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10/19/23 Thursday

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Cosmic Scales? Ancient Fast Radio Wave Burst Could Be Used to Find Universe's Weight

Astrophysicists have struggled to understand just how much matter there is in the universe, leading to hypotheses about the existence of "dark matter" that we cannot observe aside from the gravitational effect it has on other matter.

A powerful, ancient radio signal recently discovered by astronomers could be the key to detecting intergalactic matter, a group of scientists argued in a paper published in Science on Thursday.

"If we count up the amount of normal matter in the Universe - the atoms that we are all made of - we find that more than half of what should be there today is missing," study co-lead author Ryan Shannon, a professor of astrophysics at Swinburne University in Australia, said in a statement.

"We think that the missing matter is hiding in the space between galaxies, but it may just be so hot and diffuse that it's impossible to see using normal techniques," he explained.

The key is FRB 20220610A, a fast radio burst (FRB) that originated 8 billion years ago from the heart of three merging galaxies. It's considerably more distant than the previously known most distant FRB source and was enormously powerful, releasing more energy in one millisecond than the sun does in 30 years.

The discovery was made using the ASKAP radio telescope in Western Australia and the European Southern Observatory's Very Large Telescope (VLT) in Chile, while the Keck Observatory in Hawaii obtained direct images of the burst's galaxy of origin at other wavelengths.

Fast radio bursts are not well-understood phenomena. First detected in 2007, FRBs are believed to be connected to magnetars, a type of neutron star with a hugely powerful magnetic field, of which only a handful have ever been found. However, other sources have not been ruled out, and the mechanism that causes FRBs is unknown.

Other suggested sources include collisions between very dense objects such as black holes or neutron stars; supernovas, and even extraterrestrial intelligence.

Most FRBs are single-episode events, lasting a few seconds at most and constituting a single powerful blast of radio waves. However, some FRBs repeat on regular cycles, adding to astronomers' confusion.

SKAO Postdoctoral Fellow Hao Qiu explained that as the FRB moves through intergalactic space, it interacts with the matter there, allowing us to observe it from Earth.

"Radio observations give us key information that allows us to measure the turbulent magnetized interstellar and intergalactic medium between us and the host galaxy," Qui said.

"Optical observations play a complementary role by enabling us to identify the distance of the host galaxy and learn more about the host and foreground environment along the line of sight.

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Comparing the radio and optical data allows us to test cosmological models of the intergalactic medium and better understand what could create these bursts."

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US Bid to Introduce 'Temporary House Speaker' Resolution 'Dead' Over Unconstitutional Fears

An attempt to find a way around an impasse in the US House of Representatives has failed after being rejected by Republicans who feared its unconstitutionality.

On Wednesday, the GOP's second choice for speaker of the House, Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH), lost his second attempt to get elected to the position. With the clock steadily counting down until the next government shutdown, Rep. Patrick McHenry (R-NC) attempted to float a novel temporary solution: create a "caretaker speaker" with the power to bring new legislation, allowing lawmakers to pass the essential budget bills that were postponed in September.

After discussing the idea behind closed doors for nearly four hours on Thursday, the GOP seemed to have rejected the suggestion.

"The resolution is dead," Rep. Byron Donalds (R-FL) told reporters outside the meeting room. "Even Patrick, to his credit, and to his fidelity to the US Constitution, understands that we cannot just drop powers in the lap of somebody," Donalds added. "The house has to elect a speaker."

Now, the Florida lawmaker said, Jordan was "gonna go back and talk to the 22 members" of the House GOP Caucus who voted against him.

The Republicans hold a slim, four-seat majority in the House, giving small factions great leverage over the party's mainstream.

Less than a dozen right-wing Republicans withheld their votes for Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) for House speaker in January until he agreed to a list of policy demands; when McCarthy was removed from the speaker's chair in a historic vote earlier this month, it was that same faction that brought him down.

On the Democrats' side, the party is united behind its pick for speaker as Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY), who leads the Democratic House Caucus. As of yet, neither Republicans nor Democrats have shown interest in a cross-party alliance to elect a speaker and resume normal congressional business, although there are some reports of such talks.

If the House is unable to select a new speaker and pass the essential budget bills by November 17, it will trigger a shutdown of the US federal government, hamstringing many of its non-essential functions.

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Ex-Top Israeli Official: Future of Gaza After Hamas 'Doesn't Concern Us'

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Israel is preparing to launch a ground assault on the Gaza Strip to destroy the Islamist militant group Hamas, which was elected to Gaza's government in 2006. A former top Israeli official said Israel's concern in Gaza is purely with the elimination of a "terrorist group," and they do not care how Palestinians govern the territory afterward.

More than a week after Hamas forces stormed through gaps in the Gaza border fence and attacked Israeli settlements near the border, killing over 1,300 people, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) are continuing to amass troops ahead of a ground assault on the Gaza Strip. Jerusalem has said the operation will aim to destroy Hamas networks in northern Gaza, and have warned 1.1 million Palestinians living in the area to evacuate.

Meanwhile, the Gaza Strip remains under “complete siege,” as Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant put it, with electricity, fuel, and food links severed from the outside world, and the IDF air bombardment has killed at least 3,800 people, according to Gaza’s health ministry.

The US has moved to resupply the IDF and positioned two aircraft carriers in the region, warning other powers not to attack Israel during such a critical hour.

Yaakov Kedmi, a military expert and former head of the Israeli Jewish diaspora liaison service Nativ, told Sputnik that Israel’s aim in the operation is to increase its security in the wake of the attack, not to seize control over more Palestinian land.

He said the IDF’s main goal in the coming ground operation in the Gaza Strip is “the complete liquidation of Hamas, all its military and political structures, so that there is no more Hamas in Gaza. This is an operational task which stands in front of the Israeli army.”

Once Hamas is destroyed, Kedmi said there were several possible futures for the Gaza Strip. “Israel is not going to stay in Gaza and rule it and so on. There are several options. The most acceptable option is for Israeli troops to leave and the Palestinian Authority to become the legitimate political authority in Gaza, to return to power with its security, police and everything else. That is, return to the state that was in its time, when the Palestinian Authority governed both Gaza and the West Bank, as it did before Hamas seized power in Gaza.”

“Other options are less realistic and less effective, such as for some Arab forces to enter there and maintain some kind of order. Maybe other international forces, but this is all unreliable and ineffective, because the only power that can exist there and that can be sustainable is the power of the Palestinians themselves,” he said.

“We're not going to stay anyway. Once Hamas is eliminated, then there will be negotiations with Arab countries and with the Palestinian Authority. These are your people, this is your territory. We have no complaints. Take it. The only thing is that no more terrorist organizations can arise there, and that there is no threat to Israel from there. That's all.”

“We left there completely,” he noted. “The first time was when the Oslo Accords began, and then from a small remaining area in 2006. There will be a Gaza without Hamas and then the political forces that will govern there will determine what will happen to Gaza. Will it be the Palestinian Authority, will it be some kind of inter-Arab forces? Let them decide, it doesn't concern us.”

Despite Hamas being a social movement with broad popular support in Gaza and even some support in the West Bank, Kedmi said this did not make Hamas’ destruction any less impossible than for other terrorist groups.

“Is ISIS* not a social movement, al-Qaeda** not a social movement?” he asked. “Does this deprive them of their terrorist essence? No, We are not interested in the social movement

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aspect, social issues will be resolved by the Palestinian Authority, and the terrorist component will be resolved in our prisons."
Turning to Israeli society, Kedmi noted that despite sharp political divisions, Israelis were united in the belief that "Hamas must be eliminated."
"There are different opinions in Israel regarding the future of Gaza, but they do not play any significance, because the real way out of the situation is when the Arab forces themselves, inter-Arab, control the Gaza Strip. The most stable and most natural ones that can do this are the authorities of the Palestinian Authority, as it was for 12 years after the Oslo agreements," he said.
Kedmi rejected the suggestion that a ground operation in Gaza could potentially be the beginning of a wider war in the Middle East.
"With whom? Who will fight against us?" he asked. "Well, there are two terrorist organizations, one Hamas, one Hezbollah. But these are not serious opponents. Who else will fight against us? We have no claims or aspirations for any country around us. Those who are further away shout louder, but those who are closer sit quietly. They have already fought with us, and this has discouraged them forever."

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'They Have Each Others' Backs': Russia-China 'Alignment' Helping Both Nations Prosper - Expert

Despite increasing Western sanctions against Russia and China, both nations have continued to prosper, deepening their economic, political, and cultural ties in recent years. The Belt and Road forum in Beijing is just the latest place where the strength of that relationship is demonstrated, a geopolitical expert said.
The leaders of most of the world's nations have converged in Beijing this week for a special forum commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an infrastructure megaproject in more than 150 countries. Russia sent a large delegation headed by President Vladimir Putin.
The two leaders spoke extensively about new economic projects helping trade to blossom between their nations, including Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline that will lead from western Siberia to Xinjiang, and a computerizing component to the BRI dubbed the "Digital Belt and Road" or "Digital Silk Road."
Author, journalist, and geopolitical analyst KJ Noh told Sputnik that Putin's meeting with Xi in Beijing was "tremendously important" and "shows that the multi-polar alignment is very, very solid."
"The two key leaders, both Russia and China, which are also being certainly strongly threatened by the imperial Western ruling elite - they have each other's backs," he said.
"But I want to point out the incredible contrast that, you know, Biden goes to Israel and he essentially endorses the violence; Putin goes to China and he's endorsing development and

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constructive engagement. And, you know, I think it's such a striking contrast that in Beijing, through the Belt and Road gathering, they're celebrating development, mutual support, and peace, and the United States is once again putting its hand on the scale and endorsing, or at least tacitly endorsing, more violence. I think it simply boils down to the fact that China and the global South are building things. The US is bombing them, or at least giving the thumbs up to do so.I think that's such an extraordinary contrast. China is giving water and electricity to the world and the US and its allies are cutting it off right now as we speak. You know, peace and de-escalation versus war and destruction."

Noh said that the BRI and the new projects discussed at the Beijing forum would have repercussions in other parts of the globe, especially in Europe, where most nations have joined in a US-led boycott of Russian energy exports in spite of their own economic dependence on those products.

"What it's going to do is it's going to accelerate the deindustrialization of the EU, which was rapidly accelerated by the destruction of Nord Stream, and it's going to accelerate the further development of China and its allies," Noh said of Russia finding new customers. "I mean, remember, Europe and especially Germany got its industrialized boost from cheap energy. If it no longer has that, and that is being directed to China, then you can be sure that China will start to move forward 'on steroids' as far as its further industrial and technological development is concerned."

"And all of this is part of, you know, that China is the boat that will be lifting up all the other boats, and currently the Belt and Road is shifting and shifting into high gear. That is, it's not simply an infrastructural transportation network, but they're talking about a digital belt and road, and green and sustainable development, scientific and technological innovation, you know, just educational and cultural development. All of these things once again point to the ways in which the center of economic and political and cultural gravity is shifting to the Global South, led by China and Russia," Noh said.

