so has making them more interchangeable as well.

The USSF set a new record for rapid deployment from a "hot standby" disposition last week when it was able to launch a satellite within 27 hours of handing out the launch orders.

The feat was accomplished by Firefly Aerospace on September 14 and dubbed the "Victus Nox" (Latin for "conquer the night") mission. It was a double-feat for Firefly, as the satellite's launch from Vandenberg Space Force Base in California was also its first successful satellite deployment on its new Alpha rocket.

"The success of VICTUX NOX marks a culture shift in our nation's ability to deter adversary aggression and, when required, respond with the operational speed necessary to deliver decisive capabilities to our warfighters," USSF Lt. Gen. Michael Guetlein, the head of Space Systems Command (SSC), said in a statement.

"We are thrilled with tonight's successful launch. This mission highlights significant progress towards meeting emerging challenges in space," said USSF Lt. Col. MacKenzie Birchenough, the materiel lead for SSC's Space Safari program, which coordinated the mission.

"While space has been viewed as a strategic theater for a long time, the advancement of TacRS [Tactically Responsive Space] capabilities represents a paradigm shift for the National Security Space enterprise. We are incredibly proud of the entire VICTUS NOX team for this huge accomplishment," Birchenough said.

According to media reports, Firefly was able to reduce the launch preparation time from weeks or months to having a satellite tested, fueled, and mated to its launch adapter in just 58 hours. A month before the launch orders were handed down, the USSF placed Firefly and Millennium Space Systems, another program partner, on what they called "hot standby," indicating a 24-hour launch window could open at any time.

The USSF aims to have what it calls an "enduring responsive space capability" by 2026 in order to quickly replace any damaged or destroyed satellite.

The long preparation time and hefty price tags for US satellites have been identified as key vulnerabilities in the event of a future conflict with an adversary capable of threatening US space-based assets, such as Russia or China, which have anti-satellite weapons. Older US satellites, such as geosynchronous navigation satellites, have taken years to put into orbit, weigh thousands of pounds, and cost upwards of $200 million each.

Instead, the USSF has emphasized smaller, cheaper satellites, and streamlining the launch preparation process, taking inspiration from SpaceX's Starlink Internet satellite constellation, which is based on thousands of small, low-orbit satellites, dozens of which can be carried on a single rocket.

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‘Face-Saving’ Iran Sanctions Give Biden Cover in Move to Refocus US Efforts Against China

The Biden administration may be trying to cool tensions with Tehran in order to focus more US forces on opposing China, but it must also satisfy critics at home who might cast a deal with an adversary as a sign of weakness, a leading US anti-war activist told Sputnik.

A deal was made on Monday between the United States and Iran in which five American prisoners were released by Iran in exchange for five Iranians held in US custody and for Washington overseeing the release of $6 billion in frozen assets owned by the Iranian government.

The deal has been criticized by both Republicans and Democrats, with US Rep. Mike McCaul (R-TX) saying it “creates a direct incentive” for nations to take hostages and US Rep. Robert Menendez (D-NJ) reiterating similar talking points.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, who is in New York for the United Nations General Assembly, said the deal could become “a step in the direction of a humanitarian action between us and America.” His government has been engaged in yearslong talks to convince the US to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a 2015 deal that put limits on Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of US sanctions against the country, but a final resolution has evaded diplomats.

However, the White House has tried to quiet such notions. John Kirby, the spokesperson for the White House National Security Council, cast the deal as a shrewd diplomatic maneuver, telling reporters that "sometimes in diplomacy you get what you can get."

"I don't think we should look at this as some kind of confidence-building measure to a better relationship with Iran,” Kirby added.

As the deal’s finalization was looming, the Biden administration unveiled new sanctions on 29 people and organizations it claimed were “responsible” for the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, an Iranian woman whose death in September 2022 set off major protests in the country. She died following an encounter with the Guidance Patrol, Iran’s now-disbanded morality police, who said she was not wearing her hijab properly. She died three days later, officially due to a heart attack and coma caused by a prior heart ailment, but anecdotal reports claimed she died from complications caused by a severe beating by police.

Richard Becker, the author of “Palestine, Israel, and the US Empire”, and the West Coast Coordinator for the Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER) Coalition, said the sanctions “may be face-saving” and aimed at “trying to deflect criticism of Biden for the prisoner exchange.”

“They’re not very significant, they’re targeting particular individuals and have little significance in terms of the overall picture,” Becker told Radio Sputnik’s Political Misfits, “and that may be because there’s a media attack on the Biden administration for the prisoner exchange and the release of the $6 billion, so this may very well be a reflection of the differences that exist within the administration and in Washington in a different form.”

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“The moving of the focus of US foreign policy to Asia, the ‘Pivot to Asia,’ preparation for war against China, and so forth - that’s where the main interests of US foreign policy are at this point,” he said. “But it doesn’t mean that they are forgetting about the Middle East or Iran. I think the reason for some moves toward accommodation or some initiative to try and take down the hostility with Iran [is] in order to be able to focus more forces in East Asia.”
The entire interview may be listened to here, it begins at 1:06:00.

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Photos: China, ASEAN Show Off Growing Economic Ties, ‘Shared Future’ at Expo

As China has expanded its political, economic, cultural, and military relationships across Asia and the Pacific, the US has rushed to block it by claiming Beijing poses a threat to the independence of smaller nations. Beijing has emphasized reciprocity in all efforts, saying it seeks peaceful, mutual benefit.
China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) showed off their growing economic ties at the 20th annual China-SEA Expo in the southern Chinese city of Nanning, which began on Sunday. The theme for the event is "Work Together for a Harmonious Home and a Shared Future – Promoting High-Quality Development of the Belt and Road and Building an Epicentrum of Growth.”
Chinese Premier Li Qiang spoke at the opening day ceremonies, calling China’s relationship with the 10-member ASEAN bloc “the most successful, dynamic model” in regional cooperation. “and a vivid example of a community with a shared future for mankind.”
Li hailed the "miracles of economic development" seen in recent years, including the region’s collective recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic-related economic convulsions, that their regional economic integration has made possible.
"China has been the number one trading partner for ASEAN in the past 14 consecutive years and China ranks as the second source of investment for ASEAN," ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn, a former Cambodian minister who was instrumental in bringing Cambodia into ASEAN in 1999, told Chinese media.
"We've been working together for many years and we will continue to work together. ASEAN and China are neighbors in terms of land, we share community and a future here. Our cooperation will bring great benefits and greater shared interest to both sides," Kao added.
Chinese Ministry of Commerce data showed that China-ASEAN trade exceeded $970 billion in 2022.
Pavilions featured numerous displays of that cooperation at expo, including products made or traded via the interchange, from mangoes to helicopters; information displays about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other projects; and cultural displays by the 11 nations present.
One major commodity that has exploded across the region in recent years has been new electric vehicles (NEVs) - a collective term for automobiles not wholly dependent on petroleum products for fuel, including plug-in electric vehicles, battery electric vehicles, plug-in hybrids, and fuel cell electric vehicles.

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NEVs are seen as one cornerstone of a global transition away from fossil fuel-driven economies, part of an effort to wean humanity off the pollutive fuels, the emissions of which are driving man-made climate change. Beijing has led the charge, subsidizing the industry since 2009 and implementing a plan in 2020 to phase out gas-only cars by 2035. The effort has turned the country into the world's largest market for electric vehicles, accounting for 60% of global sales last year and 35% of car sales in China.

However, as the Nanning expo has shown, Chinese-made NEVs are helping to drive similar transitions across Southeast Asia. An exhibition hall showed off some of the most popular vehicles and even gave visitors the opportunity to test drive an NEV.

According to media reports, Chinese-made NEVs accounted for 75% of all NEV sales in Southeast Asia in the first quarter of 2023. Chinese NEV makers Neta and BYD have big plans to continue that spread and to grow to 100,000 vehicles exported to the ASEAN region within three years.

ASEAN member states have been moving to support the transition as well, with the Thai and Indonesian governments pumping tens of millions of dollars and cutting out tax breaks for the industry to give manufacturers, buyers, and infrastructure construction efforts a helping hand.

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Webb Telescope Images Upend Beliefs About Galaxy Formations, Age of Universe

The new images come courtesy of the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), the most powerful telescope ever launched. Its sensitivity enables the detection of light billions of years old emanating from sources hundreds of millions of light-years away.

Far beyond the reach of Sputnik and other man-made satellites, light emitted by some of the oldest galaxies is providing new clues about the fundamental nature of the universe.

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises offered by the Webb telescope so far relates to some of the oldest known galaxies: the JWST has not only detected the formation of galaxies significantly earlier than previously speculated – just 200-500 million years after the Big Bang - it's also observed that those galaxies are much bigger and brighter than was thought possible.

Information about these galaxies is received primarily in the form of infrared light, the portion of the electromagnetic spectrum that remains after light travels long distances through our universe.

This infrared light is invisible to the human eye, but detectable by instruments like the JWST.

Scientists expected light from these early galaxies to demonstrate solar systems in an early stage of development – too young to have yet taken on a characteristic spiral or elliptical shape. But the images instead suggest galaxies with markers of considerable development, such as spiral arms.

The discovery has spurred one researcher to speculate that the universe is twice as old as previously thought.

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"Our newly-devised model stretches the galaxy formation time by several billion years, making the universe 26.7 billion years old, and not 13.7 as previously estimated," wrote Rajendra Gupta, an adjunct professor of physics at the University of Ottawa.
The argument was put forward earlier this year in the journal Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society.
However, most scientists caution against such a dramatic rethinking of our understanding without more information.
Astrophysicists so far have been unable to directly observe any galaxy or star older than 13.8 billion years. Confirmation of an older universe will require further evidence of celestial bodies formed a long time ago in galaxies far, far away.

