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9/25/23 Monday

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'Prosecutors Get It Wrong': Menendez Proves Defiant in First Public Remarks Since Indictment

Menendez was previously charged with corruption in 2017, but the case ended in a mistrial.
US Rep. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) has underscored he will not step down from his congressional post after being indicted on federal bribery charges the week prior for a second time in 10 years. Although Menendez previously said he had no plans to resign, he has remained defiant as resignation calls from members of his party grew over the weekend. In fact, the New Jersey lawmaker on Monday stood in front of cameras for the first time since his indictment and declared his innocence.
“I recognize this will be the biggest fight yet,” Menendez said in his first in-person comments since the indictment. "But as I have stated throughout this whole process, I firmly believe that when all the facts are presented, not only will I be exonerated, but I still will be New Jersey's senior senator.”
Bob and his wife Nadine are charged with conspiracy to commit bribery, conspiracy to commit honest services fraud and conspiracy to commit extortion under the color of official right. A search of his home by authorities found stacks of cash and gold bars hidden in his home. Federal prosecutors allege they are the ill-gotten gains from using his influence to help three New Jersey businessmen and the government of Egypt.
Menendez pointed to times he says he pressured US officials to bring up the issue of human rights abuses, tied aid to Egypt with human rights, pressured Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to take the issue seriously, and times he spoke publicly about issues with Egypt’s presidential elections.
“To those who have rushed to judgment,” Menendez said during his news conference. “You have done so based on a limited set of facts framed by the prosecution to be as salacious as possible.
“Remember, prosecutors get it wrong sometimes. Sadly, I know that.”
The businessmen have also been charged in the case. All co-defendants in the case are due in court on Wednesday.
Until recently, Menendez was the chair of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He was forced to step down from that position temporarily due to Democratic caucus rules. Prosecutors allege he used his position to help the Egyptian government lobby for aid increases after the annual aid to Egypt was slightly decreased in 2017. His wife is accused of acting as a go-between for Menendez and an Egyptian-American businessman with ties to the Egyptian military.
In a text exchange between that businessman and an Egyptian military general, Menendez was described as “our man,” according to the indictment. It also alleges that following a 2017 trip to Egypt, Menendez searched the internet for “how much is 1 kilo of gold worth.”
A kilo of gold was worth $40,988.39 to $47,662.23 in 2017.

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In regards to the New Jersey businessmen, Menendez is accused of using his position to influence two criminal investigations into the businesses. One of the businessmen was a longtime fund-raiser for Menendez's political campaigns.
Menendez did not directly acknowledge the shocking pictures of the treasure trove investigators found at his house but implied the cash was due to generational trauma stemming from his family's Cuban history.
"For 30 years I have withdrawn thousands of dollars in cash from my personal savings account, which I have kept for emergencies and because of the history of my family facing confiscation in Cuba," the senator claimed, adding the funds were "lawfully derived."
Menendez said the other accusations in the indictment will be addressed at trial.
While New Jersey's junior Sen. Cory Booker has not yet weighed in, other Democratic allies are increasingly demanding he step down, including New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, and New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who called the indictment "quite unfortunate" while saying it is in the "best interest" of the senator to resign.
"It shouldn't matter whether it's a Republican or a Democrat," she said in an interview with US television. "The details in this indictment are extremely serious," she added.
Menendez is up for reelection in 2024. Democratic New Jersey Rep. Andy Kim said on Sunday he plans to launch a primary challenge against the embattled senator.

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Looming Government Shutdown Setting US Up for Credit Downgrade, Food Benefits Loss

The US government's credit rating was downgraded by another credit rating agency earlier this year while the debate over the debt ceiling remained ongoing. While the US managed not to default on its debts as feared, the close call reduced the perception that the US always pays its bills.
The looming government shutdown may affect the US economy and potentially the nation's credit ratings, according to credit rating agency Moody's Monday forecast.
However, it added that if the shutdown ends quickly, its effects would likely be short-lived.
"A shutdown would be credit negative for the US sovereign," Moody's said, which currently lists a "Triple-A" rating for the US government. "In particular, it would demonstrate the significant constraints that intensifying political polarization put on fiscal policymaking at a time of declining fiscal strength, driven by widening fiscal deficits and deteriorating debt affordability."
Lower government spending would be the largest factor affecting the economy in the short-term, Moody's said, but added that "a prolonged shutdown would likely be disruptive to both the US economy and financial markets."
That could hurt the US government's credit rating with the agency, which was already downgraded by the Fitch credit rating agency during the debt ceiling debate that occurred earlier this year.

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A small but influential group of Republicans in both the US House and Senate have been promising to block any spending bill unless their demands are met. Among the most visible demands is that any additional funding to Ukraine be removed from the bills.

Multiple Republicans in the House have said they will not support any bills that provide further funding to Kiev, among the most vocal are Reps. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) and Marjorie Taylor-Greene (R-GA).

Meanwhile, in the Democrat-controlled Senate, several Republican lawmakers, including Sens. Josh Hawley (R-MO) and Rand Paul (R-KY) have been vocal about their opposition to continued funding for Ukraine and have promised to block any fast-tracking of bills that include additional aid.

“[T]hey are trying to hold the federal government hostage by inserting the $24 billion aid request in a continuing resolution: to force our hand. Either we fund an endless war in Ukraine or the uniparty will shut down the federal government and make the American people suffer,” Paul said in a statement.

Hawley, though he has consistently said he will not vote for more funding of Ukraine, has expressed opposition to a government shutdown.

“I'm just not a shutdown guy,” Hawley told US media. “I don't think we ought to be using that as leverage. ... I'm probably in a different place on this than a lot of my colleagues.”

Sens. J.D. Vance (R-VA) and Roger Marshall (R-KS) have also expressed a willingness to shutdown the government and were two of 29 lawmakers, including Paul, who signed a letter demanding more transparency about how much is being spent in Ukraine and the goals of the Biden administration.

"[The Biden administration's request implies] an open-ended commitment to supporting the war in Ukraine of an indeterminate nature, based on a strategy that is unclear, to achieve a goal yet to be articulated to the public or the Congress," the letter read. It added that until their concerns are met the lawmakers will "oppose" additional expenditures to support the Kiev regime.

Other demands from Republicans include increased border controls and other spending cuts not related to Kiev, including the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which is also at risk from the potential shutdown.

More than 7 million Americans depend on WIC benefits, according to US Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. Another food program Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), sometimes called “food-stamps,” would continue as normal in October but could be affected if the shutdown lasts longer.

In contrast, the US Department of Defense announced last week that its activities related to Operation Atlantic Resolve, the name given to the Pentagon’s actions in propping up the Kiev regime, will continue with its already appropriated funding even if the shutdown occurs.

The Pentagon has that ability because it can classify expenditures as vital for national defense, whereas the WIC program is not considered “mandatory spending” by the US government.

US military troops would also be at risk of losing their paychecks, while still being required to serve, during the looming shutdown. Their pay is also not considered "mandatory spending."

The WIC program cost roughly $6 billion in fiscal year 2023. More than $113 billion has been given in aid to Ukraine by the United States since the start of the special military operation, according to the US State Department Office of Inspector General.

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The Biden administration is asking for an additional $24 billion, with lawmakers saying they were told to expect additional aid requests in the first quarter of 2024.
Further complicating the matter for House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), who is heading the passage of the spending bills in the House, is former US President and current odds-on-favorite to win the 2024 GOP ticket Donald Trump, who has come out against compromising on the spending bills.
“The Republicans lost big on Debt Ceiling [debate earlier this year], got NOTHING, and now are worried that they will be BLAMED for the Budget Shutdown. Wrong!!! Whoever is President will be blamed,” Trump wrote in a post on Truth Social, adding: “UNLESS YOU GET EVERYTHING, SHUT IT DOWN! Close the Border, stop the Weaponization of ‘Justice,’ and End Election Interference.”
Trump also called Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell “the weakest, dumbest, and most conflicted 'Leader' in US Senate history,” in the post.
While Trump did not mention Ukraine specifically in his post, he has previously pledged to end the conflict “within 24 hours” if he becomes president again.
McCarthy could theoretically pass the spending bills if he gets enough Democrat support to override the Republican holdouts without ostracizing more moderate Republicans in the process.
However, several Republican lawmakers have promised to force a vote to vacate the House speakership McCarthy tries to join with Democrats to pass a continuing resolution, which would keep the government spending levels at its fiscal 2023 levels until a new budget is passed.

