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12/19/23 Tuesday

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'Father Christmas May Be Delayed': West's Antagonism of Russia, Iran Block Red Sea Alternatives

For a continent so dependent on specific trade routes, Europe has short-sightedly used sanctions as a weapon against nations otherwise able to host alternative trade routes, hurting itself in the process, a consultant told Sputnik.

Recently, the Yemeni Shiiite militant group Ansarallah, which controls most of Yemen, have declared that Israel-linked ships will not be allowedto pass the Bab el-Mandeb, the narrow strait that links the Red Sea to the Gulf of Yemen and the Indian Ocean beyond. Other ships, they said, will still have free passage.

However, in response to the Yemeni declaration and to news that some ships with tenuous links to Israel had also been attacked, several major shipping companies, including Maersk, Hapag Lloyd, MSC, and oil giant BP have decided to stop using the waterway entirely.

Some 12% of seaborne petroleum and 8% of liquified natural gas (LNG) trade pass through the strait every year, part of $700 billion in annual trade that uses the waterway.

The anti-Israel blockade is part of Ansarallah's response to the Israeli bombing campaign and invasion of the Gaza Strip, which has killed more than 20,000 people since early October and displaced almost the entire population of 2.3 million Palestinians. The group has also fired ballistic missiles at the southern Israeli city of Eilat.

In response to Ansarallah's declaration, the Pentagon announced on Monday the creation of a multinational task force dubbed Operation Prosperity Guardian to secure Red Sea trade for Israeli ships and restore the confidence of other cargo vessels to use the waterway. The task force includes the UK, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, and Spain, as well as the US.

The US has long opposed the rise of Ansarallah, taking part in the Saudi-led coalition war against the group that killed a quarter-million people in Yemen beginning in 2015 and devastated what was already one of the world's poorest countries. The UN brokered a ceasefire last year, but talks on a more permanent peace and to establish the legitimate government of Yemen have been slow-going.

Paul Goncharoff, a businessman and chief manager of consulting firm Goncharoff, LLC, told Sputnik on Tuesday that "Father Christmas may not arrive" on time in the European Union this year, as the West has already antagonized all of the nations through which an alternative trade corridor might run.

He said the situation in the Red Sea "is extremely serious and has already delayed shipments from Asia to Europe for the Christmas Festive season," he observed. "It impacts many delivery companies - a lot of Europeans will find their Christmas and New Year presents delayed this year, likewise for regular deliveries. Perishable items will be especially affected. There are likely to be significant insurance claims."

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Goncharoff said that redirecting freight traffic from the Red Sea to other routes would take time and not solve the present problem of delays.

"Europe has blocked routes via Russia, and the alternative INSTC [International North-South Transport Corridor] is not fully ready. Shipments around the Cape [of Good Hope] take rather longer and will not arrive until well after Christmas. As this is a seasonal market, many of these deliveries will lose their deadlines. Christmas Day is next Monday, deliveries cannot be made in time for that timescale."

"The US and EU at present have no other alternatives as they have sanctioned Russia and Iran. They could have diverted ships via the Gulf and north via Iran, and then via Azerbaijan and Turkey to Europe's Black Sea Ports - however that route is now cut off. Or, they could have sent via Iran to Russia at Astrakhan and then over to the Baltic States, Poland and Belarus, but these borders are now closed to Russian and Belarussian traffic," he explained.

Goncharoff said that compared to the March 2021 grounding of the container ship Ever Given in the Suez Canal for six days, the present situation "will have a longer and possibly long-term impact."

"The Ever Given situation was just one ship, this situation is an ongoing conflict. Unless it is resolved this could take weeks or even months to resolve," he said.

"Russia could play a role; however, its access to ports to Europe are sanctioned," he noted. "In cutting the country off, the EU has limited their supply chains. When those come under unforeseen stress, the perils of the EU having limited access becomes apparent. It is a classic example of how the EU has not fully comprehended the impact of sanctions that they have imposed. Now it means that Father Christmas may either not arrive, or be delayed this year, at least in the UK and Europe."

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'Their Only Playing Card': US Talk of Two-State Solution 'Cover' for Israel's 'Genocide' in Gaza

For decades, US and Arab leaders have upheld a two-state solution as the only path forward for Israel and the Palestinians - an agreement that required cooperation from an Israeli government uninterested in the project. Now, the Yemeni group Ansarallah has introduced a militant new factor to the equation, a journalist told Sputnik.