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US Army Halts Reenlistment Bonuses Despite Persistent Recruiting Shortfall

The announcement comes as polling earlier showed how US public confidence in the armed forces fell to a 26-year low.
A cash bonus program for reenlisting soldiers was suspended as the US Army exceeded its retention targets, although it still expects to fall short of its annual recruitment goal.
The temporary discontinuation of the program was publicized with immediate effect on September 12 in an internal Army Military Personnel Center message. The suspension comes several months after the service announced in April they had met their yearly target, retaining more than 55,000 soldiers who had been scheduled to retire.
The initiative, officially known as The Selective Retention Bonus Program, offers bonuses up to tens of thousands of dollars for soldiers in specialized areas who choose to reenlist.
The temporary suspension of the program will last through the end of the Army's fiscal year on September 30, when a new bonus program will be announced. Until then, soldiers may be eligible for other benefits upon reenlistment, including specialized courses or career training.
The announcement marks the fourth year in a row that retention goals were exceeded, but falling enlistment means the US Army continues to bleed soldiers. A shortfall of 15,000 new recruits against a target of 60,000 last year generated significant headlines. The Army is set to announce slightly higher numbers this year but is still expected to fall well short of this year's target of 65,000 recruits.
The Army has sought to address chronic enlistment shortfalls by relaxing policies requiring a high school diploma and banning certain visible tattoos. Additionally, several incentives are offered such as educational benefits, cash bonuses, and accelerated naturalization for permanent residents.
Still, Army guidelines bar 71% of American youth from enlisting due to obesity, past drug use, criminal history, physical and mental health problems or a lack of needed skills.
More recently, a tight job market is also providing stiff competition for Army recruiters. The majority of enlistees come from military families as nearly 80% of new recruits have a relative who served.

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Recent polling from Gallup revealed that only 60% of Americans have confidence in the US military, the lowest percentage in over two decades. The decline in confidence has accelerated over the last five years, with a notable drop after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. Party breakdown revealed 68% of registered Republicans expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the US military, while 62% of registered Democrats do. Only 55% of political independents reported confidence in US armed forces.

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California Lawmakers Push for Ruling on Booting Trump From State Primary Ballot

The movement to block former President Donald Trump’s 2024 election bid gained steam on Monday as California Democrats urged his removal from the state’s primary ballot.
Nine lawmakers penned a letter to the state’s Democratic Attorney General Rob Bonta advocating for Trump’s disqualification from the March 5 primary, arguing his ineligibility on grounds of inciting an uprising during the riots at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.
The effort is one of several state-level initiatives arguing against Trump’s candidacy on constitutional grounds, citing the Fourteenth Amendment’s barring of candidates “engaged in insurrection or rebellion against” the United States from holding office. The California effort is notable in its attempt to resolve the question via the state’s attorney general, an approach which may lead to a faster resolution of the question.
“We all watched in horror Mr. Trump’s insurrection against the United States when he ordered a mob of his supporters to the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021 to intimidate [then] Vice President [Mike] Pence and the United States Congress,” reads the letter, spearheaded by Silicon Valley assemblymember Evan Low.
“There is no denying that Donald Trump has engaged in behavior that is unacceptable and unbecoming of any leader,” stated a spokesperson for Bonta, appearing to sympathize with some of the lawmakers’ claims.
However, whether Bonta intends to fully weigh in on the matter in his position as the state’s attorney general remains an open question. Various other state-level officials throughout the country have determined the matter would clearly violate precedent, if not their own jurisdiction. Others claim the issue would ultimately need to be resolved by the Supreme Court regardless.
“We have a constitutional republic of laws,” argued Georgia elections official Gabriel Sterling after a similar petition was lodged in Minnesota. “Anybody using an electoral scheme or a constitutional interpretation to remove anybody from the ballot is going to be a dangerous precedent.”
Trump weighed in on the issue in a post on Truth Social, writing, “Almost all legal scholars have voiced opinions that the 14th Amendment has no legal basis or standing relative to the upcoming 2024 Presidential Election.”

“Like Election Interference, it is just another ‘trick’ being used by the Radical Left Communists, Marxists, and Fascists, to again steal an Election that their candidate, the WORST, MOST

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INCOMPETENT, & MOST CORRUPT President in U.S. history, is incapable of winning in a Free and Fair Election."
Although the discussion is seemingly without precedent in American politics, US leaders have sharply questioned democratic norms in other countries when candidates are disqualified from the electoral ballot.
Nicaragua's government was strongly criticized by the United States when authorities there detained several opposition members on charges of participation in a foreign-backed rebellion.
Recently Elliott Abrams, a highly controversial member of the US foreign policy establishment in several consecutive presidential administrations, blasted Venezuela after the disqualification of Maria Corina Machado's presidential candidacy.

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Texas AG Paxton Avoids Removal From Office, Acquitted on All Counts in Impeachment Case

The Republican controlled state assembly voted to impeach Paxton 121-23 in May.
Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton dodged impeachment on Saturday after being acquitted on 16 corruption charges by the Texas State Senate.
The GOP-controlled state assembly overwhelmingly voted to impeach Paxton in May, but state Senate Republicans came to his defense with the vast majority voting to acquit Paxton.
The two-week trial ended on Friday, leaving the state's 30 top lawmakers to deliberate on the 16 articles of impeachment over alleged corruption and abuse of power. All but two of the chamber's 18 Republicans voted to acquit Paxton. Twenty-one votes in total were required to remove Paxton from office.
The case was centered on Paxton's relationship with real estate developer Nate Paul, a large political donor for Paxton.
Members of Paxton's office accused the Attorney General of doing illegal favors for Paul. It was also alleged that Paul returned the favor by providing Paxton's mistress, a former aide for a different state senator, employment and by keeping Paxton's infidelity a secret.
Paxton married his wife, State Senator Angela Paxton in 1986 after they met in college.
"If this impeachment is based on marital impropriety, then line up, line up; we're going to be doing a lot of impeachment in this city," Tony Buzbee, Ken Paxton's lawyer said during closing arguments.
Paxton did not attend most of his trial, only appearing during the opening and closing arguments. His mistress appeared at the trial and was called as a witness but was deemed "unavailable to testify" for an undisclosed reason. Lt. Governor Dan Patrick, who presided as the judge in the impeachment case, said that both the prosecution and defense agreed on the issue.
The decision meant the mistress did not have to testify in front of Ken Paxton's wife, who attended the trial but was not allowed to vote in the case.
Paxton is also facing a criminal case in Houston, on two counts of securities fraud. He faces up to 99 years in that case.

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At Least 1 Person Killed as Hurricane Lee Leaves Trail of Damage in New England, Maritime Canada

The weekend storm's destructive force saw downed trees crash onto power lines, cars and homes. One person died as a result of the cyclone, and a fisherman in Maine experienced a rogue wave that collapsed his boat.

The coastal areas of Maine, New Hampshire and the Canadian Maritime provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island were left dealing with widespread damages and power outages in the aftermath of Hurricane Lee this weekend.

The storm, which brought with it intense winds, rough surf and rain, prompted the death of at least one individual in Maine.

The center of the post-tropical cyclone first made landfall about 135 miles west of Halifax, Nova Scotia's capital, according to the National Hurricane Center, just 50 miles southeast of Eastport, Maine. Lee brought with it maximum sustained winds of 75 miles per hour (120 kilometers per hour); however, more averaged speeds of 45 MPH. The storm later downgraded as it headed north to New Brunswick and the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

But before doing so, Lee caused extensive damage across Maine and the Canadian Maritime provinces. The wind knocked down dead trees, and caused surf swells that prompted possible life-threatening surf and rip current conditions.

Hundreds of miles from the storm's center, residents of Maine and Canada found themselves without power. At around midday on Saturday, 27% of Nova Scotia was without power, 8% of New Brunswick and 3% of Prince Edward Island was also without power. At least 11% of customers in Maine also found themselves without power. About 100,000 power outages in Maine were reported at the height of the storm.

By Sunday, large parts of New England enjoyed warm, sunny weather, including Boston, Massachusetts, and parts of Maine. But by Monday at around 4:30 p.m. local time, more than 2,600 people in the state of Maine were still without power, while 1,417 people in Vermont and 816 people in New Hampshire were also without power, according to PowerOutage.us.

Bar Harbor—a town on Maine's Mount Desert Island popular to tourists as it allows access to Acadia National Park—experienced a whale watch boat breaking free from its mooring and crashing onshore. The national park officials chose to close every campground in the park, expecting trees to come down due to the storm.

A 51-year-old in Searsport died after a large tree limb fell on his vehicle while he was traveling on US Highway 1 during a period of high wind speeds. According to officials, the tree limb also brought down live power lines that were first shuttered before officials could remove the injured person. The individual later died at the hospital.

Destructive waves of 3 feet were expected along the coast. In Maine, a lobsterman and state lawmaker reportedly experienced a rogue wave while hauling traps on the coast of Winter Harbor a day before the storm impacted the state. The lobsterman as well as a crew member

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were thrown overboard when a large wave struck the starboard side of his 42-foot boat, capsizing the vessel.

"We had just finished hauling for the day, and were watching the waves break on the ledges of Turtle Island a few hundred feet inside us," he wrote on social media. "Ready to continue towards the harbor we saw a sight I never thought I would see and never want to again. It was a giant rogue wave bearing down towards us."