The analyst noted that Putin personally leading the delegation to Beijing, his first trip outside the former Soviet Union region since the beginning of the conflict with Ukraine in February 2022, to meet personally with Chinese President Xi Jinping was a demonstration of the importance of the China-Russia relationship, which the Chinese foreign ministry described in December 2021 as having "no limit, no forbidden zone, and no ceiling."

"It's an endorsement and it's a vote of confidence, it's showing how close that relationship is," Noh said.

"I mean, just a quick parenthetical note: Putin has not been traveling more, has been restricted in his travels because of that absurd allegation of war crimes that had nothing to do - it was essentially helping children get to safety. That was used as pressure to delegitimize and to constrain President Putin from traveling. But traveling to China, he knows he's in good hands. He knows that he is among allies. And from his standpoint, it is a strong endorsement of his confidence, his trust and his support of the Belt and Road and all the other institutions that are building out a multipolar world for the better."

For more in-depth analysis of current affairs, tune in to our Sputnik radio show The Backtory.

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US State Depart. Official Publicly Resigns Over Biden Admin's Handling of Palestine-Israel Conflict

In an unprecedented move, an official in Joe Biden's State Department penned a resignation letter marked by scathing criticism of the US president's policy regarding Israel. The missive has been seen as evidence that the Israeli government may soon face mounting pressure.

An administrator within US President Joe Biden's State Department resigned on Wednesday, an event which would typically generate few headlines; however, the manner in which the official parted ways has attracted significant attention.

Josh Paul had worked at the US State Department for 11 years before his sudden departure this week. His most recent job title was director of congressional and public affairs within the US State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, a position in which he was involved in arms transfers between the United States and allied countries like Israel.

It was this role that created an irreconcilable ethical dilemma that prompted Paul's resignation.

"In my 11 years I have made more moral compromises than I can recall, each heavily, but each with my promise to myself in mind, and intact," wrote Paul in his resignation letter. "I am leaving today because I believe that in our current course with regards to the continued – indeed, expanded and expedited – provision of lethal arms to Israel – I have reached the end of that bargain."

Paul praises the "engaging" and "challenging" nature of his position within the State Department while defending his colleagues as "courageous and good civil servants." He also criticizes both Israel and Hamas militants, denouncing the "murder of civilians" and "kidnapping of children" in a blunt passage that notably identifies "terrorists" on both sides of the conflict.

But other portions of Paul's letter are unambiguous in their withering critique of Israel, violating a powerful taboo in US politics against criticizing perhaps the country's closest ally.

"We cannot be both against occupation, and for it," writes Paul. "We cannot be both for freedom, and against it. And we cannot be for a better world, while contributing to one that is materially worse."

"There is beauty to be found everywhere in this world, and it deserves both protection, and the right to flourish, and that is what I most desire for Palestinians and for Israelis… Collective punishment is an enemy to that desire, whether it involves demolishing one home, or one thousand; as too is ethnic cleansing; as too is occupation; as too is apartheid."

The open identification of the situation in Israel as "apartheid" is significant. Former President Jimmy Carter generated significant controversy in 2006 when he released a book attaching the label to the US ally.

George H.W. Bush's Secretary of State James Baker briefly threatenedto withhold loans for Israel in 1992 as settlers violently appropriated lands designated by the United Nations for Palestinians, but that level of US criticism has not been seen since then.

"Support for Israel… is the best $3 billion investment we make," then-Senator Biden proudly declared from the floor of the US Senate in 1986. "If there weren't an Israel, the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interests in the region."

In fact, the United States did help to establish Israel, with American backing for the state proving crucial in its early years.

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"I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism," former US President Truman candidly told advisers in 1945 as they warned him of the prospect of destabilizing the region. "I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents."

By 1948, Zionist groups were given a green light by Western powers, wiping out more than 500 Palestinian villages and killing thousands of Palestinians as they sought to clear the territory. Albert Einstein called the groups responsible for the acts "terrorist organizations" and decried Israel's major conservative party at the time as "closely akin… to the Nazi and Fascist parties."

Former US ambassador to Afghanistan Ronald Neumann believes Paul's statement won't change much in the short term. "I do not know that any of such resignations have ever had an effect on the department writ large or that they have a major effect on policy," said Neumann in an interview with US media, referring to previous departures such as Paul's.

"It's important for that active policy discussion and dissent that people do respect their professional obligation to either keep dissent inside the organization or to do what Mr. Paul has done and resign and take it outside," added Neumann, stressing the importance of civility and decorum in discussing US backing for massive bombing of civilian populations.

On October 7, after the failure of peaceful protest efforts in Gaza as recently as 2019, the Palestinian militant group Hamas launched a surprise attack that killed some 1,400 Israelis. The armed group has historically benefitted from funding from Netanyahu's government, which preferred for Hamas to represent Palestinians in Gaza rather than a mainstream force that might have successfully pursued Palestinian statehood.

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Pentagon Report Warns China Building Nuke Arsenal Faster Than Forecasted, Sparking Concern

A yearly report finds the United States' most feared rival is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal amidst a complex international environment.

A US government report released on Thursday showed China is increasing the size of its nuclear arsenal at a faster rate than previously expected.

The finding was revealed in a yearly report undertaken by the Pentagon to monitor China's military strength. The Asian country, which has surpassed the United States in some economic measures, is viewed as Washington's primary foreign adversary.

The report also speculates China may be pursuing a buildup in its capability in more conventional weapons, developing non-nuclear arms capable of hitting targets anywhere within the United States.

Although China remains the largest identified threat to America's desire to maintain full-spectrum dominance, the international context is increasingly distracting from the US' preferred focus on the Asian world power. The report speculated China is observing Russia's performance in its special military operation in Ukraine, drawing lessons for its military capability as well as soft power concerns.

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The report, which focused on data gathered in 2022, did not speculate on insights that may be gleaned from Israel's current attacks on Gaza, which adds complexity to the United States' foreign policy concerns.

The United States has sought to more aggressively focus on China's rise since former US President Barack Obama's second term. Of primary concern for the US is the disputed status of Taiwan, which the United States protected in a bid to undermine communist-led government in Beijing after the Chinese Civil War. The United States succeeded in splitting Korea after communist revolution there and attempted to do the same in Vietnam, suggesting a common playbook for dealing with countries with successful socialist revolutions.

The territory of Taiwan was first integrated into China in 1683. Kuomintang forces fled there after their loss in the Chinese Civil War, which brought the Communist Party of China to power. US Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower raised the specter of nuclear force being used against the country if Mao Zedong's military crossed the Taiwan Strait to consolidate Communist control. Since then, Taiwan has been self-governing, although China considers it a renegade province and opposes further moves towards independence for the island chain.

The United States is concerned China will take military action in Taiwan to achieve its goal of integrating it under Communist Party control. China has frequently engaged in war games near the island, pushing back against increased US activity in the region. China has also intercepted US aircraft in the area, doing so more than 180 times last year.

The concern over Chinese military capabilities comes amidst significant funding of military operations in Ukraine and proposed funding for Israel. Meanwhile, China has not been involved in a war since the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979.

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The Speaker Wishlist - Cartoon

The last several years have seen a number of dubious firsts in US politics, as cynicism and political polarization become persistent features of the system. Now, add threats against the spouse of a sitting member of Congress to the list.

Such was the story that emerged this week as Rep. Don Bacon (R-NE) reported his wife had received menacing phone calls from people angry over the congressman's vote against Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH) for House speaker.

"She had terrible phone calls," said Bacon to reporters, revealing that his wife had even begun sleeping with a loaded gun next to her bed.

Threatening text messages were also reportedly sent to Bacon's wife, with one reading: "Why is your husband causing chaos by not supporting Jim Jordan? I thought he was a team player."

"Your husband will not hold any political office ever again," read another message. "What a disappointment and failure he is."

Jordan again failed to gain the necessary votes to clinch the speakership after a second round of voting in the House on Thursday. Currently, a third attempt is planned for Friday. Congress may settle the issue soon to vote on the US president's proposed two-for-one emergency

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budget request announced late Thursday for a combined funding package for both Israel and Ukraine.

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Bizarre Rock in Northern Renaissance Painting Now Identified as Ancient Stone Tool

Hand axes which are made from stone are the longest-used tools in human history. According to known examples, the first used were over 1.75 million years ago which coincides with the human ancestor Homo erectus.

The “Melun Diptych” by Jean Fouquet is a devotional, religious painting from the mid-1400s. The right panel depicts the Virgin and Christ child surrounded by blue and red cherubim. The left panel depicts Etienne Chevalier with his patron saint; Saint Stephen, who holds a book with an oddly shaped rock placed upon it. The Northern Renaissance diptych was commissioned by Chevalier, who served as the treasurer for King Charles VII of France.

Art historians have often referred to the rock as a reference to Saint Stephen’s martyrdom, in which he was stoned to death.

But recently, a team of researchers have taken a second look at the oddly shaped stone. Experts from Dartmouth and the University of Cambridge say the stone is likely the earliest artistic depiction of an Acheulean hand axe. These devices were used by our ancient ancestors, most likely the Homo erectus, to cut meat, wood and to forage for food.

But prior to the Age of Enlightenment, people believed these mysterious rocks were “thunderstones,” according to text from the mid-1500s. They believed these rocks were not tools used by our ancestors, but were instead, rocks which had fallen from the sky during storms.

In fact, Swiss physician and naturalist Conrad Gessner featured a print of the hand axe in his book, “De Rerum fossil” from 1565, and called the stones “jokes of nature.”

"I love this idea of connecting a hand axe—a utilitarian object that helped hominins survive half a million years ago—with a medieval French painting, which is so well-known that it's taught in introductory art history classes," said study co-author Jeremy DeSilva, a professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology at Dartmouth. "From the Paleolithic Age to the Renaissance and beyond, hand axes have been—and continue to be—part of human history."

Disregarding the hand axe representation, the oil on wood panel painting is already mysterious in style: the Virgin Mary and her child are painted in a ghostly white, while the rich red and blue cherubs placed behind them form a symmetrical pattern of shiny, sphere-like shapes. The image is certainly otherworldly.

The patron and saint are depicted in a more realistic, less idealized style, as the two kneel towards the Virgin Mary. The rock itself most likely intended to be a reference to Saint Stephen’s martyrdom, as Fouquet would not have known its true origin. But co-study author Steven Kangas, a senior lecturer in the Department of Art History at Dartmouth, has always had a feeling the true “rock” originated from an earlier time.