Over the weekend, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a startling admission that to many did not come as a surprise at all: that in the aftermath of the 1993-5 Oslo Accords, he deliberately worked to undermine a two-state solution that would have seen the Palestinians given a separate state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"I'm proud that I prevented the establishment of a Palestinian state because today everybody understands what that Palestinian state could have been, now that we've seen the little Palestinian state in Gaza," Netanyahu told Israeli reporters on Saturday.

Using common Zionist language to describe the West Bank by referring to the ancient Jewish kingdoms of Judea and Samaria, Netanyahu went on to say that "everyone understands what

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would have happened if we had capitulated to international pressures and enabled a state like that in Judea and Samaria, surrounding Jerusalem and on the outskirts of Tel Aviv."

He also called the Oslo Accords a "mistake" he had "inherited" from then-Prime Minister Ytzhak Rabin, who signed the agreements to end the violence of the First Intifada, at the time the largest-ever Palestinian national uprising.

The agreements, signed in 1993 and 1995, saw Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) agree to establish a Palestinian state in what the United Nations calls the "Occupied Territories," the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which Israel has controlled since it seized them from Jordan and Egypt in 1967.

It also established the Palestinian National Authority to govern the territories and serve as the genesis of the new state apparatus.

Not all Israelis or Palestinians agreed with the compromise, and Rabin was assassinated months after signing the last of the agreements by an Israeli gunman and follower of the far-right rabbi Meir Kahane, who was also the ideological progenitor of the Otzma Yehudit and Religious Zionism parties currently in Netanyahu's coalition government.

Since Oslo, Western leaders have included support for a two-state solution in their standard repertoire of diplomatic positions, asserting the agreement whenever violence between Israelis and Palestinians flares up. That includes US President Joe Biden, who in 1986 declared that "Were there not an Israel, the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interest in the region."

Indeed, Netanyahu's government has been pressuring the White House not to publicly mention the two-state solution, according to US media reports.

Esteban Carrillo, a journalist and editor for the online news magazine The Cradle, told Radio Sputnik's Fault Lines on Monday that while the US and Arab states continue to talk about a two-state solution, the government doing the most for Gaza was the Yemeni militant group Ansarallah, which controls most of Yemen, including its capital of Sana'a, and operates as the de facto government of the region's poorest country.

"Well, what else can the White House say honestly, this is literally their only playing card," he said. "And at this point, they've been arming Israel as they are conducting what is essentially a genocide in the Gaza Strip, displacing 2 million people, killing - there's a new report today saying that it's actually around 25,000, with hundreds missing, still under the rubble because the rescue efforts cannot go on. So, of course, you know, Biden, they have to go back to Oslo, they have to go back to the Oslo Accords."

"Of course they have failed, and they failed because of Israel. And this call for a new two-state solution and now a revamped Palestinian Authority, this is going to fail as well, and it is because the Israelis do not even want to hear a word about this. They are saying it. There was a report a few days ago on some US outlet that said the Israelis are telling the US to stop talking about a two-state solution. Some Israeli official was interviewed, I think on Sky News over the weekend, and he was asked like, 'why shouldn't the Palestinians have the same rights?' And they're saying, essentially, 'they can't have the same rights as us because that that would mean that the genocide of the Jewish population of Israel.' You know, they always talk in these very maximalist terms and then their actions are as well as we are seeing with the ethnic cleansing of Gaza. They say they are there to eradicate Hamas, but the Hamas losses are minimal, and at this point, you have over 10,000 women and children killed."