"It's not normal for waves to break in that depth, but this one crested. I just remember the force. It hit like a freight train. I didn't know this in the moment but later realized I had gripped the wheel so tight and was torn off with such force that the calluses on the palm of my hand were torn off when I was ripped from the helm," he added.

Both persons survived the rogue wave.

Images of trees downing power lines, crashing onto vehicles, and blocking roads were reported in the Mid-coast cities of Maine, including Rockland and Camden. Closer inland, the effects of the storm had less destructive effects.

"The storm was not as bad as it was made out to be, and I'm thankful for the electrician teams who brought power back after only a few hours," a resident near Damariscotta, Maine, told Sputnik.

The companies of Central Maine Power and Versant Power had hundreds of workers, including those from out of state, to assist in bridging back power.

"The wind was mildly sporadic from the north, and caused a lot of dead branches to shake from the trees. The rain was mild, to even a misting. Some trees fell, a majority being those with shallow roots or which were already dead," the eyewitness added.

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'Revolting Slob': Fetterman Becomes Conservative Target After Senate Shakes Up Dress Code

US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) earlier made room for a looser dress code in the chamber, allowing senators to wear whatever they want after the majority leader directed the Senate's Sergeant at Arms to no longer enforce the informal dress code.

US Senator John Fetterman (D-PA) found himself with a target on his back on Monday after several colleagues took aim at the lawmaker for his lax choice in athleisure wear.

Fetterman, who is 6'8" and is known to wear sports shorts, t-shirts and hoodies. Fetterman did wear suits for a short time after he was elected last year, but has continued to sport his casual wear since returning to work after being treated for clinical depression.

The dress change, however, does not apply to staff or outside visitors who will be required to continue to wear business attire.

US Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) was one conservative who was dismayed by the change to the dress code, calling it "disgraceful." Meanwhile, conservative commentator Monica Crowley called Fetterman a "revolting slob."

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“The Senate no longer enforcing a dress code for Senators to appease Fetterman is disgraceful. Dress code is one of society’s standards that set etiquette and respect for our institutions,” Greene posted on the platform X. “Stop lowering the bar!”

Fetterman then shot back at Greene, recalling a House committee hearing in July where Green showed off explicit images from the infamous laptop belonging to the president's son, Hunter Biden.

“Thankfully, the nation’s lower chamber lives by a higher code of conduct: displaying ding-a-ling pics in public hearings,” Fetterman wrote.

The Pennsylvania lawmaker also defended himself against American statistician Nate Silver, who joked about a “new political party for people who don't give a sh*t either about how John Fetterman dresses or what [Colorado-based Republican US Rep.] Lauren Boebert does in a theater.”

Silver is referencing an incident in which Boebert was kicked out of a family-friendly musical performance of “Beetlejuice” for vaping, and was also caught reportedly groping her male companion.

“I dress like you predict,” Fetterman said in response on social media.

Governor Ron DeSantis (R-FL), also chimed in on the attack, suggesting Fetterman's casual wear was "disrespectful" to the congressional chamber.

“So he would campaign in that, which is your prerogative, right? I mean, if that’s what you want to do, but to show up in the United States Senate with that, and not have the decency to put on proper attire. I think it’s disrespectful to the body,” he said.

“And I think the fact that the Senate changed the rules to accommodate that I think speaks very poorly to how they consider that,” DeSantisadded. “Look, we need to be lifting up our standards in this country, not dumbing down our standards in this country. This is an example why.”

“I dress like he campaigns,” Fetterman later shot back at DeSantis on X.

The informal dress code has, for decades, required that senators wear business attire: a suit and tie for men, while women are to wear dresses with covered shoulders or pantsuits.

In 2019, when Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota was the top Democrat on the Rules Committee, she successfully pushed for a change to the dress code in order to allow women to wear sleeveless dresses, which the House of Representatives adopted several years prior.

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Dramatic Video Captures Moment Florida Beachgoers Wrestle Stranded Shark Back to Sea

The Mako shark is a known deadly and fierce hunter, having secured the title of maintaining the fastest hunting speed of any shark in the ocean; however, the shark's population has been reduced by 50% to 79% over the last 75 years due to overfishing.

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A group of beach goers at Florida's Pensacola Beach recently experienced a shocking surprise when they stumbled upon an almost 10-foot Mako shark that had managed to beach itself. Video footage of the scene showed how - more than once - the shark's powerful movements proved to be too strong for the men trying to lead it back into the water. However, eventually they did just that, managing to lead the stunned shark back into the depths of the tides, where it paused for a moment before swimming off.

A couple had originally been at the beach to celebrate their wedding anniversary when the husband noticed a shark heading straight toward them, and yelled at his wife to "get out of the water."

"We were sitting on the beach just having a good time and my buddy just said, 'Look out in the water there, man.' I see that fin and I was like, yeah, it was two or three sandbars away from us," Josh Fey, explained.

His wife Tina filmed the video as he and a group of other men helped the thrashing beast back into the water.

"Eventually it just turned to the left and started coming directly beeline toward the shoreline, and I said, 'That's a big shark coming in.' And we thought it was chasing some bait or whatnot, but it came all the way to shoreline and beached itself."

It is not immediately clear why, or how the shark managed to beach itself. But Kennady Brinley, a stranding coordinator with Emerald Coast Wildlife, says animals can sometimes beach themselves due to stress, an illness, abnormal rip currents, or simply getting lost looking for food.

Brinley underscored that if someone encounters a beached shark, they should not pull it backwards by its fins, as video showed beachgoers doing.

"Sharks always have to be moving forward," she said. "That's why when you see them swimming, they're always moving forward. So whenever they're pulled backwards, that is allowing for an opportunity for drowning to occur."

She adds that the men gave the Mako a chance at survival, but that it is important to call organizations like the Emerald Coast Wildlife or Florida Fish and Wildlife for help in such moments.

Mako sharks can reach up to 13 feet in length and can weigh around 1,200 pounds in weight. They are also the fastest sharks in the ocean and can reach speeds of up to 45 miles per hour. While the shark that was saved was reported to be a longfin mako shark, the shortfin mako shark was classified as endangered by the International Union Conservation of Nature.

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Explorers Make First Detailed Search of WWII Battle of Midway Shipwrecks Site

More than 3,000 Japanese troops died in the World War II-era Battle of Midway, whereas about 362 US service members were killed. The major naval battle proved significant in hostilities as it helped clamp down on Japan's expansion.

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A team of researchers have captured unprecedented images of three World War II shipwrecks lost during the Battle of Midway, as well as the first close-up photos of the Japanese Imperial Navy's Akagi (IJN), an aircraft carrier.

The team was led by the nonprofit group Ocean Exploration Trust aboard the vessel Nautilus.

"This expedition is not only rewriting history and our understanding of these special places, but also pushing the limits of what we thought was possible in terms of interdisciplinary collaboration," Daniel Wagner, chief scientist for Ocean Exploration Trust, said in the news release. "Many anti-aircraft guns were still pointing up, providing clues about the final moments on these iconic ships."

The team was able to conduct the first visual survey of the Akagi, the IJN Kaga, and of the United States Ship Yorktown, which was first located 25 years ago.

During the battle the Japanese also lost four aircraft carriers, one cruiser, and hundreds of aircraft while the US lost one carrier, one destroyer and 144 aircraft.

The research dives were launched and closed with protocol ceremonies in order to honor the site, as well as those whose lives were lost and the families and communities the individuals belonged to, the release stated. The Battle of Midway took place over several days in June of 1942, about 1,300 miles northwest of Honolulu, Hawaii.

"On this occasion, we meet on those same Pacific waters in which Japan and the US once met in battle, but this time as allies and fellow researchers," says Kosei Nomura, minister, head of Economic Section, Embassy of Japan. "We are reminded that today's peace and tomorrow's discoveries are built on the sacrifices of war, and so in my view, it is meaningful that Japan and the US are now deepening their cooperation at Midway, utilizing such cutting-edge technology."

The team completed their surveys below more than 16,000 feet (5,100 meters) during three separate deployments, and took about 43 hours to survey the three wrecks. The mission was livestreamed for the public to view the shipwrecks, and allowed for archeologists from Japan, the US and over 100 experts across the globe to connect to the ship operations.

"During over 43 hours at depth, we methodically circumnavigated these historic wrecks, bringing to light many features in great detail, including their armament, battle, and sinking-related damage. Many anti-aircraft guns were still pointing up, providing clues about the final moments on these iconic ships," Wagner added.

"The vast majority of our ocean lies in very deep waters that we know virtually nothing about," says Wagner. "These deep-sea explorations highlight how many extraordinary things are still hidden and waiting to be found in the great depths of our ocean."

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Kirby Says Not Aware of Plans to Meet With Russian Delegation at UNGA

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) - The United States is not planning to meet with the Russian delegation on the first day of the UN General Assembly's general debate, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"Not that I'm aware of," Kirby said, when asked if there are plans to meet with the Russian

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delegation.

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UN Launching AI Panel to Deliver Recommendations on Tech by Year End - Secretary-General

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Tuesday that he will appoint a new panel on artificial intelligence (AI), which will be tasked with delivering recommendations on addressing the new technology by the end of the year.

"Now AI is on everyone's lips - a subject of both awe, and fear. Even some of those who developed generative AI are calling for greater regulation," Guterres said during remarks to the General Assembly. "To help advance the search for concrete governance solutions, I will appoint this month a High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence - which will provide recommendations by the end of this year."

The UN needs a Global Digital Compact between governments, the private sector and civil society to mitigate the risks of new technologies and help utilize them to the benefit of humankind, Guterres said.