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"I've known about Fouquet's painting for years and I had always thought that the stone object looked like a prehistoric tool," said Kangas. "So, this was always sort of stuck in the back of my mind, as something that I needed to pursue in the future."
Using an infrared analysis, Kangas and other experts found that Fouquet had gone to great care in order to sketch, paint, and rework his depiction of the hand axe. The French painter's choice of color as well—color variations of yellow, brown and red—mimics the weathering of these stone artifacts which would have been made from flint or silica-rich rocks. And using an approach called Elliptical Fourier Analysis, they found a 95% match between the shape of the stone in the painting, and the shapes of Acheulean hand axes.
"The data from our shape, color, and flake scar analyses of the stone object in the painting were remarkably consistent with that of other stone age hand axes from where Fouquet lived," said study co-author James Clark, a graduate student in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge.
"Fouquet seems to have taken a special interest in the stone object, probably because he had seen one that struck his attention and imagination," added Kangas.
The study was published in the Cambridge Archaeological Journal.

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Experts Stumped as Mysterious Mermaid-Shaped 'Globster' Washes Ashore in Papua New Guinea

This isn't the first time a mermaid-like creature has washed ashore.
Experts have recently found themselves stumped like never before after being unable to pinpoint what mysterious animal is tied to ghostly white remains that washed ashore on an island in Papua New Guinea.
Photos appear to show a body that is heavily decayed, with its head completely unrecognizable. The lumpy, rotten mass was first discovered on September 20 by locals on the small volcanic island of Simberi. However, experts only have photographs to refer to in order to discover the "globster's" origin. Officials were not able to take samples of the creature or record its size and weight as the locals had buried it.
Helene Marsh, an environmental scientist from James Cook University in Australia, believes the specimen is a marine animal; however she said it's "anyone's guess" as to which animal.
"It looks like a very decomposed cetacean to me," said Sascha Hooker, an environmental scientist at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. A Cetacean refers to any type of whale or dolphin, which typically turn a ghostly white color when its skin falls off.
Another expert suggested it could be a dugong, or a "sea cow," which belongs to the species order of Sirenia, and is related to the manatee. Because its head is so wide, and due to the amount of blubber, it could most likely be a grass-munching sea cow. Officials explain it would make sense since Dugongs have inspired ancient seafaring tales of mermaids.
But the most common cetaceans in the Northern Bismarck Sea include the spinner dolphins, the pantropical spotted dolphins, short-finned pilot whales and sperm whales.

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Some experts have firmly agreed that it's most definitely not a shark.
"At first, I was leaning toward a large shark, but now that I've spent a bunch of time looking at this, I am more confident it is a cetacean," said Gregory Skomal, a marine biologist at the University of Boston. He adds that images where the animal's skin has fallen off, its exposed vertebrae looks more like a whale's backbone than that of a shark's spine.
In July of this year, a creature resembling a mermaid washed ashore on an Australian beach. The remains included a dome-like skull, and splayed out ribs.

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Biden Excuses Push for Israel, Ukraine Aid as Matter of 'National Security' in Rare Address

During Biden's address to the nation he argued as to why he believes it's important for the US to intervene in foreign affairs, and to support Israel and Ukraine.
US President Joe Biden spoke to the nation in a rare address on Thursday and announced he would be sending a budget request to Congress in order to "fund America's national security needs."
Earlier reports indicated that the funding request may include as much as $60 billion in aid to Ukraine and a total of $40 billion in aid for Israel, Taiwan and the US-Mexico border.
Biden argued the budget request would serve as a "smart investment that is going to pay dividends for American security for generations," and that it would reportedly help keep American troops out of harm's way.
However, the budget request comes at a time when the US House of Representatives struggles to elect a House speaker after they removed former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy from the post.
The lower congressional chamber remains unable to clear any legislation until it successfully fills the speakership position. The US House is also facing a government shutdown deadline as current funding for the US government is set to expire on November 17.
"We're facing an inflection point in history, one of those moments where the decisions we make today are going to determine the future for decades to come," Biden said in his opening statements.
The US president then addresses his recent trip to Tel Aviv on Wednesday. During which, he said he sat down and spoke with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his cabinet members, as well as Israelis experiencing the war with Hamas. Biden then referred to Hamas as a terrorist organization, while referring to the majority religion in Israel, which is Judaism.
"Sadly the Jewish people know perhaps better than anyone, that there is no limit to the depravity of people when they want to inflict pain on others," Biden said in addressing hostilities from the current Palestine-Israel conflict. "Israel and Palestinians equally deserve to live in safety, dignity, and peace."
Biden cautioned those in Israel, however, suggesting that "as hard as it is, we cannot give up on peace. We cannot give up on a two-state solution."

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The “two-state solution” envisions an independent Palestine established alongside Israel, but is entangled with historical and political complexities, including where exactly, borders should be drawn.

"When I was in Israel yesterday, I said that when America experienced the hell of 9/11, we felt enraged as well," Biden said. "While we sought and got justice, we made mistakes. So, I caution the government of Israel not to be blinded by rage."

The US president further detailed he spoke with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and told the leader that the US remains “committed to the Palestinian people’s right to dignity and to self-determination,” adding that the terrorist acts of Hamas do not take that right away.

“We can’t ignore the humanity of innocent Palesitnians who only want to live in peace and have an opportunity,” the president said. “Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people. Hamas uses Palestinian civilians as human shields, and innocent Palestinian families are suffering greatly because of that.”

Biden added that the bill he is sending to Congress will help Israel “have what they need” and will “sharpen” their qualitative military edge, including helping to fund their iron dome defense system.

The president later took the opportunity to compare the country’s military operation in Ukraine to hostilities between Palestine and Israel, and warned that if the US stepped away from its aid to Ukraine, “conflict and chaos could spread” abroad.

Biden clarified that the US does not want to put American boots on Russian ground, or directly fighting against Russian forces.

The US president’s address serves as a plea to Americans who have an unfavorable view of his administration’s overseas interferences. Just 31% of Americans now approve of Biden’s handling of foreign policy, compared to a majority (60%) who disapprove. A separate poll also showed that just 41% of Americans believe the US should help supply weapons to Ukraine, which is down from 46% in May.

In total, the US has spent $44 billion in security aid to Ukraine since the start of the military operation.

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Colorful Egyptian New Years Scene Uncovered During Restoration of Ancient Temple

The Temple of Esna, which had undergone a restoration process that lasted for five years, was originally built around 2,200 years ago but experienced a major renovation 200 years later when the Romans took control of Egypt.

Researchers who have been working to restore ceiling artwork in the ancient Egyptian temple of Esna have discovered a unique scene: the mythology depiction of the Egyptian New Year.

The image depicts the deities Orion, Sopdet and Anuket, who are shown in boats, as the sky goddess Nut encircles the three with her body as she swallows the evening sun.

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Sopdet represents Sirius, a star which was not visible to those in ancient Egypt for 70 days, but whose return in the east around mid-July marked the ancient Egyptians' New Year, said Christian Leitz, an Egyptology professor at the University of Tübingen. The goddess Anuket represents the receding of the Nile's waters, which would flood around the same time as the return of the star.

The New Year's scene is one of seven sections that each represent a different theme, all of which are astronomical.

"The thematic breadth of the depictions underscores the great importance that astronomy had in ancient Egypt," says Dr. Daniel von Recklinghausen, an Egyptologist from the University of Tübingen. "Images of the deities Orion, Sothis and Anukis (Anuket) play an important role in the most recently uncovered section."

At least 30 experts from the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, in collaboration with those from the University of Tübingen in Germany, have worked to restore the ceiling of the Temple of Esna.

The experts have worked tirelessly to remove thousands of years of soot, grime, and bird droppings. The process has taken longer than five years, and has revealed colorful ceiling reliefs of god, mythological figures, representations of the sun, moon, zodiac signs, and other astronomical constellations.

"Representations of the zodiac are very rare in Egyptian temples," Leitz says, adding "The zodiac itself is part of Babylonian astronomy and does not appear in Egypt until Ptolemaic times."

Researchers explained that the zodiac system, and constellations, may have been introduced to the Egyptians by the Greeks.In addition to those exquisite images, nearly 200 ink inscriptions were also discovered which helped experts to identify the restored images, according to a release.

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'Mutiny Brewing' at State Dept. Over US Support for Israeli Operation in Gaza - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - State Department staffers are preparing a dissent cable against US staunch support of Israel's expanding operation in Gaza, with some fearing the Biden administration is providing cover for excessive force to be used against Palestinians, HuffPost reported citing officials.

During a national address on Thursday, President Joe Biden said he would send a supplemental request to Congress on Friday to provide Israel and Ukraine with urgent security funds. Biden said the security aid would "sharpen Israel's qualitative military edge." Media reported that Biden's request will include $60 billion for Israel and $14 billion for Ukraine.

"There's basically a mutiny brewing within State at all levels," one State Department official was quoted as saying in the report on Thursday.

The report said diplomats are preparing what is known as a "dissent cable" - a document critical of State Department policy that goes through a protected channel to the agency's leaders.

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Some staffers believe US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his senior advisers are uninterested in the advice from the State Department's own regional experts. They also have a sense that the US will do little to ensure Israeli restraint, the report said.

The report comes a day after veteran State Department official Josh Paul publicly resigned citing the US decision to continue "lethal assistance."

Multiple officials said they heard colleagues talk about quitting as Paul did, a move that was seen as a major loss for the State Department, according to the report.

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Biden Cautions Israel Not to Be Blinded by Rage, Emphasizes US Rejects All Forms of Hate

UNITED NATIONS, October 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said in an address to the nation that the Israeli government should not be blinded by rage and underscored that the United States rejects all forms of hate.

"So, I caution the government of Israel not to be blinded by rage," Biden said on Thursday night.

Biden also said Americans must not forget who they are and the fact the United States stands against hate.

"We reject all forms, all forms of hate, whether against Muslim, Jews, or anyone. That's what great nations do. And we are a great nation," Biden said.

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Biden Says Cannot Give Up on Two-State Solution, Both Sides Deserve Safety, Peace

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said the world cannot give up on a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

"We cannot give up on a two-state solution. Israel and Palestinians equally deserve to live in safety, dignity and peace," Biden said in a national address on Thursday.

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RECAST - Biden Says World Facing 'Inflection Point' Where Decisions Made Today Determine Future

(Recasts to correct typo in headline)

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said during an address to the

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nation that the world is facing an inflection point in history where decisions made today will determine the future for decades to come.
"We are facing an inflection point in history. One of those moments where the decisions we make today are going to determine the future for decades to come," Biden said on Thursday night.

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Biden Says Does Not Seek to Have US Troops Fighting in Russia, Against Russia

UNITED NATIONS, October 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said that the United States does not seek to have US troops engaged in combat in Russia or against Russia.
"We do not seek to have American troops fighting in Russia or fighting against Russia," Biden said during an address to the nation on Thursday night.
Biden warned that if the United States walks away from Ukraine, "conflict and chaos could spread and other parts of the world."