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Carrillo noted that on Monday, Biden called Netanyahu's government "the most conservative government in Israel's history," adding that it "does not want a two-state solution."
Asked about Biden's comment, Mark Regev, Netanyahu's senior adviser for foreign affairs and international communications, brushed the disagreement aside, pointing instead to their agreement on the need to destroy Hamas through a military operation and expressing his belief that the US and Israel would come to an agreement on a "post-Hamas Gaza scenario."
"I would imagine that what happens at the end of this, in their view, is the mass displacement, the ethnic cleansing of Gaza, the complete removal of these 2 million people and pushing them into the Sinai. They keep saying 'the Arabs need to help them', and it's for them [Israel] to control Gaza, for them to control the West Bank, to take it over completely."
"Even Netanyahu is saying 'we don't want the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian Authority also wants to eradicate us', even though the Palestinian Authority is an organization that has for decades collaborated with Israel to suppress resistance in the West Bank. They are very much disliked in the occupied Palestinian territories because of these reasons and some others. So, you know, the Israelis, you need to look at their actions and you need to look at their statements. And they're very straightforward with what they want: you see former officials, you see current officials getting asked, 'you are going after Hamas, but, you know, we see all these innocent civilians' and they say, 'well, there's no innocents in Gaza, there's no civilians in Gaza'. This is the language of genocide and this is what's happening. And it's you know, it's taken such a long time for the Western world, or at the very least for Western media, for Western leaders, even Arab leaders, to accept this as a fact, that what is happening to the Palestinians right now, if it's up to Israel, it's not going to stop."
"Netanyahu today just said they need to increase the defense budget to around $5.5 billion. You know, they're not looking for the escalation."
Carrillo said Biden's talk of a two-state solution "is just cover" because they are really interested in suppressing Ansarallah because Yemen is "in control of" global trade with its blockade of the Red Sea to Israeli vessels.
"Today, BP said: 'we are no longer going to operate in the Red Sea'. The same with Evergreen. That's on top of five other shipping firms that already said 'we will not operate in the Red Sea anymore because of the threat posed by Yemen'. And now, remember, Yemen, in the Arab world, they are the poorest country. They're the least developed. This is a country that has been at war for eight years, brutal war. You know, at one point during the first two years, they were getting bombed every 3 hours in the capital, in Sana'a. But now, they are not just putting their country on the line, themselves on the line, they are showing that they have capabilities beyond what anybody really expected."
"In Western media, you keep hearing, they don't call them Ansarallah, which is this resistance faction, they call them the Houthis. The Houthis, you know, like they're this backwater tribe with AK-47s somewhere in the desert, when in reality who is doing these attacks and who are conducting these attacks on the Red Sea are the Yemeni Armed Forces."
"So now, you know, the Arab world's poorest country is doing essentially the most for Palestine. And the United States has been caught completely with their pants down, because right now the only way that they can stop. This is essentially opening a war front in Yemen. And that's why [US Defense Secretary] Lloyd Austin is right now here in the region. He's in Israel, he's going to

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meet some Arab leaders too - it's because they want to launch this naval task force, they want to call it Operation Prosperity Guardian, to stop Yemen.
“And that I think is really the most pressing issue right now in the halls of power in Washington, because what happens after the war in Gaza is going to be what happened before the war in Gaza. You know, this didn't start on October 7. This got worse on October 7, and the Israelis got punched in the nose on October 7, but before then, Gaza was already the world's largest concentration camp. They were already being bombed every so often, you know, the Israelis control everything. So in the outcome of these, no matter what the United States says, the Israelis will still at the very least, want to continue to control everything.”

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Alien-Hunting Astrophysicists Drop Catalog of Earth-Like Planets With Jupiter-Like Siblings

A group of astrophysicists have published a database of stars they’ve found that have both small, Earth-like planets as well as large, Jupiter-sized ones - a recipe scientists have come to see as crucial for the formation of life on our world.
The database, called the Kepler Giant Planet Search, took a decade to compile using data from the W. M. Keck Observatory on Mauna Kea in Hawaii. It is set to be published in January 2024 in the Astrophysical Journal Supplement Series.
"This catalog is the first of its kind and an unprecedented opportunity to explore the diversity of planetary systems that are out there with things that are like the solar system, but not exactly the solar system, and it gives us a chance to rewrite the story of how the planets form," Lauren Weiss, assistant professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Notre Dame, and leader of the team that published the catalog, said in a news release.
"The science question that I've been trying to answer over the past decade is: Of the other small planets like Earth that are out there, which of them have Jupiter siblings? Because this might be an important characteristic to look for, if we want to figure out where to find life,” she added.
In order to build the database, Weiss’ team recorded nearly 3,000 radial velocities of 63 sun-like stars that together had 157 known small planets, ranging in size from as small as Mars (15% Earth’s mass) to as large as Neptune (17 Earth masses). While some were icy, gassy planets like Neptune, many are likely rocky worlds like Earth and Mars, which might be suitable for life. During that study, they also found 13 Jupiter-like words in those same systems, as well as three companion stars.
The scientists used the radial velocity method, which is much more tedious, to spot the gas giants, because the common “dimming” method used by the Kepler space telescope is only useful for finding smaller worlds that closely orbit their star, resulting in periodic dimming of the light reaching Earth as it passes between the Earth and the star. However, Weiss’ team wanted planets more like Jupiter, which takes 12 years to orbit our sun, because recent studies have suggested that Jupiter played a highly important role in allowing life to develop on Earth.
“We often take Jupiter for granted but having a giant planet like Jupiter can have a profound effect on the habitability of terrestrial planets like Earth,” Stephen Kane, a planetary physicist at