Generative AI holds much promise, but may lead humanity "across a Rubicon" and into uncontrollable and dangerous circumstances, Guterres said.

Some UN member states have called for a new global entity to advise member states on AI, in the vein of the International Atomic Energy Agency or Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Guterres said.

The UN is prepared to host global, inclusive discussions based on the decisions of member states, Guterres added.

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Global Humanitarian System on Verge of Collapse Due to Lack of Funds - UN Chief

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) - The global humanitarian system is on the verge of collapsing because of the lack of donations from the international community, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said during his speech at the UN General Assembly on Tuesday.

"In the face of these mounting crises, the global humanitarian system is on the verge of collapse," Guterres said.

Guterres pointed out that needs are rising as funding is being cut short, especially at the United Nations.

The UN chief urged all countries to bolster efforts to address global humanitarian needs, warning that conflicts could emerge from dire situations.

World leaders are gathered at the United Nations headquarters in New York City for the annual

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high-level week of UN General Assembly, where they will address some of the world's most pressing issues.

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Armenian Foreign Minister Declines Comment on Karabakh Upon Arrival at UNGA

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan declined to comment on the situation in Armenian-majority Nagorno-Karabakh enclave on arrival in New York to attend the UN General Assembly high-level session.

Mirzoyan did not answer a Sputnik correspondent's shouted request to comment when he was entering the UN's headquarters.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry announced it has begun "anti-terrorist activities" in Nagorno-Karabakh to restore the constitutional order. Baku said it had informed the command of Russian peacekeepers in the region and the leadership of the Russian-Turkish Monitoring Center about the operation.

Armenia described the operation as aggression and reiterated that it has no military presence in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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UN Chief Says Global Community Seems Unable to Collectively Address Existential Threats

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) - The international community seems incapable at present to collectively respond to existential threats as the world becomes unhinged, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said during his address to the UN General Assembly on Tuesday.

"Our world is becoming unhinged," Guterres said. "Geopolitical tensions are rising, global challenges are mounting, and we seem incapable of coming together to respond. We confront a host of existential threats - from the climate crisis to disruptive technologies - and we do so at a time of chaotic transition."

Guterres noted that the world has seen a surge of conflicts, coups and chaos as well as widening divisions between economic and military powers that are leading to a "great fracture" in economic and financial systems and trade relations.

The UN chief emphasized that undertaking reforms in the UN Security Council is needed to reflect the world as it is today.

With respect to Ukraine-related matters, Guterres said the conflict there has serious implications for the world, especially for global food security, and emphasized that he will not give up on the efforts to revive the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative.

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Regarding the Middle East, Guterres reiterated that a two-state solution is the only pathway to lasting peace and security for Israel and the Palestinians.

The UN chief also pointed out that disasters are worsening due to climate change, adding that the global humanitarian system is on the verge of collapse due to lack of funding from the international community.

The global community must phase out coal, oil and gas in an equitable way and massively boost investments in renewable energy, Guterres said.

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Nations Must Recommit to Nuclear Non-Proliferation, End Erosion of Arms Control - UN Chief

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) - The international community must recommit to the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and end the current erosion of arms control treaties, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said during his speech at the UN General Assembly on Tuesday.

"In the context of preparations for the Summit of the Future, we put forward ideas for the consideration of Member States for a New Agenda for Peace, based on the Charter and international law... calling on States to recommit to a world free from nuclear weapons, and to end the erosion of the nuclear disarmament and arms control regime," Guterres said.

Guterres further said that nuclear disarmament is at a standstill while countries develop new weapons and make new threats.

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UN Chief Says Will Not Give Up on Grain Deal as World Badly Needs Russian, Ukrainian Food

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Tuesday that he will not give up on efforts to revive the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, adding that the world badly needs Russian and Ukrainian food and fertilizer.

"The world badly needs Ukrainian food and Russian food and fertilizers to stabilize markets and guarantee food security. I will not give up on my efforts to make it happen," Guterres said in a speech to the UN General Assembly.

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Guterres Calls for Urgent Reform of UN Security Council to Reflect World of Today

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres during his address to the UN General Assembly on Tuesday said a reform of the UN Security Council is needed to reflect the current state of the world.

"It is high time to renew multilateral institutions based on 21st century economic and political realities - rooted in equity, solidarity and universality - anchored in the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law," Guterres said. "That means reforming the Security Council in line with the world of today."

The alternative to reforms is further fragmentation, he warned.

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Zelenskyy to Visit Canada After UNGA, Washington DC Trip - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - Volodymyr Zelenskyy will head to Toronto to meet with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau following his trip to the United States, The Globe and Mail reported on Tuesday.

Zelenskyy's trip will come after his participation in the UN General Assembly's High Level Week in New York and his meeting with US President Joe Biden and congressional leaders in Washington.

The visit to Canada, which has not been formally announced, is a part of the continued efforts to keep rallying support for the Ukrainian cause amid Russia's ongoing special military operation, the report said citing an advisor to Zelenskyy's chief of staff Andriy Yermak.

Since Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the Canadian government has committed C$8.9 billion ($6.6 billion) in financial, military, and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine.

Canada has also sanctioned over 2,600 individuals and entities in Russia, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine over their alleged complicity in violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity since 2014.

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Five Americans Released From Iranian Detention Land in US - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - Five Americans released from Iranian detention this week as part of a swap deal arrived in the United States on Tuesday morning, CNN reported, citing two US officials.

The freed US citizens include Siamak Namazi, Emad Shargi, Morad Tahbaz and two individuals who wish to remain unnamed.

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All of them will have the option to participate in the Pentagon's Post Isolation Support Activities program to help them return to normal life as they are back in the US, the report said.

The US and Iran swapped prisoners on Monday. Five Americans left Iran on a plane bound to Qatar, before taking off to the US. The US, in turn, released the same number of Iranians.

The US also agreed to release approximately $6 billion in frozen Iranian oil revenues as part of the swap deal. The funds have been moved to restricted accounts in Qatar, and the US will have oversight as to how and when these funds are used.

Iran will be able to make withdrawal requests specifically for humanitarian goods and agricultural products, the White House said.

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Debris of Missing F-35 Jet Found Near Military Air Base in South Carolina - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - Joint Base Charleston said in a statement that the debris of a F-35 fighter jet that went missing over South Carolina this weekend was discovered two hours north of the air base.

The stealth fighter jet was in autopilot mode when the pilot ejected, meaning that it could have remained airborne for some time, according to media reports.

"Personnel from Joint Base Charleston and Marine Crops Air Station Beaufort, in close coordination with local authorities, have located a debris field in Williamsburg County. The debris was discovered two hours northeast of JB Charleston," the air base said in a statement on Monday.

The air base urges members of the community to avoid the area as the recovery team secures the debris field.

Moreover, Marine Corps commandant Eric Smith is reportedly issuing a two-day stand down for all aircraft units inside and outside the United States.

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World Bank, IMF Confirm Morocco Meetings to Proceed Despite Earthquakes - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - World Bank President Ajay Banga, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva, and Morocco's Minister of Economy and Finance Nadia Fettah Alaoui in a joint statement said they will proceed with the 2023 Annual Meetings in Marrakech, Morocco, despite the recent devastating earthquake in the region.

"The World Bank and IMF, together with the Moroccan authorities, have agreed to proceed with holding the 2023 Annual Meetings in Marrakech from October 9 to 15, adapting the content to the circumstances," the statement said on Monday.

On September 8, a powerful 6.9-magnitude earthquake struck Morocco, with its epicenter

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located 77 kilometers southwest of Marrakech. The earthquake, followed by several aftershocks, resulted in a tragic toll of over 2,800 fatalities and more than 2,500 injuries.

The decision to continue with the meetings comes after a thorough assessment of Marrakech's readiness to host the event and ensuring it doesn't disrupt ongoing relief and reconstruction efforts in the aftermath of the earthquake, the statement said.

In their joint statement, the leaders emphasized the importance of conducting the Annual Meetings in a manner that respects the ongoing relief efforts and pays homage to the victims and the resilience of the Moroccan people.

They also expressed their commitment to ensuring the safety of all participants, the statement said.

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Borell Says States at UNGA Cannot 'Sit and Wait' for Xi, Putin to Continue Work

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 19 (Sputnik) - States at the UN General Assembly must get to work and cannot wait on Chinese President Xi and Russian President Putin, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell said.

"About the absence of Xi and Putin, we have to continue working, we cannot sit and wait for them," Borrell told the reporters at the Mission of the European Union on Monday.

The war costs everyday lives and we would like to reach a just peace, he added.

Borrell is attending meetings as part of the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. Ukraine and food security are some of the top issues he is aiming to discuss.

The UNGA session is held annually and this year, the high level debate is held from September 19 to 26.

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Montana Receives Support of 18 Other US States in Case Challenging TikTok Ban - Filing

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - The US state of Montana received the support of 18 other states in its attempt to restrict social media platform TikTok, according to an amici curiae brief filed in the US District Court for the District of Montana.

The brief was submitted on Monday by 18 states including Virginia, Alabama, Idaho and Utah in support of a law passed by Montana’s legislature that would ban companies from allowing TikTok to be downloaded off their application stores in the state.

TikTok sued Montana in an attempt to prevent the enforcement of the law, which was set to start in January 2024.

"[Montana’s ban] is justified, and Plaintiffs’ motions for a preliminary injunction should be

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denied, because TikTok intentionally engaged in deceptive business practices which induce individuals to share sensitive personal information that can be easily accessed by the Chinese Communist Party," the filing said.