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ChatGPT Gets New Feature Enabling It to ‘Speak’, ‘Listen’ & ‘See’

ChatGPT, which stands for Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer, was launched in November 2022. It quickly became the most popular AI-powered chatbot and has over 100 million users.
ChatGPT, the popular AI chatbot by OpenAI, will launch several new features for paying customers in the coming weeks, allowing users to speak to the app and have the chatbot respond in kind, as well as upload images that can be analyzed by the AI.
The voice features will only be available on the mobile app, while the image analyzing feature will be available on all platforms. Currently, users input text to the chatbot and receive a text response. The new features will allow for a more natural conversation with the bot and the image processing feature will greatly expand its capabilities.
Users could, for example, take a picture of their car engine and have ChatGPT identify the different parts for them, or provide a tutorial on how to check the oil in that particular model.
The AI industry has been in a heated arms race over the past few years, with billions pouring into the industry on a regular basis. Earlier this year, Microsoft invested $10 billion into OpenAI, which was later valued between $27 billion and $29 billion during a $300 million share sale.

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Meanwhile, Google has been adding new features to its Bard AI chatbot regularly, Microsoft added visual search to Bing and integrated ChatGPT into Skype. Hanging over it all is the specter of open-source AI software, which is rapidly approaching parity with the heavy hitters in the space. Earlier this year, an internal memo from a Google engineer said open-source software was their biggest threat in the AI market.

Open-source software would be more difficult for governments to regulate since projects are not limited to specific jurisdictions and can be contributed to by anyone with access to the internet. On the other hand, they also enable more transparency, with the source code freely available to the public.

There are a multitude of concerns that governments and members of the public have with AI. Cyber security experts fear voice cloning software and deepfake technologies could be used to circumvent biometric security measures. There are also concerns those same technologies could be used to spread misinformation.

Privacy experts have fears about AI-powered facial recognition software and how it can be used to gather information online. Others complain AI programs like chatbots and image-generation software were built on the intellectual property of millions of people.

But perhaps the most universal concern is economic. A recent reportfrom Goldman Sachs said AI could potentially replace the work hours equivalent to 300 million full-time jobs, and the recent Writers Guild of America and the ongoing Screen Actors Guild strikes both listed AI-generated content as a concern.

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Trudeau Convinced Rota 'Reflecting' on How to Ensure House of Commons Dignity

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) – Canada's Speaker of the House of Commons (HoC) Anthony Rota is certainly reflecting on ways to preserve the Parliaments' dignity, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday.

On Friday, Hunka, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Nazi veteran who fought in the ranks of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the Nazi SS during the Second World War, was given a standing ovation by the entire Canadian legislature.

Hunka's recognition happened as the Speaker of the House of Commons, Anthony Rota, was giving introductory remarks prior to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the Canadian parliament.

On Sunday, Rota apologized for his decision to invite Hunka. Trudeau's office said, in turn, that neither the Canadian prime minister nor Zelenskyy's delegation were notified in advance of the invitation of Hunka.

"As I said yesterday, this was deeply embarrassing for the House and for Canada. It's a good thing that Speaker Rota apologized personally and I'm sure he's reflecting now on how to ensure the dignity of the House [of Commons] going forward," Trudeau said from Parliament Hill.

Trudeau's remarks addressed a question on whether he saw a way for Rota to remain the

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Speaker of the HoC despite the Ukrainian Nazi veteran scandal.

The Prime Minister said he was also aware the House Leaders of the opposition parties would be meeting later this morning at the request of the Bloc Quebecois (BQ) to discuss the matter.

On Monday, The BQ House Speaker Alain Therrien said his party had sent invitations to all opposition parliamentary leader and Rota to discuss the matter of his resignation.

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Hunter Biden Sues Giuliani, His Attorney, Over Attempt to Hack His Devices – Court Filing

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's son Hunter Biden, sued on Tuesday Rudy Giuliani and his attorney Robert Costello, accusing them of hacking his electronic devices.

"For the past many months and even years, Defendants have dedicated an extraordinary amount of time and energy toward looking for, hacking into, tampering with, manipulating, copying, disseminating, and generally obsessing over data that they were given that was taken or stolen from Plaintiff's devices or storage platforms, including what Defendants claim to have obtained from Plaintiff's alleged "laptop" computer," Biden's legal counsels said in a document filed to the UD District Court for the Central District of California.

They accused Giuliani and Costello of manipulating, altering, and damaging the data they obtained. Illegal hacking and tampering have involved further alterations and damage to the data, they added.

The Biden team stressed that the defendants' actions were unlawful under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act and several other laws.

"Plaintiff has demanded Defendants Giuliani and Costello cease their unlawful activities with respect to Plaintiff's data and return any data in their possession belonging to Plaintiff, but they have refused to do so. Defendants' statements suggest that their unlawful hacking activities are ongoing today and that, unless stopped, will continue into the future, thereby necessitating this action," the document said.

Hunter Biden is continuing to discover facts related to defendants' hacking activities and the damages being caused by them, according to the document.

"Plaintiff hereby respectfully demands a jury trial in this action for all causes of action for which a jury trial is available," it added.

In August, a US court ordered Giuliani to pay more than $130,000 in a defamation lawsuit brought by two Georgia election workers. In September, Giuliani pleaded not guilty.

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US Imposes Export Restrictions on 3 Entities Allegedly Involved in Uyghur Forced Labor

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WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing export restrictions on three entities allegedly involved in Uyghur forced labor, the Department of Homeland Security said.

"This update adds three entities to the section 2(d)(2)(B)(ii) list of the UFLPA [Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act], which identifies entities working with the government of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to recruit, transport, transfer, harbor or receive forced labor or Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, or members of other persecuted groups out of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region," DHS said in a notice filed on Tuesday.

The designated entities are Xinjiang Tianmian Foundation Textile Co., Ltd., Xinjiang Tianshan Wool Textile Co. Ltd., and Xinjiang Zhongtai Group Co. Ltd.

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Nord Stream Attack Was Driven by Fear of Losing Europe, Rather Than Ukraine – Hersh

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's order to blow up the Nord Stream pipelines had little to do with the Ukraine conflict and was rather motivated by the fear of losing control over Europe, journalist Seymour Hersh said on the first anniversary of the pipeline attacks.

According to Hersh, the White House feared that Germany would waver and allow cheap Russian gas to flow to Europe, allowing Berlin and eventually all of NATO to fall under Moscow's influence.

In late 2021, a CIA group was urged to come up with a proposal for action that could "deter" Russia from launching a military operation in Ukraine, Hersh wrote.

As soon as February 2022 – after Biden publicly threatened to "bring an end" to the pipelines if Russia entered Ukraine – the CIA planning group was told by the White House that there would be no immediate attack on Nord Stream, but the group should arrange to plant bombs and be ready to trigger them "on demand."

"It was then that we understood that the attack on the pipelines was not a deterrent because as the war went on we never got the command," Hersh quoted a US official as saying.

"We realized that the destruction of the two Russian pipelines was not related to the Ukrainian war but was part of a neocon political agenda to keep Scholz and Germany, with winter coming up and the pipelines shut down, from getting cold feet and opening up [the shuttered Nord Stream 2.] The White House fear was that Putin would get Germany under his thumb and then he was going to get Poland," the official said.

On September 26 last year, the Nord Stream pipelines, built to deliver gas under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany, were ripped apart by deep sea explosions

At that time, the Nord Stream 1 pipeline had not transported any gas since August, when Russia shut it down, citing maintenance issues. Nord Stream 2 had never been put into operation, as Germany halted the certification process in late 2021.

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Biden's Campaign Taking Measures to Prevent Him From Falling in Public - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - As the US presidential election campaigns pick up steam, President Joe Biden's team is redoubling efforts to prevent him from falling again in public and dampen voices of those who say he is unfit for office, Axios reported on Tuesday.