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Biden to Send Congress Urgent Request Friday to Fund Ukraine, Israel - National Address

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced that he will send an urgent request to the US Congress to fund Israel and Ukraine.
"That's why tomorrow I'm going to send to Congress an urgent budget request to fund America's national security needs to support our critical partners including Israel and Ukraine," Biden said in his address to the nation. "The security package I'm sending to Congress... is an unprecedented commitment to Israel's security that will sharpen Israel's qualitative military edge which we've committed to."
Biden also said the US will ensure the Iron Dome continues to guard the skies over Israel.
"We're going to make sure other hostile actors in the region, know that Israel is stronger than ever and prevent this conflict from spreading," he added.

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Biden Says World Facing Infection Point Where Decisions Made Today Determine Future

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"We are facing an inflection point in history. One of those moments where the decisions we make today are going to determine the future for decades to come," Biden said on Thursday evening.

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Biden's Request to Congress to Include $60Bln for Ukraine, $14Bln for Israel - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's supplemental funding request to Congress on national security issues includes $60 billion for Ukraine and $14 billion for Israel, Reuters reported citing a source.
The report said on Thursday said that half of the $60 billion requested for Ukraine will go towards modernizing and replenishing US weapon stocks.
Moreover, Biden is requesting $14 for US border security, $7 billion to address Indo-Pacific security concerns, and $10 billion for humanitarian aid, according to the report.

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US House Will Hold Third Floor Vote to Elect Speaker Friday - Whip

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will hold a floor vote at 10:00 a.m. EST (2:00 p.m. GMT) Friday in its third attempt this week to elect a new speaker, Democratic Whip Katherine Clark said in a notice.
"Members are further advised that votes related to the election of the Speaker are expected as early as 10:00 a.m. tomorrow," Clark said on Thursday.
House Republicans will again attempt to secure at least 217 votes for Congressman Jim Jordan, who has twice failed to unify the Republican conference, Punchbowl News reported. Jordan met with opponents of his speakership throughout the day in an effort to bolster his support among Republicans.
Earlier this month, the House of Representatives ousted Congressman Kevin McCarthy from the role, restricting its ability to pass legislation. The US Congress must pass government funding legislation before November 17 to prevent a government shutdown.

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US Peace Activist Goes on Hunger Strike Over Military Actions in Gaza, Calls for Ceasefire

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WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Leslie Angeline, a member of a women-led peace group CODEPINK, has gone on a hunger strike in Congress to protest military actions against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and will continue to visit US lawmaker offices to call them to sign the Ceasefire Now Resolution introduced by a group of Democrats in the House of Representatives.

"We went to several offices today and we've got a lot more to go to," Angeline said. "We're asking all of them to sign the Ceasefire Now Resolution - Corey Bush's resolution for a ceasefire. That's our first ask. That's the most important first thing, we have to have a ceasefire."

The legislation is backed by House Democrats, including Rashida Tlaib, Jamaal Bowman, Ilhan Omar and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and is calling for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas as well as the provision of aid to civilians in Gaza.

Angeline said that while she and another peace activist, Crystal Zevon, have not managed to talk directly with legislators on Thursday, they were able to talk to their staffers on Tuesday.

"We're talking mostly with staffers... we are mostly getting a very positive response. Today's been a good day," she said.

Zevon said she has noticed that many lawmakers are hesitant in their stance on the Israel-Palestine issue and are afraid of their political positions because of their constituents and because President Joe Biden is so steadfast in his "Israel or nothing" position that they they're afraid of being pariahs in Congress and not being able to accomplish other things.

"So, we're battling, because people just need to speak out regardless of what it's going to mean, because it's the only way we're going to get anywhere. You know, the power we have is to try to get them to move forward because children are dying," Zevon said.

Angeline said she started her hunger strike on October 17 and added that she feels fine and only drinks juice and water.

"I'm feeling wonderful, motivated and empowered by the events yesterday," she said. "It was quite an inspiring event yesterday, the rally, and the speakers were incredible. And then, to walk down and be part of the outside protests in the Cannon House Office Building and then to have 400 arrested inside Cannon. So, I feel like they can't ignore us, they have to listen. And it's important that they listen."

On Wednesday, mass protests against military actions in the Gaza Strip and calling for a ceasefire in the Middle East took place in Washington. According to the local media, citing the Washington police, at least 300 people were arrested.

On Thursday night, President Joe Biden is expected to request from Congress what he called was an "unprecedented" funding package for Israel.

Angeline and Zevon said they are completely opposed to the United States sending money for weapons or more war in Ukraine and Israel.

"We hope not, that's immoral. There are people [in the United States] who are starving, there are people who are homeless, there are people without health care. There are people dying in Gaza, and we're gonna give more money for weapons, more ways to kill them? No, absolutely not. We say no," they said.

Angeline said Israel is displacing the Palestinians in Gaza and under the cover of Hamas they can perpetuate the war.

"It is ethnic cleansing. Reducing Gaza. Genocide, it's genocide. Absolutely, everyone acknowledges it all week that it's genocide. No more genocide. And how dare Israel? You know,

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they had a holocaust. They had a genocide. How can they do that to another people? They went through it," Angeline added.

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McHenry Vows to Leave Interim US House Leadership Role if Pushed to Pass Bills - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Temporary US House Speaker Pro Tempore Patrick McHenry threatened to leave the interim leadership position if House Republicans attempt to push him into bringing legislation to the floor, NBC News reported, citing multiple lawmakers.

McHenry was selected by former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, whom the House of Representatives ousted from the role earlier this month, to serve in the event of his absence. However, it is unclear whether McHenry's position gives him the authority to bring legislation to the floor without further empowerment.

"If you try to do that, you will figure out who the next person on Kevin's list is," the report quoted McHenry as saying during a closed-door Republican conference meeting.

House Republicans have held a series of internal meetings since ousting McCarthy in an effort to unify support behind a single nominee for speaker. Although the conference nominated Congressman Jim Jordan, the lawmaker has yet to secure the 217 votes needed to become speaker.

Some House Republicans have instead proposed empowering McHenry to bring legislation to the floor for consideration, but others have questioned the constitutionality of such a move.

McHenry reportedly said after the Republican conference meeting on Thursday that he is focused on electing Jordan as speaker.

The US Congress must pass government funding measures before November 17 to avoid a government shutdown. Some lawmakers have also expressed the need to reopen the House of Representatives in order to pass more aid packages for Israel and Ukraine.

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Security Enhanced at Capitol Amid Pro-Palestinian Protest, Targeted Republicans - Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman Lauren Boebert's office told Sputnik that enhanced security measures were taken to protect lawmakers amid a pro-Palestinian demonstration in the Capitol that mostly targeted Republicans.

On Wednesday, thousands of protesters gathered at the US Capitol. The participants, which included more than 1,000 Jews, demanded that US lawmakers pass a resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas conflict.

"We actually had a sniper outside our window making sure the place is safe," Boebert's Press Secretary Anthony Fakhoury said on Thursday. "I saw several members and staffers get

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harassed and called dirty names by the protesters.They were especially hostile towards Republicans so we kept Congresswoman Boebert safe in her office until it passed through at around 7:00 p.m. [Eastern Time]."

Fakhoury recalled seeing many of the protesters get arrested.

Republican Congressman Paul Gosar told Sputnik the protesters should be held accountable for their actions.

"The Israel-hating mob and terrorist sympathizers who stormed the House Office Building should be held accountable for their abhorrent behavior," Gosar said.

On Wednesday, local media, citing the DC police, reported that at least 300 people were arrested during the demonstration. US Capitol Police said they arrested more than 100 people at the Cannon House Office Building who were peacefully protesting the Israel-Hamas war and demanding a ceasefire.

At least three individuals are being charged with assault on a police officer for their conduct during processing, the Capitol Police said.

Former US Justice Department prosecutor Ronald Sievert told Sputnik he expects the pro-Palestinian protesters may face trespassing charges similar to January 6 protesters, but they are not expected to serve lengthy jail time.

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Biden Revives Bid to Refill US Oil Reserve With 6Mln Barrels Purchase - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has revived his bid to refill the heavily-drawn US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR), with the Department of Energy announcing two separate offers of crude purchases on Thursday totaling 6 million barrels, to be delivered between December this year and January 2024.

The last time the Biden administration announced purchases intentions for the SPR was in July.

"The Department of Energy, Strategic Petroleum Reserve Project Management Office has a requirement to conduct a purchase of approximately three (3) million barrels of United States produced sour crude oil for December 2023 delivery," the DoE said in the two offer documents posted on its website. The other document was identically worded, except for the delivery period, which was stated as January 2024.

According to the Energy Department, those responding to its purchase offer for December must submit their responses by October 24. For the January purchase, responses must be received by November 1.

"The government contemplates award of a firm-fixed-priced contract resulting from this," the documents said. "The government intends to evaluate proposals without discussions with offerors (except clarifications). Therefore, the offeror’s initial proposal should contain its best terms from a price and technical standpoint."

The Biden administration leaned heavily on the SPR between late 2021 and early this year to offset tight crude supplies that had raised fuel costs for Americans. As of last month, the SPR's crude balance was at its lowest since November 1983 after the release of about 200 million

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barrels or more over the past 18 months.

The Biden administration's use of the SPR has, however, been a highly-charged matter for oil bulls and Biden's political opponents. Both sides accuse him of indiscriminately releasing hundreds of millions of barrels from the stockpile to subdue crude prices and shore up his political standing with American voters - when the reserve is meant for emergency use, in times of critically short oil supply. Biden and the Democrats are up for reelection in November 2024.

Biden, in his defense, had said he was only acting to reduce record high pump prices of fuel, which stood at above $5 per gallon last June and fallen since to around $3.50. The administration had also blamed last year's high crude oil prices for US inflation getting to four-decade highs of above 9% in June 2020.

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RPT - White House Admits It Deleted Instagram Post With US Special Forces, Biden in Israel

(Repeats to add Instagram designation in lede)

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The White House admitted that it had to delete its post on Instagram, a Meta-owned company, banned in Russia as an extremist organization, from yesterday depicting President Joe Biden shaking hands with, as it turned out, members of the US special operation forces during his trip in Israel.

"As soon as this was brought to our attention, we immediately deleted the photo. We regret the error and any issues this may have caused," the White House said in a statement obtained by Fox News on Thursday.

The description under the original Instagram post said that Biden had a chance to meet with "first responders" to thank them for their bravery amid the escalation in Israel. The athletic military men were immediately recognized as members of one of the US elite special operations detachments, "Delta Force."

During a press briefing on Thursday, Pentagon press secretary Pat Ryder referred all questions regarding the photo blunder to the White House and refused to confirm whether any US special operations forces are in Israel at the moment.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) -

ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

* The United Nations is concerned about the level of killing in the West Bank, which has not seen since 2005, and calls on all sides to de-escalate the situation, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Thursday.
* Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant told Israeli soldiers near the Gaza Strip that a ground operation may commence soon.
* The Israel Defense Forces said that it carried out an airstrike on a detachment of armed Palestinians in the Nur Shams Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank.
* The commander of the Palestinian National Security Forces, Jehad Mheisen, has been killed by an Israeli airstrike, Palestinian Interior Ministry spokesman Eyad al-Bosom said.
* The Israeli military has received the green light to enter the Gaza Strip when it is ready, Israeli Economy Minister Nir Barkat said.
* The United States has transferred Iron Dome interceptors to Israel amid its ongoing conflict with Hamas and expects further transfers in the coming days, Defense Department Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder said.