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the University of California, Riverside, who has authored numerous papers on Jupiter, told US media in August 2022.
He noted that it was possible for Jupiter-like worlds to both protect smaller, inner solar system planets from comets and asteroids, but also to pose a threat to them by pulling them out of stable orbits that would allow life to develop.
Weiss said the paper will serve as the basis for future research into how other star systems are laid out, function, and might sustain life.
"Probably the thing I'm most excited about is revisiting this story of how the Earth formed," Weiss said. "Now that we have more information about what other kinds of planetary systems are out there, we're looking for patterns, finding new discoveries, and these possibilities really excite me."
Telegram posts

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“The Arab world's poorest country is doing essentially the most for Palestine,” Esteban Carrillo, an editor for The Cradle, told Sputnik about the Yemeni Ansarallah movement, which has shut down Israeli trade in the Red Sea.

Biden has criticized Netanyahu, saying Israel no longer wants a two-state solution with the Palestinians. Carrillo said it was the “only playing card” for the US and Arab states after arming Jerusalem to the hilt and doing nothing about the deaths of 25,000 people in Gaza.

“I would imagine that what happens at the end of this, in their view, is the mass displacement, the ethnic cleansing of Gaza, the complete removal of these 2 million people and pushing them into the Sinai. They keep saying ‘the Arabs need to help them’, and it's for them [Israel] to control Gaza, for them to control the West Bank, to take it over completely.”

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“The EU has not fully comprehended the impact of sanctions that they have imposed. Now it means that Father Christmas may either not arrive, or be delayed this year, at least in the UK and Europe.”

Businessman and consultant Paul Goncharoff told Sputnik the West would suffer from Ansarallah’s blockade of Israel-connected ships in the Red Sea because it has antagonized the countries through which any alternative cargo route might run.

“The US and EU at present have no other alternatives as they have sanctioned Russia and Iran. They could have diverted ships via the Gulf and north via Iran, and then via Azerbaijan and

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Turkey to Europe's Black Sea Ports - however that route is now cut off. Or, they could have sent via Iran to Russia at Astrakhan and then over to the Baltic States, Poland and Belarus, but these borders are now closed to Russian and Belarussian traffic," he explained.

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"Raytheon will design, build and test two high-power microwave antenna systems that will use directed energy to defeat airborne threats at the speed of light," read a press release Tuesday.

But as drone warfare led by the Houthis rages on, the weapons contractor says they don't expect to deliver prototypes of the technology until 2024 and 2026.

The US military has experimented with microwave weapons tech for decades, recently spurred on by the increasing use of drones on the battlefield.

The United States has long claimed the use of the technology by foreign adversaries, most recently demonstrated by unfounded claims of "Havana Syndrome" suffered by US diplomats.

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2023 is set to be one of the most unproductive years for US Congress ever

Unprecedented battles over the House speakership took weeks to resolve earlier this year, and Republicans have also spent days pursuing a so far unfruitful impeachment inquiry against US President Joe Biden.

But the 118th Congress has struggled to otherwise make good use of their time, with only 20 bills set to become law this year.

Numismatists will be pleased, however, after Congress voted to approve the minting of a coin celebrating the US Marine Corps.

2023 has seen a large number of lawmakers announce their retirements amidst what many have labeled a trend towards "political performance art" in Washington.

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US Military Taps Use of Microwave Weapons to Neutralize Drone Threats

For now, the use of drone swarms gives smaller adversaries waging asymmetric war a unique advantage that US military contractors are working to counterbalance.

US warnings of microwave weapons used to attack diplomatic personnel in Havana have been shown to be another case of Western projection as the Pentagon admits to its own development of the novel technology.