Democrats are also concerned that Biden could have a "bad fall" shortly before the November 2024 election, which would be a nightmare scenario, the report said.

Since Biden stumbled over a sandbag at the Air Force Academy in June, he has been wearing tennis shoes more often to avoid tripping, and is using the shorter staircase on Air Force One, the report said.

Biden has also been working with a physical therapist since November 2021 and doing exercises to improve his balance, the report added.

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IMF Says Sub-Saharan Countries Must Reduce Fiscal Deficit to Avoid Debt Crisis

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - Most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have to reduce their fiscal deficit in the coming years to avoid a debt crisis, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday.

"Most countries in the region will need to reduce their fiscal deficits in the coming years. For the average country, the amount of adjustment is about 2 to 3 percent of GDP," the IMF said in a new report.

The adjustment looks feasible because countries in sub-Saharan Africa improved their primary balance by 1% of GDP a year over two to three years, the fund said.

However, the nations face unequal challenges. Some countries have fiscal space to maintain and even increase vital investments in human and physical capital, while others may need to reprofile or restructure their debt, the IMF warned.

The IMF pointed out that the average debt ratio in the region has almost doubled in the last decade and reached approximately 60% of GDP by the end of 2022.

"Repaying this debt has also become much costlier," the report said.

The IMF urged governments to strengthen budget institutions to improve the implementation of their fiscal plans. It also said that securing public support by linking the policy measures to longer-term benefits is important for maintaining a sustainable fiscal strategy.

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US Senate Candidate Says Doubts Congress Will Probe Nord Stream Explosions Amid Elections

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - Congress is not likely to take an initiative to investigate who sabotaged the Russian Nord Stream pipelines last September considering US lawmakers are focused on the 2024 elections, independent candidate for the US Senate Diane Sare told Sputnik.

"No, I think it's in the way," Sare said when asked if she expects Congress to probe the Nord Stream sabotage. "It's unfortunate that we have elections coming up because the Congress is posturing for elections."

A congressional investigation would allow Congress to discover if President Joe Biden and other members of his administration had a role in the event, Sare said.

Sare pointed out Biden's remarks from February 7, 2022, alongside the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, when the US president said the United States would "bring an end " to the Nord Stream project if Russia carried out its special military operation in Ukraine.

"I promise you we'll be able to do it," Biden responded when asked how the United States would be able to end the project if it is under Germany's control.

Sare believes pressure from the American public would be the best way to push Congress to launch a congressional investigation into the Nord Stream incident.

"I think the American people still have to demand it," Sare said. "If people got the idea that this was an illegal clandestine operation by the State Department, the military, etc., then maybe we could get this to happen."

Many US lawmakers, Sare said, are beginning to not be so enthusiastic about sending billions of dollars worth of more weapons to Ukraine, probably as a result of pressure from their constituents.

Major US new outlets like The New York Times and CNN could also help bring about a congressional investigation if they ever decide to give the matter more coverage, Sare said.

The Nord Stream pipelines, built to deliver gas under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany, were hit by explosions in September 2022. The pipeline's operator, Nord Stream AG, said that the damage was unprecedented and it was impossible to estimate the time repairs might take.

Denmark, Germany and Norway have left Russia out of their investigations into the attack, prompting Moscow to launch its own investigation with charges of international terrorism.

No official results of the investigations have yet been announced, but Pulitzer Prize-winning US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh published a report in February 2023 alleging that the explosions had been organized by the United States with the support of Norway. Washington has denied any involvement in the incident.

In mid-July, media reported that Dutch military intelligence had informed the CIA of Ukraine's plans to sabotage the Nord Stream pipelines months before it happened.

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US Space Force Believes Crisis Line With China Valuable, But Not Underway - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - The US Space Force believes establishing a hotline with China to prevent a crisis in space would be valuable, but the United States and Beijing have not had discussions on this matter yet, a Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik.

"I can confirm [Chief of Space Operations] Gen. [Chance] Saltzman said a line would be valuable, but that we haven't gotten to the point where we're having that discussion with the PRC [People's Republic of China]," the spokesperson said on Monday.

Last month, China's Ministry of Defense said that military-to-military communication between the United States and China has not stopped, but pointed out that there are many difficulties and obstacles in the relationship.

In June, China rejected a US request for a meeting between US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Chinese counterpart Li Shangfu on the margins of the Singapore defense forum, mostly due to US sanctions placed on Li in 2018 for allegedly purchasing Russian arms.

However, talks between US and Chinese officials has improved in recent months with a high-level visit to China by Biden administration officials.

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Ford Says 'Pausing' Construction of Billion-Dollar Electric Vehicle Project in Michigan

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - Ford is pausing construction of a $3.5 billion plant in Michigan to review the company's ability to competitively operate the facility, a company spokesperson told Sputnik.

"Yes, that’s accurate," the Ford spokesperson said about plans to halt construction of the new plant. "We’re pausing work and limiting spending on construction on the Marshall project until we’re confident about our ability to competitively operate the plant."

The company's decision comes amid a growing strike by unionized auto workers at Ford, General Motors, and Stellantis. Ford was also criticized by congressional Republicans over its plans to use Chinese technology to manufacture its electric batteries at the new plant.

In August, President Joe Biden signed an executive order restricting US investment in China due to national security concerns.

According to the spokesperson, there are a number of considerations on this matter, but no final decision has been made about the future of the project.

Ford planned to open the new electric battery plant by 2026, employing some 2,500 workers. The project could make Ford the first automaker to produce next-gen lithium, iron, phosphate batteries in the United States.

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Chevron Declines to Comment on Reports Company Increasing Production of Venezuelan Oil

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - A Chevron spokesperson declined to comment on reports that the company intends to boost its production of Venezuelan oil by the end of next year.

Earlier, media reported that Chevron plans to provide an additional 65,000 barrels of Venezuelan oil per day by the end of 2024 to bring total output to 200,000 barrels per day through its joint venture assets with Venezuela's PDVSA.

"Chevron does not comment on rumors or commercial matters," Chevron said in a statement to Sputnik on Monday. "We continue to conduct our business in compliance with all laws and regulations where we operate, as well as the sanctions framework provided by the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC)."

Chevron restarted its shipping activities at its affiliated Joint Venture assets in Venezuela in January 2023, the spokesperson noted.

Last November, the US Treasury Department provided a new license that allows Chevron to extract oil in Venezuela for six months through its joint venture partners PDVSA. However, this license did not expand operations or allow new US investment in Venezuela's oil sector.

The United States granted the new license after the Venezuelan government and the opposition resumed talks in Mexico City and came to an agreement on addressing the humanitarian crisis in the country, including an agreement on the continuation of talks focused on elections to be held in 2024.

US and Venezuelan officials have held regular talks recently about a partial lifting of sanctions should Caracas hold free and fair elections in October's primary vote that will determine who will run against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

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White House in Contact With Cuban Embassy After Attack to Ensure Timely Probe - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - The White House is in contact with Cuban embassy officials and law enforcement to ensure an appropriate investigation is conducted after two Molotov cocktails were thrown at the diplomatic facility on Sunday, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said in a press release.

"We are in contact with Cuban embassy officials and law enforcement authorities to ensure an appropriate and timely investigation as well as to offer our support for future protective efforts," Sullivan said in the release on Monday.

The United States, Sullivan continued, strongly condemns Sunday’s attack on the Cuban embassy and considers attacks against diplomatic facilities as unacceptable.

On Sunday, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla said via X, formerly known as Twitter, that an individual threw two Molotov cocktails at the embassy, but no embassy staff were harmed during the attack.

According to Rodriguez, Cuba has repeatedly warned US authorities about violent anti-Cuban

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groups in Washington.

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US, Cook Islands Sign Agreement Establishing Diplomatic Relations

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown jointly declared the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and the island nation at a signing ceremony at the State Department.

"Today, the US becomes the Cook Islands 61st diplomatic partner in this will undoubtedly pave the way for others to follow suit," Brown said on Monday.