PENTAGON REPORT ON CHINA

* The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) missile forces are being transformed by hypersonic technology, which Beijing may be planning to use to strike foreign bases and ships, the US Defense Department said in a report to Congress.
* The Defense Department said China may be exploring the development of conventionally-armed intercontinental range missiles that could hit targets in the United States.
* The Defense Department said China is projected to have more than 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030.
* China has allegedly made attempts to secretly provide Russia with material to support Moscow in its ongoing conflict with Ukraine, the Defense Department said.

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CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Ukraine has suffered up to 260 military casualties in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Thursday.

* The Ukrainian parliament on Thursday adopted a law banning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate in the first reading, lawmaker Yaroslav Zheleznyak said.

* Threats to Russia's Izvestia correspondent Valentin Trushnin are another example of Kiev's extremist acts, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* Ukraine expects to receive F-16 fighter jets in the first half of 2024 after Ukrainian pilots finish their training, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said.

RUSSIA-NORTH KOREA TALKS

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui have confirmed their commitment to a diplomatic settlement of the situation on the Korean Peninsula during talks in Pyongyang, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Thursday.

* Lavrov has invited his North Korean counterpart to visit Moscow at convenient time, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* Lavrov and Choe Son Hui confirmed their the determination to resist the hegemonic aspirations of the United States, leading to an aggravation of the situation in the Asia-Pacific region, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* The work on the implementation of the agreements reached by Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at the summit in September has began, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

US TRAVEL ALERTS

* The US State Department urges American citizens in Lebanon to depart the country "as soon as possible" while commercial flights remain available, the embassy in Lebanon said on Thursday.

* The State Department issued a worldwide caution alert on Thursday for Americans traveling overseas, citing the potential for terrorist attacks amid heightened global tensions.

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Biden, Zelenskyy Discuss Continued US Support for Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden spoke by telephone with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy and discussed US support for Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation, the White House said in a press release on Thursday.

"This afternoon, President Biden held a call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy ahead of his remarks tonight to discuss the United States' continued commitment to supporting Ukraine amidst Russia's brutal war," the release said.

Biden will address the US public at 8:00 p.m. ET on Thursday regarding the conflicts in Ukraine and Israel.

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Zelenskyy said in a separate statement that he discussed with Biden the further strengthening of Ukraine's long-range capabilities.

Earlier this week, the White House confirmed to Sputnik that the United States provided long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) to Ukraine.

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US Negotiates Aid Modalities with Egypt, Israel, Expect Progress Soon - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador David Satterfield discussed aid agreement implementation details with Egyptian and Israeli officials and expect to see progress in the coming days, State Department Spokesperson Mathew Miller said on Thursday.

"Ambassador Satterfield... met with officials from the government of Egypt and the government of Israel today in Israel to negotiate the exact modalities by which we can implement the agreement that the president secured," Miller said at a press briefing. "Over the coming days.. I think what you will see - can't get into the exact time, but we expect [it] to be implemented soon - details for humanitarian aid to go in."

Miller mentioned that the Israelis are deeply concerned about the potential redirection of humanitarian aid, fearing that the assistance might end up with Hamas. Additionally, he expressed a desire for consistent humanitarian support to be directed to Gaza to benefit its civilian populace.

Earlier this month, Hamas launched a surprise large-scale attack on Israel, which claimed the lives of hundreds of people from both sides of the conflict. Israel declared a state of war with Hamas and announced a complete water, electricity and food blockade of Gaza Strip.

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US to Send Israel Thousands of 155mm Artillery Shells Designated for Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department pans to provide Israel with tens of thousands 155mm artillery shells that were originally designated for Ukraine, Axios reported on Thursday, citing Israeli officials.

The Defense Department plans to send Israel the shells that were designated from US emergency stocks several months ago, the report said.

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US Denies Knowledge of Israel Using White Phosphorus in Gaza - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 19, (Sputnik)- US State Department spokesperson Mathew Miller said on Thursday that he has seen reports claiming Israel is using white phosphorous munitions in the Gaza Strip and in Lebanon, but pointed out that he has no evidence to prove the veracity of the statements.

"I've seen the report. I have no evidence to show that it's accurate," Miller said during a press briefing when asked if the US government has any knowledge of Israel using white phosphorus.

Last week, Human Rights Watch reported that Israeli forces used artillery shells containing white phosphorous in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon on October 10-11.

Israel declared a state of war with Hamas and announced a complete water, food, medicine, fuel and electricity blockade of Gaza after the Palestinian organization conducted surprise attacks on Israeli military and civilian targets on October 7. Israel is also undertaking daily strikes on the densely populated Gaza with various kinds of munitions. Numerous international organizations have have expressed deep concern about Israel's blockade of Gaza as a form of collective punishment and its indiscriminate bombardments in which more than 2,500 people have died.

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Pentagon Says US Contractor in Syria Died of Heart Attack Amid Drone Attacks

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - A US contractor in Iraq died as the result of a cardiac arrest while sheltering in place due to a potential attack, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"In Iraq, early warning systems indicated a possible threat approaching the airbase at al-Asad, and base personnel sheltered in place as a protective measure. Though no attack occurred, sadly a US civilian contractor suffered a cardiac episode while sheltering and passed away shortly thereafter," Ryder said during a press briefing.

The Defense Department offers its sympathies and condolences to the contractor's loved ones, Ryder said.

The warning system alert and subsequent precautions came amid an uptick in attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria.

The attacks occurred concurrently with heightened tensions in the region due to the conflict between Israel and Hamas. However, it is important to separate the attacks in Iraq and Syria from the conflict in Israel, Ryder said.

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RPT- Pentagon Confirms US Navy Ship Shot Down 3 Missiles Launched by Houthis in Yemen

(Updates with details in paras 3,4,5; background in para 6)
WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Defense Department Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder on Thursday confirmed that a US Navy warship shot down three missiles launched by Houthi militants in Yemen that were possibly headed toward Israel.
"The crew of the guided missile destroyer USS Carney operating in the northern Red Sea earlier today shot down three land attack cruise missiles and several drones that were launched by Houthi forces in Yemen," Ryder said during a press briefing. "Information about these engagements is still being processed and we cannot say for certain what these missiles and drones were targeting, but they were launched from Yemen heading north along the Red Sea, potentially towards targets in Israel."
The missile intercepts were a demonstration of the integrated air and missile defense architecture that the United States has built in the Middle East, Ryder added.
There were no casualties to US forces and "none that we know of to any civilians on the ground," Ryder said.
Moreover, Ryder said US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin earlier in the day conducted a series of calls with UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Emir Sheikh Tamim of Qatar, including his Saudi and Israeli counterparts.
Tensions have been building across the Middle East, including militant attacks against US bases in the region, in light of the Israel-Gaza conflict and the increased US military footprint in the region to support Israel.

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State Dept. Doesn't Think Int'l Probe of Gaza Hospital Blast Appropriate at This time

WASHINGTON, October 19, (Sputnik)- The United States does not think an international investigation into the deadly blast at a Gaza hospital is warranted at this time and believes it was a misfire rocket attack originating within Gaza, State Department spokesperson Mathew Miller said on Thursday.
"I do not believe that is appropriate at this time. The Israeli government has released a great deal of evidence to support their contention that this was a misfire rocket attack from inside Gaza that unfortunately landed on this hospital and killed it looks like hundreds of civilians," Miller told a press briefing, when asked about the possibility of an international probe.
Miller said that the US government is currently conducting its own assessment of the situation.
"And I would just say from Hamas' side, we've seen a claim backed up by zero evidence," Miller added.
On Tuesday, a large explosion hit the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City, killing almost 500 people. Hamas attributed it to an Israeli airstrike, while the Israel Defense Forces blamed a

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failed rocket launch by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement.

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Canada Has Withdrawn 41 Diplomats from India - Canadian Foreign Minister

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Canada has withdrawn 41 diplomats from India after their diplomatic immunity was threatened, Foreign Minister Melanie Joly said on Thursday.
"The safety and security of Canadians and diplomats is always our priority than the implications of the Indian government's actions. We have made a decision to organize the departure of these 41," said Joly at a press conference.

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

US Has Transferred Iron Dome Interceptors to Israel, More Coming - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) – The United States has transferred Iron Dome interceptors to Israel amid its ongoing conflict with Hamas and expects further transfers in the coming days, Defense Department Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder said on Thursday
"Iron Dome interceptors from stockpiles the US has in the country have been quickly provided to Israel," Ryder told reporters.
The US will provide Israel with additional interceptors in the days ahead, Ryder said.

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Ryder said Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had a series of calls with his counterparts from the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

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Fargo Police Warns Public of Potential Explosive Device in Downtown Area - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The police in Fargo, North Dakota, has issued a statement on Thursday asking residents to avoid the downtown area due to possibility that an explosive device being located there.
“For safety reasons, the Fargo Police Department is asking all members of the public and all members of the media to avoid the area of Main Avenue and Broadway as officers deal with a potential improvised explosive device,” the statement said.
The Fargo Police Department urged anyone is in the buildings in this affected area to shelter in place.
Local media noted that the device was found in the early afternoon but half an hour later the

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police reopened the roads for traffic.

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US Navy Warship in Mideast Intercepts Multiple Projectiles Fired by Houthis - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - A US Navy warship operating in the Middle East near the coast of Yemen intercepted multiple missiles fired by the Iran-backed Houthi militants, CNN reported on Thursday citing US officials.

Several American bases across the Middle East have come under attack, including in Syria and Iraq, in light of the increased military footprint in the region to support Israel.

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Number of US Citizens Killed in Hamas Attacks in Israel Increases to 32 - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The number of Americans killed in the Hamas attacks in Israel increased to 32 and 11 others are missing, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

"32 are deceased, 11 remain unaccounted for," Miller said during a press briefing.

US President Joe Biden was in Israel on Wednesday where he met with Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, to discuss their military plans against Hamas in Gaza and the hostage situation.

Media reported, citing sources familiar with the matter, that the Biden administration believes the likelihood of rescuing all of the hostages held by Hamas is extremely low.

As the hostage crisis continues, all efforts around it will largely be made in secret, the report said, adding that US and Israeli officials are jointly working to gather intelligence on the whereabouts of the hostages.

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Fed Chair Says US Inflation 'Too High,' Rates May Have to Stay Up

NEW YORK CITY, October 19 (Sputnik) - US inflation remains too high despite the most aggressive Federal Reserve monetary policy in decades and interest rates probably have to stay high over time, the central bank's chairman Jerome Powell said Thursday without outrightly calling for more rate hikes.