The legislation comes amid other efforts across the United States to restrict the use of TikTok amid privacy concerns linked to TikTok's ties to China-based parent company ByteDance.

TikTok has also failed to regulate its platform and reduce harms to adolescent users, the filing said.

Federal law does not prohibit state governments from protecting their citizens from such conduct, the filing added.

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Grossi Says IAEA Sees No Shelling at Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Plant at Present

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) -The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) sees no indications of shelling at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) at this time, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi told Sputnik.

"Not at this point, but as I say, I measure my words, because at any time this can happen. This is a war zone, as you know," Grossi said on Monday, when asked if the IAEA has seen any recent shelling.

The security situation at ZNPP has improved since the creation of the so-called five principles for the protection of the facility, Grossi said. However, the situation remains extremely fragile in some areas, Grossi added.

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Grossi Says Regrets Iran's Ejection of IAEA Inspectors, Hopes Tehran Reconsiders

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) - International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi told Sputnik that he regrets Iran's decision to eject IAEA inspectors and hopes that Tehran will reconsider its position.

"I regret this. This is something I really don't understand. I cannot see who benefits from this," Grossi said on Monday. "So I really hope that they will review this decision."

Iran needs the IAEA to give the necessary assurances that its nuclear program is being conducted for peaceful purposes, Grossi added.

On Saturday, Grossi said Iran had decided to recall several IAEA experts involved in inspections of the country's nuclear facilities under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Grossi said the decision deprives Iran of about one-third of IAEA's inspection group. However, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said such action was

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allowed under the provisions of the NPT.

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Grossi Says Will Meet Russian, Ukrainian Officials This Week in New York

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) - International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi told Sputnik that he will meet separately with Russian and Ukrainian officials on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly this week in New York City.
"Yes, I'm going to see both sides during this week, which is, of course, indispensable for me to continue being useful in this situation," Grossi said when asked if he will meet with Russian and Ukrainian officials in New York.

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Grossi Says Security Situation at Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Plant Improved But Remains Fragile

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) - International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi told Sputnik that he has seen certain improvements concerning the security situation around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), but the situation remains fragile.
"Every day is a challenge for us. I think, so far we have seen certain improvements but the situation continues to be extremely fragile in Zaporizhzhia," Grossi said.
Grossi added that he will meet with Russian and Ukrainian officials this week on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly.

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Blinken, Han Discuss Possible US-China Cooperation on Transnational Issues - State Dept.

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Chinese Vice President Han Zheng discussed the potential opportunity to cooperate on transnational challenges, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.
"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with PRC [People's Republic of China] Vice President Han Zheng on the margins of the 78th UN General Assembly in New York City," Miller said in a press release on Monday. "The Secretary also explored potential areas of cooperation and advocated for progress on shared transnational challenges."
The two officials had a constructive discussion about maintaining open lines of communication

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between the United States and China and responsibly managing the bilateral relationship, the release said.

Blinken emphasized during the meeting that the United States will continue to use diplomacy to advance US interests and to discuss areas of difference with China, the release said.

Both sides reiterated their commitment to holding senior-level engagements in the coming weeks, the release added.

Blinken and Han also discussed Ukraine, North Korea and the importance of maintaining stability across the Taiwan Strait, according to the release.

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Trump to Skip Republican Primary Debate, Address Detroit Auto Workers Instead - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump is set to address current and former members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union in Detroit instead of participating in the upcoming Republican primary debate, CNBC reported.

Last week, some 13,000 workers from the auto industry initiated strikes following a call by the UAW. The strikes affected the so-called "Big Three" automakers in the United States - Ford, General Motors and Stellantis. The strikes commenced after negotiations failed to secure wage increases for workers by the deadline set for late Thursday night.

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US to Introduce Resolution at UNGA on Global Threats Posed by Synthetic Drugs - Blinken

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - The United States will introduce a resolution at the UN General Assembly to highlight the global threats posed by synthetic drugs, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

"The United States will introduce a resolution [at] the United Nations General Assembly highlighting the global health and security threat of synthetic drugs and urging international action to address them," Blinken said on Monday.

Blinken made the comment during an event in New York dubbed Addressing Public Health and Security Threats of Synthetic Drugs Through Global Cooperation.

Synthetic drugs, notably fentanyl, have become the primary cause of death for Americans aged 18 to 49, with nearly 110,000 fatalities in 2022, according to reports.

Blinken pointed out to the existing collaborative efforts between the United States and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime to combat illicit drugs.

However, Blinken also said the United States will similarly partner with tech companies to find ways to deny criminals access to online platforms to market drugs as well as build tools to help

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those seeking treatment.

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US National Debt Exceeds $33 Trillion for First Time in History - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US national debt exceeded $33 trillion for the first time in the country's history, according to US Treasury Department data.

The US national debt stands at approximately $33.04 trillion, the Treasury Department said.

The milestone comes as Congress works to fund the government before the end of the month, lest they risk a government shutdown.

A number of US House Republicans have expressed opposition to a short-term funding bill proposed by the chamber leadership, citing concerns about excessive government spending.

On Monday, US Congressman Dan Bishop said the United States has added $1 trillion to the existing national debt since June to exceed $33 billion, adding that the per family share is $260,000.

Bishop said the Congress' answer to the record level of debt is to pass another continuing resolution to continue to fund the government. The congressman referred to Congress and the government as "the swamp" - a popular reference for the bureaucracy in Washington.

Earlier on Monday, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said that she is comfortable with the economic path of the United States despite the rising inflation and interest rates.

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Canada Expels Indian Diplomat Who Headed Intelligence Operations - Joly

(Adds background in paras 6-7)

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) – Canada has expelled an Indian diplomat after a link was discovered between the Indian government and the murder of Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar earlier this year, Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly said on Monday.

Joly pointed out that she had conveyed to her Indian counterpart Canada's expectation that India fully cooperate to ensure that the authorities get to the bottom of the case.

"As of today, and as a consequence, we've expelled a top Indian diplomat from Canada," she said.

Joly said the expelled diplomat was heading the Indian intelligence agency's operations in Canada.

"The allegations that a representative of a foreign government may have been involved in the killing of a Canadian citizen here in Canada on Canadian soil is not only troubling, but it is completely unacceptable," Joly added.

Nijjar, a prominent Sikh nationalist leader living in the province of British Columbia and a vocal

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backer of an independent Khalistan state, was designated as a terrorist and head of a separatist movement by the Indian government.
In mid-June, the individual was fatally shot by two masked gunmen in a parking lot outside the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara in Surrey, BC.

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Iran's Leadership Won't Get 'Hands On' Prisoner Swap Funds - White House

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - Iran's government will not directly access the unfrozen funds issued by the Biden administration in the prisoner exchange as Qatar and the US will oversee disbursement, White House National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby said in an interview.
"The money will not go to the regime they will they will not get their hands on any of this," Kirby told CNN on Monday.
The Biden administration's agreement with Iran, reached in August, led to the release of five detained Americans, in exchange for which Iran gains access to approximately $6 billion in sanctioned oil revenue held in South Korea.
However, the United States and Qatar will oversee the purchase of humanitarian materials and subsequently ensure their delivery to Iran, the Biden administration said in a statement.
The assets will be held within the Qatar National Bank System, with the provision for Iran to make withdrawal requests specifically for humanitarian goods and agricultural products, the statement said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) -

UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY
* US officials are not planning to hold bilateral meetings with their Russian counterparts on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.
* The United States will work in the days ahead with allies and partners to make it more difficult for countries to engage in "wrongful" detentions of foreign citizens, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.
* All Russian journalists that are accompanying Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the UN General Assembly have received the necessary visas, the Russian Foreign Ministry told Sputnik.

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* The United States will discuss with partners at the UN General Assembly in New York Iran's decision to revoke the accreditation of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, a senior White House official said.

US-IRAN PRISONER EXCHANGE

* Five US prisoners who were freed as part of a prisoner exchange with Iran have arrived in Qatar, US media reported on Monday.
* Two Iranians released by the United States under the prisoner swap agreement landed in Tehran, Iran's Press TV broadcaster reported.
* Oman and Qatar have contributed to reaching an agreement on the exchange of prisoners between the United States and Iran, a senior White House official said.

BAN ON UKRAINE GRAIN

* Ukraine has filed lawsuits with the World Trade Organization (WTO) against Poland, Hungary and Slovakia because of their ban on the import of Ukrainian products, the Ukrainian Economy Ministry said on Monday.
* Slovakia is ready to defend its position regarding its ban of Ukrainian grain on the sidelines of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and is not going to lift the restrictions imposed until it receives guarantees that the imports would be under control, Slovak Agriculture Minister Josef Bires said.

US-CHINA RELATIONS

* The meeting between US President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping will take place at an appropriate time and bilateral relations between the two countries are moving in a better direction, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.
* The United States and China should seek a relationship where each government's officials visit each other regularly, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said.
* The United States is committed to a responsible relationship with China, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said at the beginning of the meeting with Chinese Vice President Han Zheng on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE'S HEARING ON RUSSIA, UKRAINE

* Russia expects the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to accept Moscow's arguments about inadmissibility of Ukraine's February 2022 claim under the Genocide Convention and remove it from consideration, Gennady Kuzmin, who represents Moscow in court, told Sputnik on Monday.
* The ICJ will make an admissibility decision on Ukraine's claim against Russia under the Genocide Convention in late 2023 or early 2024, Kuzmin, told Sputnik.

RUSSIAN ECONOMY

* Russia's new federal budget should be calculated fairly and tailored according to national priorities and interests, President Vladimir Putin said on Monday.
* Accelerated inflation is one of the major problems for Russia's economy, and it is important to understand the reasons for the depreciation of the ruble and to take necessary measures to prevent this, Putin said.