According to a joint statement released after the ceremony, this diplomatic accord signifies a commitment to bolster cooperation on various shared priorities, including addressing climate challenges, promoting ocean stewardship, managing marine resources, advancing renewable energy, fostering education, supporting sustainable development, upholding democracy, human rights, and ensuring good governance.

Additionally, the partnership will extend to collaboration within Pacific regional institutions, such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the Pacific Community, with a particular emphasis on strengthening connections within the Pacific region, the statement said.

Furthermore, earlier today, the United States also signed an agreement establishing diplomatic relations with Niue, emphasizing its recognition of Niue as an independent and sovereign nation.

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Canadians Must Question Who Their Leaders Glorify, Especially in Ukraine - Russian Embassy

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - Canadians should question who their government leaders glorify, especially when it comes to which groups they support in Ukraine, the Russian Embassy in Canada said in a statement.

The Russian Embassy made the comment in light of a scandal that unfolded on Friday when Yaroslav Hunka, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Nazi veteran who fought in the ranks of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the Nazi SS during the Second World War, was twice given a standing ovation by the entire Canadian legislature. Hunka's recognition happened as the Speaker of the House of Commons, Anthony Rota, was giving introductory remarks prior to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the Canadian parliament.

"Citizens of this country must once again think about who their leaders glorify and what kind of junta they support in Ukraine," the Embassy said on Monday. "Russia condemns any form of glorification of Nazism. And Russia will always remember heroism of Canadian sons and daughters who fought side by side with us to free the world from Nazi plague."

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The Embassy explained that the Canadian parliament's standing ovation for the Ukrainian Nazi veteran is "shameful" and will forever be remembered in the history of Canadian democracy.

"It is surprising how Canada, a member of the anti-Hitler coalition, can openly and without any hesitation glorify Nazi butchers," the Embassy said. "This is a slap in the face of the true Canadian heroes who fought for liberation of Europe from the Nazis together with their Russian and Soviet brother-in-arms."

It is no longer surprising that Canada voted against the resolution on combating the glorification of Nazism, adopted by the UN General Assembly, in December 2022, the statement said.

Earlier on Monday, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, in light of the scandal, said that Canadians should be wary of "Russian propaganda." However, Trudeau also described the situation as "extremely upsetting" and "deeply embarrassing."

On Sunday, Rota apologized for his decision to invite Hunka. Trudeau's office said, in turn, that neither the Canadian prime minister nor Zelenskyy's delegation were notified in advance of the invitation of Hunka.

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Blue Origin CEO Bob Smith Says Decided to Step Down Effective December 4 - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - Aerospace manufacturer Blue Origin CEO Bob Smith said in a statement that he has decided to step down from his position in the beginning of December.

"With pride and satisfaction in all that we've accomplished, I'm announcing that effective December 4, I will be stepping aside as Chief Executive Officer of Blue Origin. I will remain with Blue [Origin] until January 2 to ensure a smooth transition with the new CEO," Smith said in a message to Blue Origin employees as quoted by CNBC on Monday.

Blue Origin designs and manufactures rockets, spacecraft and heavy-lift launch vehicles as well as provides spaceflight services.

Smith said in the six years with Blue Origin, he oversaw a significant expansion of the team, facilities and sales orders and expressed pride in the company's historic contributions to the spaceflight industry.

Smith also revealed that he had been engaged in discussions with company founder Jeff Bezos regarding a succession plan for the next several months prior to his departure.

"I'm committed to ensuring this transition is flawless, and everyone should know that Ill always be on Team Blue," Smith said.

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UPDATE- US Adds 28 Entities Including From China, Russia to Economic Blacklist - Commerce Dept.

(Updates with additional details in paras 4-5)
WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - The United States imposed export restrictions on 28 entities including 11 in China and five in Russia, the Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) said in a notice in the Federal Register scheduled to be published on Wednesday.
BIS "amends the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) by adding twenty-eight entities to the Entity List under the destinations of the People's Republic of China (China), Finland, Germany, Oman, Pakistan, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates. These entities have been determined by the US Government to be acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States," the notice stated on Monday.
The targeted entities in Russia were Device Consulting, Grant Instrument, SMT-iLogic, Streloy, and VSMPO-AVISMA Corporation PJSC.
The new export restrictions have also been introduced against 11 companies from China, five companies from Pakistan, three companies from Finland, two companies from Oman, and one company each from Germany and the United Arab Emirates, according to the notice.
The US Commerce Department claims that nine companies on the list from China, Finland, Germany, and Russia have conspired to violate US export controls, including to supply components that can be used to make unmanned aerial vehicles for Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff (GRU), the notice said.

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White House Says No Announcements on Providing Long-Range ATACMS Missiles to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said in an interview that the White House has no announcements to make at this time regarding the provision of long-range Army Tactical Missiles Systems (ATACMS) for Ukraine.
"I don't have announcements on these ATACMS," Kirby told CNN on Monday.
Last week, media reported that US President Joe Biden told his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy that the United States will send a small number of ATACMS to Ukraine.
A National Security Council spokesperson declined to confirm the reports to Sputnik.

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US Delivered 1st Batch of Abrams Tanks to Ukraine, Sending More in Coming Weeks - Kirby

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WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has delivered the first batch of its Abrams main battle tanks to Ukraine, with more scheduled to arrive in the coming weeks, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said during an interview.

"This is the first tranche of the Abrams tanks," Kirby told CNN on Monday. "There will be more flowing in here in the coming weeks."

Earlier on Monday, US media reported that the first of 31 batches of Abrams tanks was delivered to Ukraine on September 23.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINIAN ATTACKS ON RUSSIA

* Russia's air defense systems destroyed seven Ukrainian fixed-wing drones over the Belgorod region on Monday, the Defense Ministry said.
* Another Ukrainian drone was destroyed over the Belgorod region, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* One missile was shot down near the Belbek airfield in Sevastopol, city governor Mikhail Razvozhayev said.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH

* The United States supports an international mission to ensure that human rights are respected in the Nagorno-Karabakh region amid recent tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.
* The Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh have escorted three columns of people from Stepanakert to Armenia through the Lachin corridor, the Defense Ministry said.
* Azerbaijan fully restored its sovereignty five days ago and is confident the reintegration process of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians will be successful, President Ilham Aliyev said.

RUSSIA-ARMENIA RELATIONS

* The West wants to use the situation in Ukraine to kick Russia out of the South Caucasus and the United States does not care about Armenia or Armenians, Russian Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev said on Monday during a meeting with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.
* Pashinyan spoke about the importance of cooperation between ministers of internal affairs of Armenia and Russia during a meeting with Kolokoltsev, the Armenian government said.
* The address of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on the country's independence on September 24 contains unacceptable attacks against Russia and causes nothing but rejection, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

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* Russia repelled seven attacks and Ukraine has lost up to 445 military in the Donetsk direction in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Monday.
* Russian armed forces launched a group strike using cruise missiles and drones at the locations of foreign mercenaries and training sites for Ukrainian saboteurs, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* The first batch of US battle tanks Abrams was delivered to Ukraine on September 23, The New York Times reported, citing two US defense officials.

KOSOVO TENSIONS
* The situation in and around Kosovo is extremely difficult, tense and potentially dangerous, and Russia is witnessing a biased attitude toward the Serbs, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.
* There is a direct threat of resumption of ethnic cleansing of the Serbs in Kosovo, which was practiced by Kosovo Albanians in past, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

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Trump Vows to Settle Russian-Ukrainian Conflict Shortly After Winning Presidency

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump during a rally in South Carolina on Monday said he would prioritize solving the Russia-Ukraine conflict quickly if he is elected to another term in office.
"Shortly after I win the presidency, I will have the horrible war between Russia and Ukraine settled, it's going to be settled," Trump said in a campaign speech in Summerville, South Carolina.
Trump also said he was committed to preventing a potential third world war, adding that the situation is much closer to a global conflict than commonly perceived.
Tensions between Russia and the West have risen dramatically since the start of Russia's special operation in Ukraine in February 2022, with the US and its allies imposing comprehensive sanctions on Moscow and commiitting more than $76 billion in direct security assistance to Kiev.