"Inflation is still too high," Powell said at an event at the Economic Club of New York. "Right

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now the risk is still high inflation. It's possible we are going into a more inflationary period, but it's hard to know. It may be that rates haven't been high enough long enough."

Powell's appearance at the Economic Club of New York came at a particularly challenging time for Fed policy-makers who have to navigate treacherous inflation and the demands of different interest groups within the United States, without impacting the continued recovery of the economy from the 2020 outbreak of the coronavirus. Prior to his speech, the event was disrupted by protestors advocating greater action by financial authorities to protect Americans from the adverse financial impacts of climate change. Powell was briefly escorted out to safety before the event resumed.

As the Fed chair spoke, the selloff in US bonds accelerated on expectations that US interest rates will remain higher for longer, with the yield on the benchmark 10-year Treasury note rising to the key psychological mark of 5% — a level last reached in June 2007.

But Powell's disinclination to outrightly signal another rate hike also kept federal funds futures — which is an indicator of Fed rate decisions — unchanged at the prevailing 5.25%-5.50% range. That pushed down the Dollar Index — an instrument that pits the US currency against six of its major rivals — on the notion that the dollar will be disadvantaged in an environment where the Fed might just hold on to rates without raising them further.

The latest reading of the US Consumer Price Index, or CPI, suggests the Fed has stalled since July in its target of returning inflation to 2% per annum, after making steady progress toward the target earlier this year.

Inflation was higher than expected for a third month in a row as consumer prices grew by an annual rate of 3.7% in September, the same as in August, and higher than the 3.6% forecast by Wall Street economists.

To fight inflation, the Fed hiked interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and August 2023, raising them by 5.25% from a base rate of just 0.25%.

The central bank is scheduled to decide on rates again at its next two-day policy meeting ending on November 2. But the unchanged reading on federal funds futures as Powell spoke indicated the Fed will skip a rate hike again at that meeting, just as it did in September.

Pressed for a guidance on rates, Powell acknowledged that the Fed had "slowed on rates to give policy time to work." He added: "We have to use eyes and risk management to monitor monetary policy impact. There is a lot of uncertainty on lags [between the economy and Fed decisions]. We are moving carefully with policy decisions."

The Fed chair could not hide his wonder on how well the economy itself was doing despite the central bank's aggressive rate hikes — and the relative problem of inflation caused by that.

"Economy is a story of stronger demand. The economy is very resilient, growing strongly. Growth is running above its longer run trend. That is a surprise," he said, adding, however, that "it is very hard to know how the economy can grow with higher rates".

The Atlanta Fed, a division of the central bank, estimates that the economy grew by an annual rate of 5.4% in the third quarter of this year versus a mere expansion of 2.1% in the second quarter.

The Fed has repeatedly pointed to an overheated labor market and wage growth, aside from soaring energy prices — all arguably effects of a booming economy — as reasons for inflation remaining well above its 2% per annum,

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US Intelligence Assessment Claims 100-300 People Killed in Gaza Hospital Blast - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Between 100-300 people were killed in a blast at a Christian hospital in Gaza, CNN reported on Thursday, citing a preliminary US intelligence community assessment.

The US intelligence community concluded that the death toll is at the "low end" of the 100-300 range, the report said. The assessment also concluded that Israel "probably" did not strike the hospital.

However, Hamas and other groups have pinned responsibility for the blast on an Israeli attack. Israel has claimed that the blast was the result of a failed rocket launch from within Gaza itself by the Palestine Islamic Jihad group.

The US continues to work to corroborate Israel's claims, the assessment reportedly said.

On Wednesday, Russian Permanent Representative to the UN Vassily Nebenzia called for an objective investigation into the incident and for the perpetrators to face prosecution.

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US Aware of Kurmasheva's Arrest in Russia, No Notification by Moscow - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware of the arrest of dual US-Russian citizen Alsu Kurmasheva in Russia, but has not been officially notified by Moscow, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

"We are aware of reports concerning the detention of Alsu Kurmasheva in Russia," Miller said during a press briefing. "We have not been officially notified by the government of Russia about this arrest yet but this is a case we have been tracking since May, when the Russian government seized her passports and prevented her from leaving the country."

US media reported that Kurmasheva, a reporter with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, was arrested in the Russian city of Kazan on Wednesday and charged with failing to register as a foreign agent.

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US Court Schedules Status Conference in Russian Citizen Konoshchenok's Case for January 23

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NEW YORK, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US District Court for the Eastern District of New York on Thursday scheduled the next status conference in the case of Russian national Vadim Konoshchenok for January 23, 2024.

The US authorities allege that Konoshchenok was transporting US-made items from Estonia to Russia in violation of the existing sanctions regime.

"How about January 23, 11:00 a.m.?" Judge Hector Gonzalez asked the parties during the court hearing.

The defense and the prosecution agreed with the judge's proposal to schedule the next status conference for January 23.

The judge expressed hope the case will go to trial by next summer.

One of the defense lawyers told the court that Konoshchenok has complained about the food quality provided in detention and that his client receives required medications only occasionally.

On July 13, the Estonian authorities extradited Konoshchenok to the United States, where the authorities charged him with conspiring to circumvent sanctions, illegally purchasing items for the Russian defense sector and for committing related financial fraud.

The US Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York told Sputnik that Konoshchenok did not plead guilty to the charges against him.

In December, the Russian embassy in Tallinn dismissed claims that Konoshchenok was an FSB officer, saying the claim is nothing more than a fantasy.

The embassy said that Konoshchenok, born in Tallinn, lived in Estonia as a permanent resident with his six children. The embassy called the detention and extradition of Konoshchenuk to the United States another instance of hostage-taking of a Russian citizen.

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US Needs More Investigators in Kiev to Probe Potential Aid Abuse - USAID IG Chief Nominee

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US government has only two in investigators on the ground in Ukraine to investigate all issues of alleged corruption in the more than $100 billion of aid Washington has given and is requesting six more, Paul Martin, the Biden administration's nominee to be USAID's next inspector general, told Congress on Thursday.

"USAID OIG, it's my understanding, has two criminal investigators at the embassy in Kiev and we would like to get up to six more auditors and investigators on the ground," Martin said. "We need more boots on the ground, permanently there."

Martin also said three different US government inspector generals already had authorization to monitor the aid flow for waste and corruption and no more were needed.

But although the necessary legal mechanisms to allow oversight to operate were already in place, the process was seriously still constrained by lack of personnel approved to operate there, Martin stressed.

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Pushing Human Rights Issues in Egypt to be US Priority - US Nominee For Ambassador

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Pressing the Egyptian government to improve its record on human rights will be a top priority of the Biden administration, US nominee as next ambassador to Cairo Herro Mustafa Garg told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) on Wednesday.

"I share with you the concerns on human rights in Egypt: "It will be a top priority for me," Garg said in response to a question from Senator Chris Murphy. "I commit to continuing this discussion with the Egyptians so that we do see tangible progress on thes important issues."

Murphy said President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's regime currently had 30,000 to 50,000 people jailed for political reasons. Garg said President Joe Biden had discussed US human rights concerns in his meeting with al-Sisi on Tuesday in Cairo.

"The president did have a good discussion with El-Sisi yesterday [Tuesday]on getting humanitarian aid into Gaza through Egypt. We do have the commitment for that to happen," Garg added.

Born in Erbil, Iraq, Garg became the first US ambassador of Kurdish descent when she was appointed ambassador to Bulgaria in 2019. Her family fled Saddam Hussein and spent two years living in refugee camps in Iran until they were sponsored to come to the United States.

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UN Concerned Level of Killings in West Bank on Level Not Seen Since 2005 - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 19 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is concerned about the level of killing in the West Bank, which has not seen seen since 2005, and calls on all sides to de-escalate the situation, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Thursday.

"We are concerned that the level of killings in the West Bank has not been seen there since 2005. So we need that to de-escalate," Haq said during a press briefing.

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Biden Increasing Hatred Toward US by Sponsoring Israel War Against Gaza - Activist

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WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is increasing hatred toward Americans by providing military assistance to Israel amid its war with Gaza, co-founder of a women-led peace group CODEPINK Medea Benjamin told Sputnik.

When asked about about President Joe Biden's expected request to Congress for additional funding for Israel, Benjamin said: "It makes me literally sick."

"I am just ashamed of my government that this is what we're doing in the middle of a crisis when people are being bombed every day that the US decides that it's going to give even more money to keep this bombing going and to keep this apartheid state of Israel going," she said. "I think so many people around the world are looking at what's happening in Gaza, and looking at Biden in his support and it is increasing hatred against the United States, which is actually bad for our national security."

She stated that it is a "terrible miscalculation" to support Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli government while they are "committing war crimes."

Biden is set to request from Congress an unprecedented defense aid package for Israel this week. His supplemental spending request is expected to include assistance for both Ukraine and Israel.

Benjamin believes that Biden's request will "sail through" Congress and will be approved.

"There are very few members of Congress that are willing to stand up to the US government on this one, and the pro-Israel lobby in the United States is so powerful, that members of Congress are afraid to speak out," she said. "Just like we see members of the administration and staff in Congress are afraid to speak out. So the aid will go through, I have no doubt on that, unfortunately."

On October 7, the Palestinian group Hamas launched a surprise large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing and abducting people in neighboring Israeli communities. Israel launched retaliatory strikes and ordered a complete blockade of the Gaza Strip, home to more than 2 million people, cutting off supplies of water, food and fuel. Thousands of dead and injured have been reported on both sides as a result of the escalation.

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US House Won't Hold Speaker Vote Thursday, Looks to Empower McHenry - Congressional Source

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will not hold a floor vote on Thursday to elect a new speaker, with some House Republicans instead seeking to empower temporary speaker pro tempore Patrick McHenry, a congressional source told Sputnik.

"There will be no third vote for Mr. [Jim] Jordan today or anytime in the near future," the congressional source said. "The House is likely to consider a resolution backing Mr. McHenry as interim Speaker until January 3."

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the House of Representatives held floor votes in an attempt to elect a new speaker. House Republicans nominated Jordan, but failed to unite the party behind

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him and secure the 217 votes needed to win the speakership. House Democrats unified behind Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, winning him a plurality of votes both times.

House lawmakers are unable to conduct normal legislative business, such as passing government funding bills or aid packages, until they elect a new speaker or empower McHenry.

However, some House Republicans including Matt Gaetz, Chip Roy and Dan Bishop have expressed opposition to empowering McHenry.

"The proposal to empower the Speaker pro tem is not significantly different than electing Speaker Hakeem Jeffries. It is a coalition government between the Democrats and the Republican big spenders," Bishop said in a statement.

In addition, Gaetz and Roy both questioned the constitutionality of empowering McHenry.