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* Russia's GDP growth may amount to 2.5-2.8% by the end of the year, Putin said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Explosions were heard near the administration building of the Donetsk People's Republic, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Monday.

* Ukraine has lost up to 255 military in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* The Russian armed forces have attacked storage facilities with Storm Shadow cruise missiles and ammunition with depleted uranium in Ukraine, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

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PREVIEW - Austin, Milley Head to Germany to Meet With Ukraine Allies Amid Stalled Counteroffensive

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley are heading to Germany to host the Ukrainian Contact Defense Group (UDCG) amid a stalled counteroffensive and media reports that the White House is leaning toward supplying long-range missiles to Kiev.

The meeting, which is set to take place on Tuesday at Germany's Ramstein Air Base, will be the 15th since April 2022, and the fifth in-person meeting of senior military officials from nearly 50 countries to discuss Ukraine’s security needs in the conflict with Russia.

At Ramstein, Austin and Milley are expected to have their first in-person meeting with Ukraine’s new Defense Minister Rustem Umerov, who assumed office on September 6, according to the Pentagon.

The UDCG meeting is a platform to discuss the situation on the battlefield in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia as well as to coordinate arms supplies to Kiev.

On Sunday, Milley gave a grim forecast on Ukraine’s counteroffensive, saying that it will not result in the complete return of all lost territories.

The upcoming UDCG meeting is also of interest due to recent media reports that the Biden administration is pondering supplying Ukraine with long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) despite denials by the White House and the State Department that the administration has made any such decision.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov called the potential supply of ATACMS to Kiev a "road to nowhere," adding that it will not change the situation on the battlefield, where Ukraine continues to struggle to overcome well-prepared Russian defense lines.

If the supply of long-range missiles is not announced at the Ramstein meeting, a chance still exists that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy may be able to persuade Biden to take this step during their upcoming meeting at the White House and in Congress on Thursday.

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US to Appoint Envoy to Address Security Threat of Fentanyl Drug Usage – Blinken

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) – The United States will appoint a special envoy to address the acute issue of fentanyl use that has become the main cause of death in the United States over the past years, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday.

"The United States will name an envoy to elevate our diplomacy on this issue, working with countries around the world to confront this global threat," Blinken said in his remarks at the Addressing the Public Health and Security Threat of Synthetic Drugs Through Global Cooperation Event in New York City.

In July, the White House released a comprehensive, government-wide response to combat the deadly emerging threat that the combination of fentanyl and xylazine poses.

According to the White House, the monthly percentage of illegally manufactured fentanyl-involved deaths with xylazine detected increased 276% between January 2019 and June 2022.

In 2021, more than 106,000 drug overdose deaths were documented in the United States, according to data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Canada Expels Indian Diplomat Who Headed Intelligence Operations - Joly

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) – Canada has expelled an Indian diplomat after a link was discovered between the Indian government and the murder of Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar earlier this year, Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly said on Monday.

Joly pointed out that she had conveyed to her Indian counterpart Canada's expectation that India fully cooperate to ensure that the authorities get to the bottom of the case.

"As of today, and as a consequence, we've expelled a top Indian diplomat from Canada," she said.

Joly said the expelled diplomat was heading the Indian intelligence agency's operations in Canada.

"The allegations that a representative of a foreign government may have been involved in the killing of a Canadian citizen here in Canada on Canadian soil is not only troubling, but it is completely unacceptable," Joly added.

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US Congressman Matt Gaetz Intending to Run for Florida Governor in 2026- Reports

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WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Matt Gaetz intends to run for Florida governor in 2026, after current governor Ron DeSantis leaves the office due to term limit restrictions, NBC News reported on Monday.

Gaetz suggested multiple times that he may seek the governorship, the report said, citing four people who attended a reception with the congressman on Sunday.

Gaetz is “100% in” on the idea of running for governor, one Florida Republican operative reportedly said.

Gaetz told several people to expect him to run in the 2026 race, a Florida Republican lobbyist said.

Many people encouraged the congressman to run for governor one day, Gaetz said, when asked about the Sunday event. Gaetz noted that Florida has an “outstanding governor” who will hold the role through 2026, the report said.

Gaetz served as an adviser to DeSantis’ 2018 campaign for governor. However, Gaetz is a vocal supporter of former US President Donald Trump, who is running against DeSantis in the 2024 Republican Party presidential primary.

Gaetz said his only political focus at the moment is reelecting Trump in 2024, the report added.

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Biden Announces $11 Million Humanitarian Aid for Flood-Stricken Libya - White House

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced that the United States will provide an additional $11 million to local and international aid groups responding to the devastating floods in eastern Libya, according to a statement released by the White House on Monday.

"Today — as the people of eastern Libya continue to recover and rebuild in the aftermath of catastrophic flooding— the United States will provide an additional $11 million to local and international organizations responding to their urgent humanitarian needs," Biden said in the statement.

The State Department and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) will coordinate the delivery of the assistance, which includes water, food, shelter and medical assistance.

Torrential rains hit Libya on September 10, brought by Storm Daniel. They caused destructive flooding in the country's east, where the cities of Susah and Derna were declared natural disaster zones. The death toll is at thousands and continues rising as thousands more remain missing.

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Blinken Says US Committed to Responsibly Managing Relationship With China

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is committed to a responsible relationship with China, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said at the beginning of the meeting with Chinese Vice President Han Zheng on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly on Monday.

"The world expects us to responsibly manage our relationship. The United States is committed to doing just that," Blinken said.

The secretary of state expressed the United States' desire to maintain cooperation with China in a responsible manner.

Blinken also said that face-to-face diplomacy remains the best way to deal with areas of disagreement.

In addition, Blinken said diplomacy is the best means to finding opportunities for collaboration.

Han agreed that China and the United States have differences and challenges, but added that the world needs stable and healthy relations between the two countries.

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Canada Following Link Between India Govt., Murder of Canadian Citizen Nijjar – Trudeau

(Adds details in paras 2-3, 5-7, background in paras 8-9)

WASHINGTON September 18 (Sputnik) – Canadian Intelligence Services have been following allegations of a potential link between the Indian government and the murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar earlier this year, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Monday.

Nijjar, a prominent Sikh nationalist leader living in the province of British Columbia and a vocal backer of an independent Khalistan state, was designated as a terrorist and head of a separatist movement by the Indian government.

In mid-June, the individual was fatally shot by two masked gunmen in a parking lot outside the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara in Surrey, BC.

"Over the past number of weeks, Canadian security agencies have been actively pursuing credible allegations of a potential link between agents of the government of India and the killing of a Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar ... Canada has declared its deep concerns to the top intelligence and security officials of the Indian government. Last week at the G20, I brought them personally and directly to Prime Minister Modi in no uncertain terms," Trudeau told the House of Commons.

Trudeau added that the involvement by any foreign government in the murder of a Canadian citizen on the country's soil is an unacceptable violation of Canada's sovereignty, further noting that it was contrary to fundamental rules to which "democratic societies" abide.

The Prime Minister said that Canada had been closely working and coordinating with its allies on the matter and urged the Indian government to cooperate with Ottawa in solving this investigation.

"I also expect it [India] to reiterate that its position on extrajudicial operations in another country

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is clearly and unequivocally in line with international law," he continued.

Following Trudeau's attendance to the G20 Summit in New-Delhi, India, the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a strongly worded readout in which it expressed concern about Canadian-based anti-India activities by "extremist elements".

Notably, the ministry expressed concern over their promotion of secessionism and incitement of violence toward Indian diplomats as well as threatening the community throughout the country and called on Canada to work jointly with India to eliminate the "nexus" of extremism and organized crime.

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Venezuela Has 'Critical' Weeks Ahead if Seeking US Sanctions Relief - State Dept. Official

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - Venezuela faces critical weeks ahead if it seeks sanctions relief from the United States, US Charge of Affaires in Colombia Francesco Palmieri said on Monday.

The Venezuelan opposition is getting ready to hold primary elections on October 22 to determine who will face off against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in next year's presidential elections.

"The United States is prepared to offer relief by reducing and relaxing sanctions," Palmieri said during a discussion hosted by the Atlantic Council. "We in the US government have not set an explicit deadline by which such actions must be taken, but obviously the coming weeks ahead are critical."

The Biden administration, according to Palmieri, is hoping is that the primary vote is a competitive process by nature and will result in even greater unity among Venezuelans. The United States is focused on ensuring the the October primary proceeds unimpeded and creates the conditions for a free and fair presidential election in 2024, the senior US official added.

Moreover, Palmieri stressed that the international community also has a role to play in addressing Venezuela's issues. These challenges include the matter of Venezuelan debts and assets abroad, humanitarian support for vulnerable Venezuelans, and the issue of transnational criminal groups operating within Venezuela, Palmieri said.

Palmieri said the United States is currently in discussions with like-minded partners to unite the international community in support of democracy, economic and social development, and human rights in Venezuela.

The United States partially lifted sanctions it imposed on Venezuela after the government released seven US citizens from prison and resumed talks with the opposition that resulted in reaching an agreement to address the humanitarian crisis in the country and to continue talks focused on holding elections in 2024.

The Biden administration has repeatedly said it would provide additional sanctions relief if Venezuela took other significant steps, such as holding free and fair elections.

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US Arrests Russian Marchenko for Allegedly Procuring Dual-Use Tech for Russia - DOJ

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States arrested Russian national Maxim Marchenko for his alleged involvement in illegally procuring US dual-use, military grade microelectronics for Russian entities, the Justice Department said on Monday.