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Trump Pledges to End Biden's Energy Policies, Cut Energy Costs in 6 Months

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump during a campaign rally in South Carolina on Monday vowed to establish US energy self-sufficiency and halt what he called President Joe Biden's adversarial stance towards American energy.

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"I will end Joe Biden's war on American energy and reclaim energy independence," Trump said during a campaign speech in Summerville, South Carolina.

Trump said that three years ago, the United States had achieved full energy independence and was on the path toward energy dominance.

He also outlined an ambitious goal for his possible next term, saying he would secure the lowest energy and electricity costs compared to other major industrial nations within a six-month timeframe.

In 2020, Trump's last year in office, the US imported around 7.9 million barrels per day of crude oil and petroleum products, compared to 10 million barrels per day in 2016, President Barack Obama's last full year in office, according to the US Energy Information Administration.

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Canada's BQ to Convene Opposition Parliamentary Leaders, Rota to Discuss His Resignation

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) – The Bloc Quebecois (BQ), one of the official opposition parties in Canada's Parliament requested the resignation of the Speaker of the House of Commons (HoC) Anthony Rota and invited parliamentary leaders to convene and discuss the matter, the party's House Leader Alain Therrien said on Monday.

On Friday, Hunka, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Nazi veteran who fought in the ranks of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the Nazi SS during the Second World War, was given a standing ovation by the entire Canadian legislature. Hunka's recognition happened as the Speaker of the House of Commons, Anthony Rota, was giving introductory remarks prior to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the Canadian parliament.

On Sunday, Rota apologized for his decision to invite Hunka. Trudeau's office said, in turn, that neither the Canadian prime minister nor Zelenskyy's delegation were notified in advance of the invitation of Hunka.

"Today we were hoping that the Speaker of the House [Rota] would resign on his own initiative, we strongly hoped for it. Unfortunately, that is not what he did. Thus, we now demand the Speaker to leave. He has lost the Chambers confidence, it's evident," Therrien said from Parliament Hill.

The BQ House Speaker said his party had sent invitations to all opposition parliamentary leader and Rota to discuss the matter of his resignation.

Therrien's calls have been echoed by other opposition parties, notably by the New Democratic Party (NDP) House Leader Peter Julian who said Rota's mistake was unforgivable as it landed the entire HoC in disrepute.

Conservative lawmaker Michelle Rempel Garner and her colleague Chris Warkentin said the party would neither take collective responsibility for the consequences of Hunka's standing ovation. Warkenting further called on Rota not to take responsibility for what he said was the governments mistake.

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Russia Should Not Be Isolated, World Needs to Work Together - Kiribati Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - Russia should not be isolated at a time when the world must unite and collaborate on recovery, Kiribati's Permanent Representative to the UN Teburoro Tito told Sputnik.

"It should not be... because it's a member of the human family," Tito said. "Let's work it out together. Let's not throw somebody out. But let's continue to work together... And let's hope that we can recover."

Tito stressed that everyone wants things to be back to normal and if they feel otherwise, there is something wrong with them.

"Nobody wants trouble. No. Every good human being wants peace," he said. "All the good values in life, we will stand for it. And when things are broken, we want to fix it quickly."

The countries of the collective West have imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia and have committed more than $76 billion in direct security assistance to Kiev since Russia launched its special operation in 2022.

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Proposal to Hold P5 Summit Shows Russia Wants to Engage - Kiribati Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - Russia demonstrated its willingness to engage rather than "do it alone," when it proposed holding a summit of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, also known as P5, Kiribati Ambassador to the United Nations Teburoro Tito told Sputnik.

In January 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed a meeting of the leaders of the five UN Security Council permanent members - China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom and the United States. The initiative was then backed by all P5 members.

Asked whether holding such a meeting was a good idea, Tito said: "Of course."

"It's a good idea that shows Russia wants to engage, Russia doesn't want to do it alone," Tito said.

The Kiribati ambassador said the initiative showed that Russia believes in the collective wisdom to come together and act together.

"That's wisdom. That is good. I will say I respect Putin for thinking like that," Tito said.

The ambassador reiterated that Russia's initiative to ask for the holding of a summit was a good thing, adding that he could not understand why some members of the UN Security Council did not want to meet.

"I will ask why. Who is the good guy here? Who's the bad guy?" Tito added.

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Trudeau Says Canada Must Be Wary of Russian Propaganda After Parliament Celebrated Nazi

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, amid the scandal of celebrating the Nazi veteran at the nation's Parliament during Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address, said on Monday that the country should be wary of "Russian propaganda."

"I think it going to be really important that all of us push back against Russian propaganda, Russian disinformation and continue our steadfast unequivocal support of Ukraine," Trudeau said.

On Friday, Yaroslav Hunka, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Nazi veteran who fought in the ranks of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the Nazi SS during the Second World War, was twice given a standing ovation by the entire Canadian legislature. Hunka's recognition happened as the Speaker of the House of Commons, Anthony Rota, was giving introductory remarks prior to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the Canadian parliament.

Trudeau called the situation "extremely upsetting." He reminded that Rota had already acknowledged the mistake and had apologized.

"It is deeply embarrassing to the parliament of Canada," Trudeau said.

On Sunday, Rota apologized for his decision to invite Hunka. Trudeau's office said, in turn, that neither the Canadian prime minister nor Zelenskyy's delegation were notified in advance of the invitation of Hunka.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Moscow is outraged by the honoring of a Ukrainian Nazi Veteran in the Canadian Parliament, adding that the crimes of Nazism have no statute of limitations.

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Trump Says Republican Party Primary Debates Waste of Time Due to Lack of Viewership

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - Former US President and 2024 presidential candidate Donald Trump said on Monday that the Republican Party's primary debates are a waste of time due to their lack of viewership.

"They're wasting a lot of time with these ridiculous debates that nobody is watching," Trump said during a speech in South Carolina.

The last Republican debate – the first of the 2024 primary season – was the lowest rated in history, Trump said. Trump opted not to attend the debate and instead appeared in an interview with former Fox News host Tucker Carlson.

The Republican Party will hold its second primary debate on Wednesday, which Trump is again set to skip. Last week, US media reported that Trump will address current and former United

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Auto Workers union members instead of participating in the debate.
Trump leads the pack of Republican presidential hopefuls at 55.1% support, according to FiveThirtyEight primary polling averages published Monday. Trump is followed by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis at 13.3% support, entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy at 5.9% and former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley at 5.3%.

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Biden's Trip to the Michigan UAW Picket Line Has Nothing to Do With Trump - White House

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's upcoming trip to join the picket line alongside the United Auto Workers has nothing to do with former President Trump's visit to Detroit, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Monday.
"Absolutely not. This is a decision to visit the picket line and it was based off his own desire. This is what the president wanted to do, to stand with auto workers," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing when asked if Biden's decision to go to Michigan had anything to do with Trump's own plans to visit the state.
Last week, Biden announced that he will travel to Michigan on Tuesday, September 26, to stand alongside auto workers picketing as members of the United Auto Workers do the same across the nation in protest against three major auto manufacturers across the United States.
Former President Donald Trump will be visiting Detroit on Wednesday, September 27, where he is expected to address around 500 former or current union members at 8 p.m. at Drake Enterprises at 24800 Capital Blvd., in Clinton Township.
The actions of the UAW were prompted by failed negotiations to secure wage increases for workers. The UAW demands had included a 46% pay increase and a reduced work week to 32 hours, among other provisions.

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Russia Should Maintain Veto Power, Yet UNSC Expansion Needed - Kiribati Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - Russia should maintain its veto in the UN Security Council but more permanent members should be added to have a wider representation, Kiribati Ambassador to the UN Teburoro Tito told Sputnik.
During his address to the UN Security Council last week, Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the United Nations was at a "dead end" due to Russia having the right of veto. He called for a reform of the UN, including its veto power mechanism, saying that the UN General Assembly should be enabled to override a veto by a two thirds majority.
When asked whether Russia should be deprived of the right of veto, Tito replied: "No."
"It's kind of a tradition of history. So should we destroy this tradition?" Tito said. "Maybe reform

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... but some of the legacies of the past, the history of the United Nations must be preserved."
He reiterated that all the five permanent members should preserve their veto power and "make sure they will use it wisely."
However, Tito believes, the number of UNSC members could be increased. He recalled that the UN had 51 founding members, while now there are almost 200 countries.
"Many of them were still colonies, But now 193, almost 200. So it makes sense [to expand the UNSC]. I mean, logically speaking," he stated. "I don't see anything wrong in expanding, just to make it more representative."