The news was announced Tuesday in US media as drone attacks from smaller adversaries increasingly change the dynamics of warfare internationally. Most recently, Houthi fighters in Yemen have used suicide drones to attack ships in the Red Sea as the country attempts to enforce a blockade against Israel. Drones have also seen use by both sides in Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

The swarms can be attacked with missiles, but that strategy is costly – far more costly than the drones themselves. Pentagon planners hope to find a cheaper way to neutralize the threat.

"Directed energy, high powered microwave, low-cost interceptors is where we want to be," said US Army Major General Sean Gainey last month at a meeting of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank funded by contributions from military contractors. Ken Bedingfield, finance chief at L3Harris Technologies, agreed that the increasing use of drones has created a sense of urgency. "We've arrived at a bit of a moment," said the representative of the weapons manufacturer.

As the United States announces a multinational effort to address the Houthis' effective blockade, RTX (the parent company of Raytheon) announced Tuesday the US Navy has ordered two new microwave directed energy weapon systems to knockout airborne targets.

"Raytheon, an RTX business, will design, build and test two high-power microwave antenna systems that will use directed energy to defeat airborne threats at the speed of light," read a release from the company.

Under the three-year, $31.3 million contract from the Naval Surface Warfare Center Dahlgren Division, Raytheon will deliver prototype systems to the US Navy and US Air Force as part of the Directed Energy Front-Line Electromagnetic Neutralization and Defeat program, the release said.

Raytheon says the systems will be designed to be transportable and represent a "cost-effective and reliable solution" to the threat of drones. But the company doesn't expect to deliver prototypes until 2024 and 2026, raising the prospect that drone warfare will remain an effective strategy for years to come.

Weapons manufacturing has seen large-scale privatization in the United States since the 1940s. Military contractors often attempt to sell the Pentagon on exotic and expensive new weapons programs that boost private manufacturers' profits, but some have questioned whether the strategy creates an optimally-functioning military. Ukraine's broad failure amidst Russia's special military operation in the Donbass has put the effectiveness of US weapons systems in doubt. Meanwhile, Russia has managed to leapfrog the United States in some crucial next-generation technologies, as when the country recently demonstrated the use of hypersonic weapons.

Paul Head, the director of Next Generation technologies at Raytheon, concedes that microwave weapons probably wouldn't completely disable large swarms of drones. But he and other war

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contractors hope they can sell the Pentagon on the technology as part of a "layered" approach to responding to the threat.

"If I have 20 incoming threats, and even if my high-power microwave can only address half of those, that's 10 less threats that we now need to deal with," said Head.

Earlier this year, the US Air Force tested the Thor system to disable drones, a technology in development for several years. Lockheed Martin is testing a system they dub "Morfius" which is carried by a drone and aims to attack from short range.

The United States has attempted to perfect concentrated microwave weapons for decades. When the 1960s "Starfish Prime" nuclear test in the Pacific damaged electrical systems in Hawaii, efforts intensified to find a way to harness the technology on the battlefield.

But developing a system that emits beams powerful enough to damage enemy electronics while remaining compact enough to be practical has proven challenging.

The US insisted foreign powers had cracked the code, claiming diplomats at US embassies in Moscow and Beijing had been targeted with a terrifying but invisible new weapon. But evidence to prove the claims never emerged.

The charge reappeared recently as US diplomats in Cuba complained of "Havana Syndrome," but the Central Intelligence Agency was forced to admit that the strange symptoms were not caused by any foreign adversary. Some have suggested the claims may be caused by mass social contagion as US diplomats confront the guilt and cognitive dissonance of their country's persecution of the small island nation.

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118th US Congress Reaches New Dysfunctional Highs, Data Reveals

New data shows just how unproductive Washington lawmakers have been compared to previous years.

Those who endorse the maxim "the government that governs best is the government that governs least" will be pleased to know 2023 is shaping up to be one of Capitol Hill's most unproductive years ever.

Data supporting the claim was released Monday when it was revealed only 24 bills have been passed by both the US Senate and House of Representatives this year. Legislation must be cleared by both chambers before becoming law in the United States.

What's more, only 20 of those bills have been signed by US President Joe Biden, giving them the full force of law.

Much of what the 118th Congress has passed is likely to appeal only to a few niche segments of the population. Numismatists can look forward to a coin celebrating the 250th anniversary of the US Marine Corps (complete with a website to mark the occasion, keeping graphic designers in Washington gainfully employed). Several Veterans Affairs clinics were also renamed to honor local military heroes.