"[Justice Department] announced the unsealing of a Complaint charging MAXIM MARCHENKO with conspiring to defraud the United States and with smuggling, wire fraud, and money laundering offenses based on MARCHENKO's alleged participation in a scheme to unlawfully procure US-sourced, dual-use microelectronics with military applications on behalf of end users in Russia," the Justice Department said in a press release.

The release said Marchenko was arraigned in court earlier in the day and was ordered detained, the release said. The Russian national faces seven counts including money laundering, with potential prison terms adding up to 100 years, according to the release.

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Biden to Host Pacific Leaders in Washington Next Week - Senior State Dept. Official

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will host Pacific island leaders at the second US-Island Pacific Islands Forum in Washington next week as part of his administration's ongoing diplomatic and security initiatives to revive and boost US influence across the Pacific region, Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Richard Verma said on Monday.

"Next week, President Biden will host the second US-Island Pacific Islands Forum," Verma told an audience at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP).

The meeting will be part of a period of intense activity aiming to boost US influence and standing in the region, Verma said.

Verma said the Biden administration had launched an ongoing dialogue to hear and respond to the economic, and security needs of the small island nations in the region.

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Canada Following Link Between India Govt., Murder of Canadian Citizen Nijjar – Trudeau

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"Over the past number of weeks, Canadian security agencies have been actively pursuing credible allegations of a potential link between agents of the government of India and the killing of a Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar ... Canada has declared its deep concerns to the top intelligence and security officials of the Indian government. Last week at the G20 I brought them personally and directly to Prime Minister Modi in no uncertain terms," Trudeau told the House of Commons.

Trudeau added that the involvement by any foreign government in the murder of a Canadian citizen on the country's soil is an unacceptable violation of Canada's sovereignty.

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US House Set to Consider Stopgap Government Funding Bill This Week - Majority Leader

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will consider a stopgap government funding bill later this week in an effort to avoid a government shutdown before the end of the month, House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a schedule released Monday.

House lawmakers will consider the Continuing Appropriations and Border Security Enhancement Act later this week, the schedule said. US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy told reporters that lawmakers will vote on the measure on Thursday.

The legislation would extend US government funding through October 31 and enhance border security by resuming construction of a border wall, Scalise said in a statement.

"By passing a continuing resolution through the next month, Congress can keep the government open while incorporating border-related reforms to address the crisis at our border and protect American citizens," the statement said.

The legislation would also cut government spending by 8% and does not include any funding for Ukraine, Congressman Byron Donalds, who introduced the bill, said in a statement via social media platform X.

However, the eight-percent cut only lasts for 30 days and the border security measures will be ignored by US President Joe Biden, Congressman Matt Gaetz said in response to Donalds. The legislation does not have the votes to pass, Gaetz added.

US Congresswoman Victoria Spartz also released a statement expressing opposition to the bill and criticizing McCarthy.

"It is a shame that our weak Speaker cannot even commit to having a commission to discuss our looming fiscal catastrophe," the statement said.

The US Congress must pass legislation to fund the government – such as a continuing resolution, appropriations bills or an omnibus – before the end of the month, lest they risk a government shutdown.

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US Has No Plans to Recognize Taliban, Urges It to Meet Commitments - Kirby

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has no plans to recognize the Taliban (under UN sanctions over terrorism) and urges it to meet international obligations, National Security Council (NSC) Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Monday.

"We have not recognized the Taliban, there are no plans to do that at this point," Kirby told reporters.

He urged the Taliban to "legitimately meet" the movement's commitments to the international community, if it wants to be seen as legitimate. That is particularly related to women's and girls' rights, he added.

"They have not only done that, they have gone the other way," Kirby said.

The Taliban has slashed women's rights to travel, study and work since it took control of Afghanistan in August 2021 after the withdrawal of international troops and the collapse of the US-backed government. In late 2022, the group banned girls and women from attending secondary schools and higher education institutions. The move faced international backlash, with many countries and the United Nations urging the Afghan authorities to lift the restrictions on women's rights.

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Yellen Says US, China Should Seek Relationship Where Officials Visits Completely Routine

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States and China should seek a relationship where each government's officials visit each other regularly, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Monday.

"What we should seek is a relationship where it's completely routine for Chinese officials to be visiting the United States and vice versa," Yellen said during a discussion at the Clinton Global Initiative Annual Meeting.

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Biden Looking Forward to Hearing From Zelenskyy About Ukraine's Counteroffensive - Kirby

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is looking forward to hearing about the progress of Ukraine's counteroffensive from Volodymyr Zelenskyy during their bilateral meeting later this week, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Monday.

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"President [Biden] is looking forward to hearing from President Zelenskyy about their counter-offensive and about the progress they are making," Kirby said during a press briefing.
Biden will host Zelenskyy on Thursday at the White House. The Ukrainian leader is also expected to meet with both Democratic and Republican lawmakers on Capitol Hill during his visit to Washington.
Ukraine launched its latest counteroffensive in early June. Three months later, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the Ukrainian counteroffensive had failed, with Ukraine suffering over 71,000 casualties. Several Western officials have also admitted that the Ukrainian counteroffensive has not been successful.

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US Officials Have No Meeting Planned With Russians at UNGA - Kirby

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US officials are not planning to hold bilateral meetings with their Russian counterparts on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, National Security Council (NSC) spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.
"No bilateral discussions that I know [of]. I do not have anything to share," Kirby told reporters.

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EU, Partners Launch Working Groups to Broker Israel-Palestine Peace - Borrell

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - The European Union, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt are launching working groups that will focus on brokering peace between Israel and Palestine amid rising violence between the two parties, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell
"We have launched three senior-level working groups that will be completely elaborating bilateral, regional and global approaches," Borrell told reporters. "They will start in one month from now in Brussels."
Borrell underscored that a two-state solution is needed and everyone has to support it in practical terms, but at the moment neither side is ready to engage in negotiations
Relations between Palestine and Israel have been adversarial since the latter's founding in 1948. Palestinians seek diplomatic recognition of their independent state on the territories of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which is partially occupied by Israel, and the Gaza Strip.
The Israeli government refuses to recognize Palestine as an independent political and diplomatic entity and continues to build settlements in the occupied areas despite objections from the United Nations.

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Iran's Release of Americans May Have Positive Effect on Reviving Nuke Deal Talks - Borrell

UNITED NATIONS, September 19 (Sputnik) - European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell said on Monday that Iran's release of American prisoners earlier in the day could possibly have a positive effect on restarting negotiations on reviving the Iran nuclear deal.

Earlier in the day, the United States and Iran exchanged prisoners as part of a prisoner exchange agreement. Five US citizens left Iran on a plane bound to Qatar. The United States, in turn, released the same number of Iranians.

"I don't know, maybe," Borrell said when asked if Tehran's release of America prisoners could have a positive impact on reviving Iran nuclear deal talks.

In 2015, Iran signed a nuclear agreement with the United States, China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and the European Union. The agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) stipulated lifting sanctions imposed on Iran in exchange for restricting the country's nuclear program.

However, President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement in 2018, reimposing comprehensive sanctions on Iran. Tehran reacted by reducing its obligations under the agreement, including those concerning nuclear research, centrifuges and uranium enrichment levels.

In December 2021, talks on the resumption of the JCPOA were resumed, but a year later progress on the agreement became largely frozen.

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Biden-Xi Summit to Come at Appropriate Time, Relations Moving in Better Direction - Kirby

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The meeting between US President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, will happen at the appropriate time, and bilateral relations between the two countries are moving in a better direction, US National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Monday.

"That'll happen at the appropriate time and then the appropriate amount of space. We're just not there yet," Kirby told reporters, adding that the meeting has not been scheduled.

However, Kirby noted that "things are moving in a better direction" regarding US-China relations.

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US Lawmaker Briefed on Missing F-35 Jet Says Marines Still Do Not Know Aircraft's Location

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman Nancy Mace said on Monday that the Marines Corps still does not know the location of the F-35 aircraft that went missing over South Carolina on Sunday afternoon.

The fighter jet was in autopilot mode when the pilot ejected, meaning that it could have remained airborne for some time, according to media reports.

"One of the shortest meetings I've ever had, because guess what, no one at US Marine Corps sent over to brief me and my staff had any showers," Mace said.

The congresswoman added that no one knows if the missing F-35 fighter jet is in the air or under the water.

Based on the last known position of the stealth fighter jet, the US military is focusing its search in the area around Lake Moultrie and Lake Marion, Joint Base Charleston said via the social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter.

The US military is now asking the public to cooperate with military authorities as they continue their search and asked anyone with information that could assist the effort to call the Joint Base Charleston Base Defense Operations Center.

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US Committing $15Mln to Help Governments Use AI to Achieve Development Goals - Blinken

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday that the United States is committing $15 million to enable governments to use artificial intelligence (AI) technology to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

"Today I'm also pleased to announce a new $15 million commitment by the United States to help more governments leverage the power of AI to drive global good, focused specifically on Sustainable Development Goals," Blinken said during remarks at an event on AI progress.

The Sustainable Development Goals, created as part of the UN's 2030 Agenda, include eliminating hunger, providing education and reducing inequalities around the world.

The global community must gather a wide range of entities, including developing countries, to discuss the risks and benefits of AI, Blinken said.

Despite the risks associated with AI, it also provides "almost endless" opportunities, Blinken added.

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Musk Says China May Lead World in Development, Regulation of AI Technology

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - China may end up leading the world in the development of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Monday.