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UN Reform Should Be Delayed Until Ukraine Crisis Resolved - Kiribati Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - Any reforms of the United Nations should be delayed until the Ukraine crisis is resolved, Kiribati Ambassador to the United Nations Teburoro Tito told Sputnik.
When asked whether he thinks the United Nations needs to undertake reforms, Tito said, "Well, reforms, maybe next year."
"I mean, today, the UN Secretary General needs to just sit down and call the meeting. This is an emergency," Tito said, referring to the conflict in Ukraine.
Tito said that when the house is on fire, one stops doing things and goes to extinguish the fire.
"The world is on fire, Ukraine and Russia are on fire. Let’s stop the fire first and then go back to the normal," Tito said.
UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said earlier in September that there is a need for a reform of the UN Security Council to reflect the current state of the world. The alternative to reforms is further fragmentation, Gutrerres warned.

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Ex-Kiribati President Says Concerned UN Was Unable to Prevent Ukraine Conflict

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - Kiribati's former president and current ambassador to the United Nations Teburoro Tito told Sputnik he is concerned that the United Nations failed to prevent the Ukraine conflict.
"I am concerned that our United Nations, the United Nations that now I'm part of was not able to prevent the conflict we now have in Ukraine," Tito said on the margins of the UN General Assembly. "I'm gonna say that perhaps if we, if the United Nations leadership and all the people, all the experts and all the big members of the United Nations had time to come and talk and discuss what's going wrong, I'm pretty sure that war would not have happened."
Tito said when there are two sides colliding, not happy with each other, one should bring them

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to the table for talks.

"Talk and talk. It may not be one day, maybe a week or month, but keep talking," he said. "And eventually, people start smiling with each other and then move forward."

The United Nations, the former Kiribati president believes, should engage more actively in addressing the situation, and actually "should have done it on day one, when the thing erupted."

"One must never sleep, on the first, on the second day, and we must not go to sleep until it's solved, stopped," he stressed. "But now we carry on sleeping for more than a year now. Go into the second year. It's a shame."

According to Tito, the UN secretary general should take charge and possibly create a "peacemaking body" to spur peace talks. The body should bring together leaders from all over the world and even former leaders.

Tito said he himself would be ready to be there and contribute.

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New Ransomware Group Claims Responsibility for Cyberattack on Sony Entertainment - Report

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - Ransomed.vc, a relatively new ransomware group, has claimed responsibility for a cyberattack on the Sony Group Corporation, the cyber security news and analysis organization Cyber Security Connect said in a report on Monday.

"We have successfully compromised all of Sony systems. We won't ransom them! We will sell the data. Due to Sony not wanting to pay. Data is for sale," the report cited the ransomware group as saying.

Ransomed.vc started operating earlier in September though it certainly has connections to prior online forums and groups, the report said.

The group employs an extortion tactic that leverages General Data Protection Laws (GDPR) in the European Union and coerces victims to either pay ransom or risk potential GDPR penalties due to data exposure, the report said.

The group has presented proof-of-hack materials, such as screenshots of an internal login page, a PowerPoint presentation and several Java and HTML files, the report said.

However, the relatively small data collection of fewer than 6,000 files in total, in contrast to Sony's extensive file volume, has raised doubts about the credibility of the group's claim to have compromised the company, the report added.

Sony has not come out with a public statement about the potential hack of its websites, according to the report.

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Moodys Warns of US Negative Rating if Partial Govt. Shutdown Happens

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WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The United States could be hit with a new negative credit rating amid the growing probability that parts of its government will shut down, according to Moodys Investors Service, the last of the credit rating agencies that remain positive on the country.

"It appears increasingly likely that the United States federal government could enter a partial shutdown by the end of this month," Moodys said in a fact sheet published Monday that underscored September as the last month of the fiscal year for the country, which had an "Aaa stable" assigned by the rating agency. "A shutdown would be credit negative for the US sovereign."

The US Congress, controlled by Republicans opposed to the Democratic federal government of President Joe Biden, are withholding funding for bills that would fund the operation of certain government agencies, raising the probability of a partial shutdown.

"The economic impact of a shutdown would likely be short-lived and concentrated in areas with a large government presence, with limited ramifications for the broader US economy and GDP growth," Moodys said, referring to Gross Domestic Product growth in the fact sheet presented in question-and-answer style.

It said the most direct impact would be through lower government spending, with an immediate impact on consumption and spending by affected federal workers and contractors and most of the hit to consumption would be reversed once the government reopened.

"However, the longer the shutdown persists, the more negative the potential impact on the broader economy," Moodys said. "A prolonged shutdown would likely be disruptive both to the US economy and financial markets. While government debt service payments would not be impacted and a short-lived shutdown would be unlikely to disrupt the economy, it would underscore the weakness of US institutional and governance strength relative to other Aaa-rated sovereigns that we have highlighted in recent years."

Fitch Ratings downgraded the credit rating of the United States from Triple-A to Double-A in August, citing fiscal deterioration over the next three years in the world's largest economy. The downgrade came on the heels of a Republican-Democrat tussle over the raising of the US debt ceiling, without which the country might have defaulted on its payments for the first time ever.

In 2011, S&P gave its first-ever credit downgrade to the US, cutting its rating to AA+. More than a decade later, that agency has still not restored its rating.

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State Dept. Says Unaware of Ukrainian Nazi Veteran's Glorification in Canadian Parliament

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) – US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday that he was unaware of a Ukrainian Nazi veteran's glorification in the Canadian Parliament last week because he was busy at the United Nations General Assembly.

"I will admit that I was at the United Nations General Assembly on Friday…and I am not sure what you are referring to," Miller said during a press briefing.

On Friday, Hunka, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Nazi veteran who fought in the ranks of the 14th

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Waffen Grenadier Division of the Nazi SS during the Second World War, was twice given a standing ovation by the entire Canadian legislature. Hunka's recognition happened as the Speaker of the House of Commons, Anthony Rota, was giving introductory remarks prior to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the Canadian parliament.

On Sunday, Rota apologized for his decision to invite Hunka. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's office said, in turn, that neither the Canadian prime minister nor Zelenskyy's delegation were notified in advance of the invitation of Hunka.

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Potential US Gov't Shutdown Would Impact Farmers, Families in Need - Agriculture Chief

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - Federal programs that substantially benefit children and farmers in the United States will be negatively impacted should Congress be unable to reach a deal to avert a government shutdown this week, Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said on Monday.

The US Congress needs to adopt a full or short-term budget before October 1, the end of the current fiscal year, in order to avoid a government shutdown.

"WIC is a program that impacts and affects over 50% of all the newborns in this country," Vilsack said. "Nearly 7 million pregnant moms, new mothers and young children count on WIC every single day to receive support, nutrition assistance support. With a shutdown, what we would see across the United States is a denial of those benefits and opportunities."

Farmers would be unable to take out timely loans needed to harvest crops and get them ready for the market, Vilsack said.

Moreover, a shutdown would lead to the closure of national forests, meaning towns lose tourism revenue that then puts local businesses at risk, Vilsack added.

According to Vilsack, more than 50,000 employees throughout the US Department of Agriculture will be furloughed in the event of a shutdown as well.

However, Vilsack pointed out that the Agriculture Department would continue food inspections of meat, poultry, and processed food regardless of a shutdown.

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US State Department Says Including Russian Troops in Mexican Parade ‘Odd Decision’

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The Mexican government’s decision to include Russian troops in a parade celebrating the country’s independence was odd, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"We did find that to be an odd decision," Miller said during a press briefing, when asked about the inclusion of Russian troops.