"You're rewarding the wrong kind of behavior here," said retiring Rep. Brian Higgins (D-NY) recently, lamenting the increasing trend towards theatrics in Congress rather than productivity

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and cooperation. “My concern is the trend has just begun, it’s not ending. And my sense is, I can just do more constructive things with my life.”
2023 seems poised to set another record as large numbers of US lawmakers announce their retirements before next year’s election cycle.
Observers point to “divided government” as one cause for the logjam. Republicans control the House of Representatives, while Democrats narrowly control the Senate and Democrat Joe Biden sits in the White House.
The 104th, 112th, and 113th Congresses saw a similar lack of productivity with Republicans controlling legislative bodies and Democrats Barack Obama and Bill Clinton controlling the executive branch.
But those legislative sessions still saw between 70 and 73 laws passed. Congress still has another year to go before the end of the 118th session, but analysts believe 2024 could be even less productive as the politics of a presidential election year come into view.
Progress was stymied this year by unprecedented drama surrounding former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.
The House held an unprecedented 15 rounds of voting in January before finally confirming him, then spent three weeks without a speaker at all when Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) toppled McCarthy by October.
Data shows the trend towards shrinking productivity is increasing, with five of the six most unproductive years for the US Congress occurring since 2011.

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Late on Monday a volcanic eruption occurred on the Reykjanes Peninsula in Iceland. The eruption sent lava spewing into the night sky and has triggered authorities to take charge of evacuation efforts and prepare for possible lava flows.

“Gas pollution might be noticeable in Vestmannaeyjar today, but not elsewhere in populated areas. According to the weather forecast, gas pollution might be detected in the capital area late tonight or tomorrow morning,” the Icelandic Met Office wrote in an update on Tuesday.

They said that the eruption “does not pose an immediate threat to people" but will continue monitoring the eruption site. The lava flow, the agency added, is estimated to be about “one-quarter of what it was when it first erupted” and continues to diminish. People in Iceland have been anticipating volcanic activity for weeks as the region around Reykjavik has been experiencing increasing seismic activity since late October.

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Death Toll in Gansu Earthquake Rises to At Least 127

Rescue efforts following China's deadliest earthquake in nearly 10 years were hampered by the high altitude and temperatures of the region.

On Tuesday morning at least 127 people were reported to have died as the result of a magnitude 6.2 earthquake in northwest China. The quake first struck the province of Gansu late on Monday and severely damaged infrastructure. The mountainous Gansu province is one of the poorest and most diverse regions in the country.

Fatalities could also rise as more than 700 were reported to be injured—that figure is a sharp increase from the 96 injuries that were reported yesterday. Conditions in the region are also freezing, with temperatures reaching -13C (8.7F). Reports say that some people were reduced to starting bonfires in their yards, or setting cardboard boxes on fire in a desperate attempt to stay warm.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has reportedly ordered thousands of rescue crews to assist the affected region, and has ordered workers to repair infrastructure. Hours following the earthquake, rescuers are still attempting to dig people out of the rubble. A local official said the government had dispatched 1,400 rescue personnel to the quake zone, with another 1,600 on standby.

Rescue efforts are being made difficult by the remote location, high altitude and cold temperatures of the region. The first 72 hours following an earthquake are critical in rescue efforts, but the window is even shorter in this case.

"The golden hour for rescuing people for this earthquake will be shorter," said Wang Duo, a team leader of the Gansu Houtian Emergency Rescue Corps.

More than 15,000 houses were damaged by the earthquake which also knocked out water, electricity and transportation links in some parts of Gansu. Others were damaged by powerful mudslides that were triggered by the quake, and dozens of roads were damaged by landslides.

On Monday, the European-Mediterranean Seismological Center (EMSC) said that a magnitude 6.0 earthquake struck China at 15:59 GMT. The epicenter of the quake occurred 101 kilometers (62.7 miles) southwest of the Chinese city of Lanzhou at a depth of 11 kilometers (6.8 miles). More than 300 aftershocks followed the earthquake, and most had a magnitude of 3 or less, state media reported.

It is the deadliest earthquake to strike China since 2014. The Ludianearthquake had a magnitude of 6.1 and killed more than 600 people. Thousands of buildings, as well as a school, collapsed during the earthquake.