"To your point about which countries will have significant leadership in AI, China is certainly one of them, one of the very top, potentially number one," Musk said during a conversation with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Western leaders have expressed concern about China potentially lacking in AI regulation, Musk said.

However, Musk said that he met with the Chinese leadership to discuss the risks of AI and the officials took notice of the risk of a digital superintelligence taking control of China from the Chinese Communist Party.

Musk and Netanyahu discussed the potential risks and benefits of AI to humankind during their meeting. AI is potentially the biggest threat to civilization, Musk said, adding that there is still a chance to responsibly develop the technology.

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Biden Offers Condolences, Support to Morocco King After Earthquake - White House

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden reached out to King Mohammed VI of Morocco to express condolences for those killed as a result of the September 8 catastrophic earthquake, discuss $1 million in US aid to the country and pledge further assistance, the White House said on Monday.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. called King Mohammed VI of Morocco today to offer his condolences for the loss of life in the devastating earthquake on September 8 and reaffirm the deep partnership between Morocco and the United States," the White House said in a press release on Monday.

At least 2,900 people have died and more than 5,500 have been injured in a 6.8 magnitude earthquake that struck Morocco on September 8, according to reports.

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White House Says Opposes Bill That Cuts US Approval for LNG Exports to Non-FTA Nations

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The White House said on Monday that it opposes legislation in Congress that would eliminate the need for federal approval to export US-produced liquefied natural gas (LNG) to countries that do not have a free trade agreement with the United States.

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The US House Rules Committee will decide later on Monday whether to advance the measure to the House floor for a full vote.

"The [Biden] administration strongly opposes passage of H.R. 1130, legislation to change the procedures for approval of the import and export of natural gas under the Natural Gas Act," the White House said in a press release. "H.R. 1130 would eliminate the requirement for Department of Energy (DOE) authorization of export of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to countries with which the United States does not have a free trade agreement (non-FTA countries)."

The legislation would undermine the ability of the United States to ensure that the export of LNG is consistent with the country's economic and energy security, foreign policy and environmental interests, the release said.

The Energy Department currently reviews the impact potential LNG exports may have on the US economy, domestic natural gas and electricity price, US natural gas supply security, and the environment, the release added.

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UN Says No Additional Security Measures for UNSC Meeting With Zelenskyy

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is taking no additional security measures in the run-up to a UN Security Council meeting that will feature Volodymyr Zelenskyy, spokesman Stephane Dujarric told Sputnik.

Zelenskyy is expected to participate in a UNSC meeting on September 20, a session that will also be attended by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

"We don't expect anything but a robust diplomatic discussion. We have no expectation that anything might happen," Dujarric said, when asked whether the UN expects any provocations related to the meeting.

He also replied in the negative when asked if the meeting will require any special security measures be taken.

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US Believes Diplomacy Best Way to Get Sustainable Result on Iran Nuclear Program - Blinken

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to believe that diplomacy remains the best way to address the Iran nuclear program and reach a sustainable result, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday.

"We continue to believe that diplomacy is the best way to get a sustainable, effective result, one that we had previously with the Iran nuclear agreement," Blinken said.

Blinken reiterated that the United States is not engaged in the talks on the matter, but "will see

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is there are opportunities."

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US to Work at UNGA to Make It Difficult for Countries to Engage in Detentions - Blinken

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) – The United States will work in the days ahead with allies and partners to make it more difficult for countries to engage in "wrongful" detentions of foreign citizens, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday.

"We're going to be working every single day to take steps to make this practice more difficult and more and more of a burden on those countries that are engaging [in wrongful detentions] and you'll see in the days ahead here in New York, at the United Nations, our efforts to work with other countries to do just that," Blinken said in his remarks following the release of five Americans by Iran as part of a prisoner swap deal.

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Premature to Say What Auto Workers Strike Will Do to Robust US Economy - Yellen

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The economic impact of an automobile workers strike on America is too early to predict, with the economy itself performing robustly without any signs of an impending downturn, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Monday.

“It’s premature to forecast what it means for the economy,” Yellen said in an interview on the CNBC network. “I don’t see any signs that the economy is at the risk of a downturn,” she said, citing a robust labor market with inflation moving down. Any outcome will depend on “how long the strike lasts”, she said, referring to the action by the United Auto Workers, or UAW, union.

Yellen spoke as the UAW strike, ignited by auto workers’ demand for better wages and conditions, entered its fourth day. She said the Biden administration was expecting that the union and automakers will be negotiating “24/7” to get a solution. “The two sides need to narrow their disagreements” and work for a “win-win” deal, she added.

UAW President Shawn Fain, meanwhile, told the MSNBC network that he did not see a role for the administration in bringing an end to the strike, after President Joe Biden announced that he was sending Acting Labor Secretary Julie Su and presidential advisor Gene Sperling to Detroit, the auto capital of the United States, to mediate.

"This is our battle," Fain said. "Our negotiating teams are working hard. Our members are out there manning the picket lines. Our allies are out there with us. This battle is not about the president. It's not about the former president. This battle is about the workers standing up for economic and social justice and getting their fair share."

US Gross Domestic Product, or GDP, likely grew 2.1% year-on-year in the second quarter of 2023 instead of a previously estimated 2.4%, the Commerce Department said in its second

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quarterly reading of the economy last month.
The US economy grew 2.1% for all of 2022, slowing from a 5.9% expansion in the previous year, as exports and consumer spending declined.

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US Citizens Freed by Iran in Prisoner Swap Deal Arrive in Qatar - TV Broadcasts

WASHINGTON/DOHA, September 18 (Sputnik) - Five US citizens released from detention in Iran as part of a prisoner swap between Washington and Tehran arrived in Qatar on Monday, according to television broadcasts from the airport.
A source in the airport also confirmed to Sputnik that the plane with the former prisoners had landed in Doha.
Earlier on Monday, the White House said that Oman and Qatar contributed to the US-Iran prisoner swap, in which five US citizens were released in exchange for the same number of Iranians.
The released US citizens include Siamak Namazi, Emad Shargi, Morad Tahbaz and two individuals who wish to remain unnamed, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on the prisoner swap.
The United States has now secured the release of more than 30 wrongfully detained US citizens around the world under the Biden administration, the statement added.

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US Sanctioning Former Iranian President Ahmadinejad, Iranian Intelligence Ministry - Biden

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced on Monday that his administration is imposing sanctions on former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence for their alleged role in wrongful detentions.
"Today, we are sanctioning former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence under the Levinson Act for their involvement in wrongful detentions. And, we will continue to impose costs on Iran for their provocative actions in the region," Biden said in a statement, following a prisoner swap deal with Tehran that freed five Americans.

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Hunter Biden Sues IRS for 'Unlawful' Release of Tax Information - Court Filing

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WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, sued the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) on Monday for allegedly illegally releasing his tax information.

"Plaintiff Robert Hunter Biden ('Mr. Biden' or 'Plaintiff'), by and through his undersigned counsel, brings this action against the United States Internal Revenue Service (the 'IRS' or 'Defendant'), to seek redress for the (1) unlawful disclosure of Mr. Biden's confidential tax return information ... and (2) willful and intentional failure to establish appropriate administrative, technical, and/or physical safeguards over the IRS's records system to insure the security and confidentiality of Mr. Biden's confidential tax return information," the complaint filed with with the US District Court for the District of Columbia said.

President's son requested the court award him $1,000 in damages for "each and every" unauthorized disclosure of his tax return information. He also asked the court to declare that the IRS violated the law by willfully, knowingly, and unlawfully disclosing his tax return information, according to the filing.

The 27-page complaint also requests the court, among other things, to order that the IRS return all of Biden's documents in its possession.

In addition, the plaintiff's team allege that IRS agents "have targeted and sought to embarrass" Hunter Biden.

"While Mr. Biden has been the victim of various leaks regarding the IRS investigation previously, most recently, two IRS agents—Mr. Gary Shapley and Mr. Joseph Ziegler—and their attorneys raised the stakes to unprecedented levels with their numerous public appearances and statements that blatantly violated Section 6103 of the Internal Revenue Code by engaging in a campaign to publicly smear Mr. Biden," the filing said.

Both IRS agents and their counsel have made over 20 nationally televised and non-congressionally sanctioned interviews in an "assault" on Biden's rights, the complaint alleged.

Hunter Biden demands a trial by jury of all claims asserted in the complaint.

Hunter Biden is expected to face federal tax charges for alleged failure to pay taxes for 2017 and 2018. Last week, he was also indicted by a US federal court on three federal firearm-related charges for making false statements about using illegal drugs at the time he purchased a firearm.

All the charges were set to be resolved by a plea deal and pre-trial diversion agreement, however, the arrangement collapsed.

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US Doesn't Believe Sanctions Will Mess Up Prisoner Deal With Iran - Kirby

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States does not expect its recent sanctions on Iran to derail the prisoner exchange deal that is currently underway, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Monday.

"We don't believe that will be the case, that these sanctions are somehow going to mess up this particular deal. All of this was carefully choreographed, and I think it [the sanctions] sends a

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strong signal to Tehran that we take this very seriously and we will continue to take it very seriously and hold Iran accountable," Kirby told CNN in an interview.

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Americans Swapped in Iran Deal to Land in Qatar in About an Hour or So - White House

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - Five US prisoners who were freed as part of a prisoner exchange with Iran are now in the air and on their way to Qatar, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said in an interview with CNN on Monday.
"This is a significant development today. They are in the air, they are on their way to Qatar. We expect them to land in about an hour or so, and then they'll be making their way back to the United States after that," Kirby said.

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