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On September 16, Mexico held an independence-day parade that featured a contingent of Russian soldiers. President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said that all countries with which Mexico maintains diplomatic ties were invited to participate.

However, the inclusion of Russian troops in the parade drew criticism from Ukrainian Ambassador to Mexico Oksana Dramaretska.

Last week, Mexican Foreign Secretary Alicia Barcena said Mexico hopes to see Russia and Ukraine engage in peace negotiations to resolve their conflict. The Biden administration has repeatedly said that it would only back a peace plan supported by Ukraine.

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US Must Enforce Sanctions to Deter N. Korea Military Cooperation With Russia - Senator

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The United States should insist on strengthening the existing sanctions regime against North Korea and imposing secondary sanctions to deter its military cooperation with Russia, Senator Chris Van Hollen said on Monday.

"Among the steps we should take is better to enforce existing US and other sanctions against the DPRK," Van Hollen said at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The senator, who chairs the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy, reminded that he introduced a bipartisan law that aimed to apply secondary sanctions against foreign banks and entities that violated imposed restrictions.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said last week that the transfer of weapons between Russia and North Korea would be in violation of several resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council (UNSC).

Earlier in September, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un completed his visit to Russia. He held talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Vostochny spaceport in Russia's Far East, met with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and inspected Russian military aircraft.

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US Supports International Mission to Ensure Human Rights in Nagorno-Karabakh - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The United States supports an international mission to ensure that human rights are respected in the Nagorno-Karabakh region amid recent tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"We do believe there should be an international mission to provide transparency, reassurance and confidence to the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the international community, that their rights and security will be protected consistent with the public statements that Azerbaijan has made," Miller said during a press briefing.

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There have been active discussions on the development of such a mission, Miller added.

Earlier on Monday, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said that the UN is prepared to provide a humanitarian needs assessment and deliver aid to people impacted by recent hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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Zelenskyy Failed Visit to US Shows 'End is Coming' for Ukraine - Experts

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's lackluster receptions in Washington and at the UN in his trip to the US last week, and inability to achieve major objectives, shows that his moment has passed and the end is near for Kiev, experts told Sputnik.

Zelenskyy visited Washington on Thursday for the second time since Russia launched its special military operation. Unlike his Democratic predecessor Nancy Pelosi, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy declined Zelenskyy's request to address a joint session of Congress. It came as the House is struggling to pass a short-term spending plan to avoid a government shutdown at the end of the month, with continued financial support for Kiev being one of the sticking points among Republicans.

Biden did announce a new security package for Kiev, although it did not include the ATACMS long-range missiles Zelenskyy sought. However, according to media reports, Biden during the visit informed Zelenskyy that the US will send a small number of ATACMS to Ukraine for the first time. A White House National Security Council spokesperson declined a Sputnik request to confirm and comment.

Retired US Army Lt. Col. and international consultant Earl Rasmussen, former Vice President of the Eurasia Institute, said Ukraine's leader failed to achieve many objectives during his trip to the US, including isolating Russia at the Security Council and securing greater international support.

Nor did he receive a strong reception from US Congress, Rasmussen observed. One would assess the US adventure as one absent of excitement and a definite disappointment, Rasmussen continued.

"There were no mass pro-Ukrainian or Anti-Russian demonstrations in New York or Washington. The UN Assembly Hall was at best half full for his presentation which seemed more based on an alternative universe," Rasmussen told Sputnik. "Essentially this visit was a non-event with even The New York Times publishing a critical article the day before his appearance in the UN. Coincidence? Likely not."

This all comes to mean one thing - a reality that Ukraine should grasp by now, Rasmussen said.

"The end is rapidly coming both for Zelenskyy and Ukraine," Rasmussen said. "A military defeat is near... The question is do we seek a settlement and end the killing or do we escalate more to try to prolong the conflict and as a result see even more lives lost and an increased chance of direct conflict."

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Former Pentagon analyst Chick Spinney speculated that Zelenskyy might even be realizing his chance to rally the West behind his cause once again has come and gone.

"I think Zelenskyy's phony 'Churchillian Moment' has passed," Spinney told Sputnik. "His body language suggests that he knows he is losing touch with his audience."

University of Rhode Island Professor of Political Studies Nicolai Petro said Zelenskyy's trip to the United States revived public interest in the issue of Ukraine, but he had to endure complaints from some of his sponsors about Ukraine's lack of military success and corruption.

"Alas, there is little that can be done about either of these," Petro said. "The fact that lax oversight controls over funding and military shipments to Ukraine predictably resulted in a significant percentage of it disappearing was not revealed yesterday - sources in the White House were aware of it in April 2022 and CBS News reported on it in August 2022."

The widespread corruption that guaranteed the waste and misuse of US and NATO-supplied weapons systems would likely continue unabated, Petro predicted.

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US Central Command Says Captured Islamic State Official in Northern Syria Raid

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Monday that it captured an official of the Islamic State terror group (ISIS, banned in Russia) during a raid in northern Syria.

"US Central Command forces successfully conducted a helicopter raid in northern Syria, September 23, 2023," CENTCOM said in a statement. "Abu Halil al-Fa'dani, an ISIS Syria Operational and Facilitation official, was captured during the raid."

CENTCOM forces conducted the raid without civilian injuries or deaths, the statement said.

Al-Fad'ani maintains relationships throughout the ISIS network in the region, the statement said. Capturing ISIS officials like al-Fad'ani increases the US' ability to locate, target and remove terrorists from the battlefield, the statement said.

CENTCOM remains committed to the "enduring defeat" of ISIS, the statement added.

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UN Ready to Provide Humanitarian Needs Assessment if Given Access to Nagorno-Karabakh

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - The United Nations stands ready to provide a humanitarian needs assessment and deliver aid to affected people in Nagorno-Karabakh if it is given access there by the relevant parties, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"If we are given access, we stand ready to conduct a humanitarian needs assessment and provide assistance to affected people," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

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The spokesperson said the United Nations is following very closely and with concern the mass movement of people from Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia.

However, Dujarric also said that the United Nations has country teams in Azerbaijan and Armenia and they stand ready to support any relief efforts if they are given "any space" there.

"Our focus is on the possible humanitarian assistance," Dujarric added.

As of Monday, nearly 3,000 people have entered Armenia from Nagorno-Karabakh after Azerbaijan launched "anti-terrorist activities" in the breakaway region on September 19. Armenian media reported multiple civilian casualties as a result of the military activities by Azerbaijan.

Last week, the Russian Defense Ministry said Azerbaijan and representatives of the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh had agreed on a complete cessation of hostilities through the mediation of Russian peacekeepers.

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Canada's Rota Doubles Down on Apology For Inviting Nazi Veteran Hunka Amid Calls to Resign

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The Speaker of the House of Commons (HoC), Anthony Rota, apologized to Parliamentarians on Monday and explained that his intention when inviting Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka was to show the feud between Russia and Ukraine is not a new one.

On Friday, Hunka, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Nazi veteran who fought in the ranks of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the Nazi SS during the Second World War, was given a standing ovation by the entire Canadian legislature. Hunka's recognition happened as the Speaker of the House of Commons, Anthony Rota, was giving introductory remarks prior to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the Canadian parliament.

On Sunday, Rota apologized for his decision to invite Hunka. Trudeau's office said, in turn, that neither the Canadian prime minister nor Zelensky's delegation were notified in advance of the invitation of Hunka.

“On Friday, in my remarks following the address by the President of Ukraine, I recognized an individual in the gallery. My intention was to show that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is not a new one; that the Ukrainians have unfortunately been subject to foreign aggression for far too long and that this must end," Rota's statement said.

The Speaker's statement was followed by remarks from the Government House Leader Karina Gould who thanked Rota for his apology, nonetheless noting that his decision hurt Parliamentarians who trusted him as they rose to applaud Hunka. "I think this unfortunate situation has been deeply embarrassing for Canada's Parliament," Gould said, adding that the embarrassment extends to Canada as a state and to the Ukrainian President.

The NDP House Leader Peter Julian said Rota's mistake was unforgivable and called for him to present his resignation. "Ultimately, this was an unforgivable error which puts the entire House in disrepute," he said.