McHenry was selected to serve as a temporary speaker in the event Congressman Kevin McCarthy, whom House lawmakers ousted from the leadership role earlier this month, was unable to perform his duties.

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New York Attorney General Sues 3 Crypto Firms for Fraud of Over $1Bln - Statement

NEW YORK, October 19 (Sputnik) - New York Attorney General Letitia James has sued three cryptocurrency companies under the Gemini and Genesis brands for allegedly defrauding some 230,000 investors of more than $1 billion, the Office of the New York Attorney General said in a statement on Thursday.

"These cryptocurrency companies lied to investors and tried to hide more than a billion dollars in losses, and it was middle-class investors who suffered as a result," James said in the statement. "Hardworking New Yorkers and investors around the country lost more than a billion dollars because they were fed blatant lies that their money would be safe and grow if they invested it in Gemini Earn. Instead, Gemini hid the risks of investing with Genesis and Genesis lied to the public about its losses."

Gemini is a New York-based digital asset platform that allows investors to buy and sell cryptocurrencies. According to the lawsuit, Gemini launched in February 2021 an investing program with Genesis called Gemini Earn, in which Genesis generated profits for investors by lending assets to third parties and returning a portion of those profits to investors.

When launching Gemini Earn, Gemini told investors that it had vetted Genesis through a risk management framework and that it was a trusted company. However, the Attorney General found that Gemini's internal risk analyses of Genesis showed that loans to the company were risky.

Citing an example, James said that just a year into its investment program, Gemini revised its estimate of Genesis' credit rating from BBB (investment grade) to CCC (junk grade) but did not publicly reveal to investors that it downgraded its rating and continued to market Earn as low-risk.

"Gemini knew Genesis' loans were undersecured and at one point highly concentrated with one entity, Sam Bankman-Fried's Alameda, but did not reveal this information to investors," the

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statement said.
Bankman-Fried, on his own, faces lawsuits totaling more than $1 billion for defrauding cryptocurrency investors and has been in custody since December.
"At one point, Sam Bankman-Fried's Alameda was the borrower for nearly 60% of all outstanding loans from Genesis to third parties," the statement said.
The Attorney General seeks to ban Genesis, its former CEO Soichiro Moro, its parent company, DCG, and DCG's CEO Barry Silbert from the financial investment industry in New York, get restitution for investors in the companies and disgorge the firms' ill-gotten gains, the statement added.

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Ameris Bank to Pay $9Mln in Settlement Over Redlining Allegations - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke on Thursday announced that the Justice Department filed a complaint against Ameris Bank, accusing the bank of redlining predominantly Black and Hispanic areas in Jacksonville, Florida.
"Today, the Justice Department filed a complaint and a proposed consent decree that, once approved by the court, requires Ameris Bank to pay $9 million dollars to resolve our allegations that the bank redlined majority-Black and Hispanic neighborhoods here in Jacksonville. Ameris is a bank with nearly $25 billion in assets that operates in nine states across the southeast and mid-Atlantic," Clarke said during a press conference for the Justice Department's Combating Redlining Initiative.
According to the court filing, redlining is a form of discrimination forbidden under these laws, happens when lenders reject or deter applications or steer clear of offering loans and credit services in neighborhoods due to the racial or ethnic backgrounds of those living there.
Furthermore, Clarke said that their complaint suggests Ameris might have breached the Fair Housing Act and the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, both of which are federal civil rights laws against lending discrimination.
She added that their study indicated that from 2016 to 2021, Ameris apparently did not offer mortgage lending services to predominantly Black and Hispanic communities in Jacksonville.

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Activist 'Disgusted' by Veto on UN Gaza Resolution, Says US Should Be Forced to Seek Peace

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Co-founder of a women-led peace group CODEPINK Medea Benjamin told Sputnik that the United States vetoing a draft UN Security Council resolution on the Israel-Hamas war causes disgust and urged the international community to press Washington to call for a ceasefire.

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On Wednesday, the US vetoed a draft UNSC resolution that would call for humanitarian pauses and urge Israel to rescind its evacuation order for Gazans. Russia and the United Kingdom abstained. Russia sought to amend the draft resolution, but the amendments were rejected.

"My reaction is disgust and that the world community has to come back again and again and again, and force the United States to call for a ceasefire," Benjamin said.

Benjamin described the situation in the Gaza Strip as "pretty hopeless."

"I don't see Israel ever really agreeing to a two-state solution because there's so many settlements that have eaten up so much of the Palestinian land, and with the tremendous hatred that is built up now between Israelis and Palestinians, I don't see them living in one democratic state either. There's got to be a solution because humanity can't keep going like this. But I personally don't see it at this moment," she said.

Benjamin also warned that the current situation is very dangerous and may spill over across the region.

"There are so many areas whether it's Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Jordan, so many areas in which this could spill over because people are very upset," she said. "The people in the street are upset. We know that if the fighting breaks out, if Hezbollah gets involved, then there will be Israeli attacks in Lebanon and then Iran will get involved. This could easily become a bloodbath again in the Middle East."

She stressed that after all these years of fighting in the Middle East, the people there deserve peace.

"And that's why we have to build support for the ceasefire," Benjamin added. "The most important thing right now and the one thing that we're all united and calling for is a ceasefire, so that more people in Gaza don't keep getting killed. But that it doesn't spread into a wider regional war."

On October 7, the Palestinian group Hamas launched a surprise large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing and abducting people in neighboring Israeli communities. Israel launched retaliatory strikes and ordered a complete blockade of the Gaza Strip, home to more than 2 million people, cutting off supplies of water, food and fuel. Thousands of dead and injured have been reported on both sides as a result of the escalation.

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US House to Consider Resolution Backing McHenry as Interim Speaker Until January 3 - Congressional Source to Sputnik

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Russia Has Submitted Resolution to UNGA on Peaceful Outer Space Activities - Official

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UNITED NATIONS, October 19 (Sputnik) - Russia has submitted to the United Nations General Assembly a draft resolution on peaceful outer space activities, the Russian Foreign Ministry Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Department Deputy Director Kosntantin Vorontsov said on Thursday.

"The Russian Federation submits to the first committee for its consideration, a draft UN General Assembly resolution on no first placement of weapons in outer space, transparency and Confidence Building Measures in outer space activities and further practical measures for the prevention of an arms race in outer space. ," Vorontsov told the First Committee members on Disarmament.

We call on all states to support this resolution, he added.

During the meeting, Vorontsov also voiced out his concerns over the US military biological program, asked multiple 'unanswered questions' and emphasized that the facts regarding its implementation in Ukraine with the support of the Defense Department and affiliated entities requires close attention.

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Russia Wants Answers on US Biological Activities in Ukraine - Foreign Ministry

UNITED NATIONS, October 19 (Sputnik) - Russia at the United Nations on Thursday reiterated its request for the United States to shed light on its biological activities in Ukraine.

"We want to receive answers to the following question. What are the indicators on public health in the recent 10-15 years that have improved thanks to the United States assistance in Ukraine?" the Russian Foreign Ministry's Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Department Deputy Director Kosntantin Vorontsov said at a UN first committee meeting.

Vorontsov requested several more answers from the United States on pathogens and biological weapons.

Vorontsov stressed that Russia has provided a "mass of evidence" regarding the US's military biological program in Ukraine, and it requires close attention.

Since March 2022, Russia has repeatedly accused the United States of conducting biological research in Ukraine for military purposes. Russia has pointed out that up to 30 biological laboratories in Ukraine were likely involved in those efforts. The United States has denied the allegations.

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Biden to Nominate Kurt Campbell as Deputy Secretary of State - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) – US President Biden will nominate Kurt Campbell to fill the deputy secretary of state post, Politico reported on Thursday, citing three sources.

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Campbell is currently the National Security Council's coordinator for the Indo-Pacific.

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US, Allies Use Civilian Infrastructure in Outer Space For Military Purposes - Official

UNITED NATIONS, October 19 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies have been using civilian infrastructure in outer space for military purposes and this will have a negative impact on peaceful outer space activities, the Russian Foreign Ministry Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Department Deputy Director Kosntantin Vorontsov said on Thursday.

"I'm referring to the fact that the United States and allies are using components of civilian infrastructure in outer space, including commercial infrastructure, and they're doing this for military purposes," Vorontsov told the First Committee members on Disarmament.

Provocative use of civilian satellites gives rise to questions within the context of the Outer Space Treaty, which calls for only peaceful use, he added.

"As a result of reckless actions by Western states where there is now an unjustified risk over the sustainability of peaceful outer space activities as well as many socio-economic processes on Earth, which affect the well being of people first and foremost in developing countries, " he continued.

During the meeting, Vorontsov also voiced out his concerns over the US military biological program, asked multiple 'unanswered questions' and emphasized that the facts regarding its implementation in Ukraine with the support of the Defense Department and affiliated entities requires close attention.

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UNSC Adopts Resolution on Libya Over Arms Embargo,Travel Ban, Freezing Asset - President

UNITED NATIONS, October 19 (Sputnik) – The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has adopted a draft resolution on Thursday concerning arms embargo, travel ban, assets freezing, and other issues related to Libya, Brazilian envoy to the UN Sérgio França Danese, who presides over the UNSC on a rotating basis this month, said.

"The draft resolution has been adopted unanimously. as Resolution 2701 (2023)," he said.

The resolution expressed serious concern over continued violations of the arms embargo.

"[The Security Council] demands full compliance by all Member States with the arms embargo, calls on all Member States not to intervene in the conflict or take measures that exacerbate the conflict and reiterates that individuals and entities determined by the Committee to have violated the provisions of resolution 1970 (2011), including the arms embargo, or assisted others in doing so, are subject to designation," the document said.

The council also called on all member states to implement effectively the travel ban and asset

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freeze measures in relation to all individuals on the sanctions list, it added.

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US State Dept. Issues Global Travel Warning, Cites Potential for Attacks Against Americans

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US State Department issued a worldwide caution alert on Thursday for Americans traveling overseas, citing the potential for terrorist attacks amid heightened global tensions.

"Due to increased tensions in various locations around the world, the potential for terrorist attacks, demonstrations or violent actions against US citizens and interests, the Department of State advises US citizens overseas to exercise increased caution," the alert said.

The alert encourages US citizens traveling abroad to remain vigilant in tourist areas, enroll in the State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program and follow State Department social media pages for updates.

The alert comes amid demonstrations around the world linked to the conflict between Israel and Palestinian Hamas fighters. On October 7, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, sparking a state of war in the country which has since killed and injured thousands of people.

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Attorney General Says US Taking Steps in Response to Threats Related to Israel-Hamas War

WASHINGTON, October 19, (Sputnik)- US Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Thursday that the US it taking measures in response to the rising threats related to the Israel-Hamas conflict.

"Last week, I directed all 94 of our United States Attorneys' Offices and the FBI to be in close touch with federal, state, and local law enforcement partners in their districts. Yesterday I met with, and today and tomorrow I will continue to meet with, our US Attorneys and federal, state, and local law enforcement officials here in Florida," Garland said on Thursday during a press Conference for the Justice Department's Combating Redlining Initiative.