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Conservative lawmaker Michelle Rempel Garner said that neither her nor the party would take collective responsibility for the decision's fallout, remarks that were echoed by several other of her colleagues such as Chris Warkentin, who advised Rota not to take responsibility for what he said for the decision's fallout.

According to historical data, the Great Patriotic War took the lives of nearly 27 million soldiers and civilians of the Soviet Union. Around 6.75 million Russians, 1.65 million Ukrainians, and 650,000 Belarussian among others, died in the fight against Nazi Germany.

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UN Says Condemns Honoring Nazis But Takes Note of Canadian Parliament Speaker's Apology

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - The United Nations stands against honoring individuals who took part in Nazi activities but acknowledges the apology of Canada's parliament speaker for recently featuring a Nazi soldier, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"From what I've seen in the reports, the speaker... of the House in Ottawa apologized for inviting this individual, giving the reasons that he gave. We, of course, stand against any honoring of people who actively took part in Nazi activities during the Second World War," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

On Friday, 98-year-old Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka, who fought in the ranks of the Schutzstaffel's (SS) 14th Waffen Grenadier Division, received a standing ovation from the entire Canadian legislature. Hunka's recognition came as House of Commons Speaker Anthony Rota delivered introductory remarks prior to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the Canadian parliament. In the face of an international criticism for featuring an SS Nazi soldier to a standing ovation by all Canadian legislators, Rota issued an apology.

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Menendez Says Facts Will Exonerate Him of Bribery Charges, Will Keep Seat in US Congress

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - US Senator Robert Menendez said on Monday that he believes he will be cleared of bribery allegations and will continue to serve in Congress after the facts of the case against him emerge.

Last week, the Justice Department unsealed an indictment charging Menendez, his wife and three other individuals with crimes including conspiracy to commit bribery, fraud and extortion under color of official right.

"I firmly believe that when all the facts are presented, not only will I be exonerated, but I still will be New Jersey's senior senator," Menendez said during a press conference.

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The court of public opinion is no substitute for the formal legal process, Menendez said. Prosecutors framed the charges as salaciously as possible, he added.

Menendez allegedly exchanged his influence as a lawmaker to enrich himself and the other co-defendants, as well as to benefit the Egyptian government. The bribes allegedly included cash, gold bars and a luxury vehicle.

The senator defended his policy record on Egypt, pointing to his work on promoting human rights in the country, and said he withdrew thousands of dollars in cash from his own personal bank accounts as an emergency measure.

However, Menendez did not comment on the Justice Department's allegations that it found the DNA of one of his co-defendants, who is accused of paying the bribes, on the envelopes containing cash.

The allegations have prompted some fellow New Jersey politicians, including Governor Phil Murphy and Congresswoman Mikie Sherill, to call on Menendez to resign from his Senate seat. Menendez has agreed to temporarily step down as Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman until the case is resolved.

Menendez said he will continue to serve his constituents and perform his duties in Congress.

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Pacific Islands to Endorse 2050 Strategy Implementation Plan at November Summit - Chair

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - Pacific Island leaders are planning to endorse a 2050 strategy implementation plan at the upcoming 52nd summit that will be hosted by the Cook Islands, Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and Prime Minister of the Cook Islands Mark Brown said on Monday.

"In a few weeks, I will host the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum leaders meeting where we will endorse the 2050 strategy implementation plan, a plan by the Pacific and for the Pacific, that will ensure the security and prosperity of all Pacific people to lead free, healthy, and productive lives," Brown said during a meeting between US President Joe Biden and PIF leaders for the US-Pacific Islands Forum Summit.

The 2050 strategy was launched in 2022 and outlines the islands' long-term approach to working together as a whole and frames regional cooperation, including in partnership with the United States, around seven areas, Brown said.

During the meeting with Biden, Brown called on him to "actively engage" at the highest level in the upcoming forum dialogue partners meeting.

The 52nd Pacific Islands Forum will convene from 6-10 November in the Cook Islands.

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US Counterterrorism Official Highlights Ongoing Threat From IS, Al Qaeda - Interview

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The terrorist networks of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda (both outlawed in Russia) continue to pose a significant threat despite their territorial losses and leadership setbacks, US State Department Bureau of Counterterrorism Deputy Director Gregory LoGerfo said on Monday.

"ISIS [Islamic State] remains a serious threat despite their territorial defeat and leadership losses, as does the global Al Qaeda network," LoGerfo said in an interview with the American Enterprise Institute.

LoGerfo highlighted the importance of the efforts to combat these threats, pointing to the global coalition to defeat the Islamic State that is comprised of more than 85 nations.

The coalition remains active, as shown by recent ministerial meetings in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, held in June and has demonstrated adaptability in responding to the evolving security challenges, LoGerfo said.

"The international community, particularly countries of origin, must do more to ensure that this challenge is addressed in a timely, secure and humane manner through repatriations and stabilization assistance," LoGerfo added.

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Biden Says Working With Congress to Invest $40Bln in Pacific Islands Infrastructure

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday he is working with Congress to invest $40 billion to improve infrastructure in the Pacific Islands.

"Today, I'm pleased to announce we're working with Congress to invest $40 billion in our Pacific Islands infrastructure initiative," Biden said during a meeting with Pacific Islands Forum leaders at the White House#

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Majority of US Voters Support Including Border Security in Government Funding Bill - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - A majority of likely voters in the United States support including money for border security as part of legislation to fund the government and avoid a shutdown, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll released Monday.

Most US voters, 63%, support including a border security measure in government funding legislation, the poll said. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of respondents said that they oppose including border security in government funding negotiations, the poll said.

US lawmakers are working to fund the government before the end of the month, although the Republican-majority House of Representatives and Democrat-majority Senate are squaring up

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to clash over matters including border security and Ukraine aid.

House Republicans have proposed a short-term government funding bill that would also address border security. Senate leadership has expressed a desire to include aid for Ukraine in any government funding bill as well, although some House Republicans have opposed the idea.

The poll surveyed 1,020 likely US voters between September 19-21. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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US Recognizes Niue, Establishes Diplomatic Relations - Biden

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The United States has recognized Nieu as a sovereign state and established diplomatic relations with the tiny Pacific nation, President Joe Biden said on Monday.

"Today, I am proud to announce that the United States recognizes Niue as a sovereign and independent state and will establish diplomatic relations between our two nations," Biden said in a statement.

He noted that Niue's "critical and constructive role" in the Pacific includes supporting the region's sustainable development, security, and marine protection, and ocean conservation. The establishment of diplomatic relations will allow the US to deepen bilateral cooperation in fighting climate challenges, protecting maritime borders and marine resources, as well as building sustainable economic growth, according to the statement.

Biden expressed readiness to work closely with Niue, the Pacific Islands Forum, and the Pacific Community to bolster Pacific regionalism.

Recognition of Niue will strengthen US bonds in the region and help improve security and prosperity, Biden added.

The second US-Pacific Island Forum Summit is taking place from September 25-26 in Washington. During the meeting, Biden will reaffirm the US' commitment to shared regional priorities and deepening cooperation with the Pacific Island nations.

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Biden Praises Screenwriters, Studios for Reaching Deal to End Strike - White House

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - US President Biden praised the Writers Guild of America and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers on Monday for reaching a tentative agreement that would see screenwriters return to work after striking for nearly five months.

"I applaud the Writers Guild of America and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers for reaching a tentative agreement that will allow writers to return to the important

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work of telling the stories of our nation, our world - and of all of us," Biden said in a release. "This agreement, including assurances related to artificial intelligence, did not come easily. But its formation is a testament to the power of collective bargaining."

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US to Provide $2Bln Loan to Poland for Defense Modernization – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide a $2 billion loan to Poland to support its ongoing defense modernization, the US State Department announced on Monday.

"Today, the United States is proud to announce the signing of a milestone $2 billion Foreign Military Financing (FMF) direct loan agreement to support Poland's defense modernization," the State Department said in a press release.

The Biden administration is providing up to $60 million in FMF to cover the cost of the loan to accelerate Poland's urgent military procurements of defense articles and services from the United States, the release said.

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