Furthermore, Garland mentioned that the FBI has observed a rise in threats against various faith groups, especially Jewish, Muslim, and Arab communities, and he has directed US Attorneys to engage with community leaders to reiterate their support and determine any further assistance required.

This comes after a large-scale attack by Hamas on Israel earlier this month, leading to significant casualties on both sides. In response, Israel declared a state of war with Hamas, imposing a complete blockade on the Gaza Strip, affecting water, electricity, and food supplies.

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Three-Quarters of Americans Worried About Israel Conflict Causing US Terror Attack - Poll

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Three-quarters of likely voters in the United States are concerned about the conflict in Israel leading to terror attacks within the US, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll released Thursday.

Seventy-five percent (75%) of likely US voters are concerned about a terror attack linked to the conflict in Israel, including 43% who are very concerned, the poll report said. Less than a quarter of respondents, 22%, said they are not concerned about an attack.

The poll comes following a surprise attack on Israel by Palestinian Hamas fighters. The attack sparked a state of war in Israel, which has since killed and injured thousands of people.

The poll surveyed 1,014 likely US voters from October 15-17. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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US Existing Home Sales Hit 13-Year Lows Amid Soaring Lending Rates, Tight Supply

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Sales of existing homes in the United States dropped to a 13-year low as spiraling rates on mortgages along with limited supply kept many off the market, the National Association of Realtors said Thursday.

"As has been the case throughout this year, limited inventory and low housing affordability continue to hamper home sales," Lawrence Yun, chief economist at the realtors' association, said. "Higher mortgage rates are really hampering activity."

Existing home sales fell 2% in September to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 3.96 million units, the lowest level since October 2010. The consensus of forecasts by Wall Street economists for September sales were 3.89 million units.

Soaring interest and mortgage rates have discouraged first-time home buyers in the United States, who typically form the core of the demand circle for housing in the country.

US mortgage rates for housing loans neared 23-year highs at the end of September, Freddie Mac, the federal agency responsible for assisting Americans with home buying, said.

The 30-year fixed-rate mortgage hit 7.31%, a peak since 2000, up from 6.65% during this same time in 2022. The 15-year fixed mortgage rate was at 6.72% compared with 5.95% from a year ago.

New home building in the United States rose 7% in September, rebounding from August's sharp drop, though future construction remained dampened by surging interest and mortgage rates, Commerce Department data showed Wednesday.

The surge in mortgage rates came after the Federal Reserve hiked US interest rates by 11

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times between March 2022 and August 2023, raising them by 5.25% from a base rate of just 0.25%. The Fed is scheduled to decide on rates again at its next two-day policy meeting ending on November 2.

Housing and real estate play important roles in the US economy, with roughly 65% of occupied housing units being owner-occupied. That makes homes a substantial source of household wealth and home construction a key provider of employment.

In the 2008/09 financial crisis, a crash of the housing market precipitated what later came to be known as the era of the Great Recession. Since then, the US property market has rapidly recovered on the back of economic recovery as well as demand from buyers. Even the 2020/22 coronavirus pandemic only had a fleeting impact on home buying in the United States.

But while supply of homes, both existing and new, have been way below demand the past two years, rising interest rates and record home prices have kept buyers away.

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Ex-Trump Attorney Sidney Powell Pleads Guilty in Georgia Election Case - Broadcast

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Sidney Powell, a former attorney for ex-US President Donald Trump, pleaded guilty on Thursday to charges brought as part of an election interference case in the state of Georgia, according to a courtroom broadcast.

Prosecutors recommended sentencing Powell to six years of probation. Powell must also provide testimony at future court proceedings and write a letter apologizing to the people of Georgia.

Prosecutors brought charges against Powell and other Trump supporters accused of accessing and copying information from election systems in hopes of proving election interference against Trump.

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China Transformed by Hypersonic Tech, May Intend to Strike Foreign Assets - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) missile forces are being transformed by hypersonic technology, which Beijing may be planning to use to strike foreign bases and ships, the Pentagon said in a report to Congress.

"The PRC's deployment of the DF-17 [hypersonic glide vehicle]-armed MRBM [medium-range ballistic missile] will continue to transform the PLA's missile force," the report said. "The system is possibly intended to… strike foreign military bases and fleets in the Western Pacific, according to a PRC-based military expert."

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Pentagon Says China May Be Developing Conventionally-Armed Intercontinental Missiles

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department said on Thursday that the People's Republic of China (PRC) may be exploring the development of conventionally-armed intercontinental range missiles that could hit targets in the United States.
"The PRC may be exploring development of conventionally-armed intercontinental range missile systems that would allow the PRC to threaten conventional strikes against targets in the continental United States," the Defense Department said in a report on China.

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Pentagon Estimates China to Have Over 1,000 Operational Nuclear Warheads by 2030 - Report

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon said China is projected to have more than 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030.
"DoD estimates that the PRC will probably have over 1,000 operational warheads by 2030, much of which will be deployed at higher readiness levels," the Pentagon said in its report to Congress.
China possessed more than 500 operational warheads as of May 2023, the Pentagon estimated.

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Pentagon Says China Continuing to Resist Mil-to-Mil Contacts With US

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon said China is continuing to resist military-to-military communications with the United States.
"Throughout 2022 and into 2023, the PLA [People's Liberation Army] largely denied, cancelled, and ignored recurring US-PRC military-to-military engagements and DoD requests for communication at multiple levels," the Pentagon said in its report on China.
The Pentagon confirmed its commitment to maintaining open lines of communication with China to ensure competition does not veer into conflict.

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China Secretly Providing Material Support to Russia for War in Ukraine - Pentagon Report

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - China has allegedly made attempts to secretly provide Russia with material to support Moscow in its ongoing conflict with Ukraine, the US Department of Defense said in a new report to Congress.

"The PRC [People's Republic of China] views its 'no limits' partnership with Russia as integral to advancing the PRC's development and emergence as a great power. Nevertheless, Beijing has attempted a discreet approach to providing material support to Russia for its war against Ukraine," the report said on Wednesday.

The United States believes that China views Russia as an important strategic partner in balancing against the containment, suppression, and encirclement from the US and its allies and partners as described by Xi earlier this year, according to a senior US Defense Department official commenting on the report.

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China Increased Provocative Actions Around Taiwan in 2022 - Pentagon Report to Congress

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - China increased its provocative and destabilizing actions around the Taiwan strait throughout 2022, including engaging in ballistic overflights of Taiwan and simulated joint firepower strike operations, the US Defense Department said in a report to Congress.

"Throughout 2022, the PLA [People's Liberation Army] increased provocative and destabilizing actions in and around the Taiwan strait, including ballistic missile overflights of Taiwan, increased flights into Taiwan's self-declared air defense identification zone, and large-scale simulated joint blockade and simulated joint firepower strike operations," the new report said.

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US Sees China Adopting More Dangerous Actions in Indo-Pacific - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The People's Republic of China (PRC) shifted to a more dangerous and provocative approach in the Indo-Pacific region in 2022, the US Defense Department said in its China Military Power Report to Congress.

"In 2022, the PRC adopted more dangerous, coercive, and provocative actions in the Indo-Pacific region. For example, between the fall of 2021 and fall of 2023, the United States documented over 180 instances of PLA coercive and risky air intercepts against US aircraft in the region. Over the same period, the PLA also conducted around 100 instances of coercive

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and risky operational behavior in the air domain against US allies and partners," the report said.

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UN Says Opposes Restrictions on Religion as Kiev Moves to Ban Ukraine Orthodox Church

UNITED NATIONS, October 19 (Sputnik) – The United Nations opposes any restrictions related to religion, spokesperson Farhan Haq told Sputnik on Thursday, after the Ukrainian parliament moved closer to ban the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC).

"We oppose any restrictions on religious practices. For more information, please contact OHCHR," Haq said.

Earlier in the day, the Ukrainian parliament passed the first reading of a bill that would ban the canonical UOC.

Over the past year, authorities in Ukraine have unleashed the largest wave of persecution against the UOC by opening criminal investigations into activities of its clergies and conducting searches. Local authorities in various regions of Ukraine have banned the activities of the UOC by accusing the church of ties to Russia.

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Americans' Confidence in News Media Reaches Record Low – Poll

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - Americans' confidence in the news media has reached a record low of 32%, a level not seen since 2016, according to a Gallup poll released Thursday.

Only 32% of Americans reported that they had "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of "trust and confidence" in the mass media to report the news "fully, accurately and fairly," according to the latest annual poll conducted September 1-23.

While it marks a historic low since Gallup started tracking the issue in 1972, it is a small decrease from the previous two years – 34% in 2022 and 36% in 2021.

At the same time, a record high 39% of Americans reported having "none at all" – 12 percentage points higher than in 2016. Along with last year, this was only the second time that Americans with no confidence at all in the media exceeded those with a great deal or a fair amount of confidence.

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US Believes Likelihood of Rescuing All Hamas Hostages Extremely Low - Reports

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WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The odds of all hostages taken by Hamas on October 7 being rescued are extremely low, Newsweek reported on Thursday, citing a source familiar with the Biden administration's response to the hostage crisis.

"There is a grim acknowledgment that the likelihood of all the hostages being rescued is extremely low," the source said. "You have to be prepared for a worst-case scenario."

As the hostage crisis continues, all efforts around it will largely be made in secret, the report said.

US and Israeli officials are jointly working to gather intelligence on the whereabouts of the hostages. While a ground invasion by Israel could put their lives at greater risk, the US may not have much of a say in whatever choice Israel ends up making, the report added.

The US is "basically operating with one arm tied behind our back" in this situation, the source said.

At least 30 US citizens have been killed since the start of the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The number of Americans held hostage by Hamas is unknown.

On October 7, the Palestinian movement Hamas launched a surprise large-scale rocket attack on Israel, prompting the latter to declare a state of war the following day and launch retaliatory strikes. On October 9, Israel ordered a complete blockade of the Gaza Strip, home to more than 2 million people, cutting off supplies of water, food and fuel. Both Israel and Palestine have reported over 1,000 deaths and thousands of injured as a result of the escalation.

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US Citizens in Lebanon Urged to Depart ‘as Soon as Possible’ - State Dept

WASHINGTON, October 19 (Sputnik) - The US State Department urges American citizens in Lebanon to depart the country "as soon as possible" while commercial flights remain available, the embassy in Lebanon said on Thursday.

"The Department of State urges U.S. citizens in Lebanon to make plans to depart as soon as possible while commercial options are still available. We recommend that U.S. citizens who choose not to depart prepare contingency plans for emergency situations," the embassy said in an email to US nationals in Lebanon.

On Tuesday, the US updated its travel advisory for Lebanon, advising against any travel to the country due to the "unpredictable security situation" in connection with the Israeli-Gaza war.

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