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Gas Pollution Warning Issued for Reykjavik After Icelandic Volcano Erupts

Icelandic authorities confirmed late Monday that an eruption had been recorded on the Reykjanes Peninsula, triggering officials to launch into evacuation efforts and prepare for

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possible lava flows. Roughly 4,000 people were evacuated from the fishing town of Grindavik last month following weeks of intense earthquakes and tremors.

Latest details released by the Icelandic Met Office has revealed that gas pollution is now threatening Iceland's capital of Reykjavik with fumes that may soon reach the capital. Authorities revealed that the dangerous fumes may potentially reach the capital between late Tuesday and early Wednesday.

According to the Icelandic Met Office, at 18:30 UTC there had been about 320 earthquakes since the eruption first began. The largest of which had a magnitude of 4.1 and occurred at 23:25 on Monday. But after midnight, the seismic activity decreased, the agency said.

“At the time of publication, the volcanic plume is drifting from the west and northwest,” the agency wrote in an update at 14:30 UTC on Tuesday. “Gas pollution might be noticeable in Vestmannaeyjar today, but not elsewhere in populated areas. According to the weather forecast, gas pollution might be detected in the capital area late tonight or tomorrow morning.”

The lava flow, the agency added, is estimated to be about “one-quarter of what it was when it first erupted.”

“The size of the volcanic eruption at Sundhnúksgígar continues to diminish. The lava flow is estimated to be about one-quarter of what it was at the beginning of the eruption on 18 December, and a third of the original fissure is active. The lava fountains are also lower than at the start of the eruption, reaching about 30 meters at their highest,” they wrote in their update.

Authorities added that the eruption “does not pose an immediate threat to people” although scientists will continue to take measurements to determine if new subterranean magma is flowing to the eruption site. While the lava appears to be flowing in a safe direction, Katrin Jakobsdottir warns that this could change within a short notice.

For the time being, the volcanic eruptions pose no threat of generating ash clouds because they are physically unable to, according to Dr. Evgenia Ilyinskaya, an associate professor of volcanology at Leeds University. "At the moment it seems not to be threatening, although it remains to be seen," she cautioned.

Bjarni Benediktsson, Iceland’s foreign minister, wrote on X that “there are no disruptions to flights to and from Iceland, and international flight corridors remain open.”

People in Iceland have been anticipating volcanic activity for weeks as the region around Reykjavik experienced increasing seismic activity since late October. An eyewitness told a British news company that when the eruption occurred half of the sky had been “lit up in red.”

Eruptions are not uncommon in Iceland. There have been four eruptions on the Reykjanes Peninsula alone in the last two years. In 2010, the Eyjafjallajokull volcano erupted causing plumes of ash to stretch over the sky. The eruption did not result in any fatalities, but caused a serious impact to Europe’s air travel that lasted for more than a week.

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Biden's Plummeting Polls - Cartoon

On Monday, US President Joe Biden's approval rating hit a record low with just 34% saying that they approve of the job he is doing. Inflation, and his handling of the conflict in Gaza has caused supporters to step back and reassess.

Biden's approval rating hit a new low of 34% on Monday. Despite the economy looking good on paper, Americans are more concerned about how they have been struggling with inflation for many months, said a Democratic pollster. The pollster suggested that Biden change his campaign messaging soon as he is "losing ground" every month.

In addition to issues regarding Americans' wallets, young voters are now turning away from Biden's foreign policy choices. Biden's decision to support Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the prime minister's retaliation against Hamas is causing many young Americans to turn away from Biden with disgust.

At least 72% of voters between the ages of 18 and 29 disapprove of Biden's handling of the conflict in Gaza, according to a recent poll. As a result, if an election were held today, former President Donald Trump would hold a 6-point lead over Biden among voters in this demographic. That's dropped significantly from July when Biden led the group by 10 points.

So what is some positive news for Biden's campaign? On Tuesday, Trump was disqualified from the 2024 ballot by the Colorado Supreme Court. The 4-3 decision found that Section 3 of the 14th Amendment—that no person shall hold office if they engage in insurrection after swearing an oath to support the Constitution—applies to Trump, and makes him ineligible to be listed on the state's presidential primary ballot.

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'It Won't Be Pretty': Julian Assange Files Final Appeal as He Faces Possible Extradition to US

Julian Assange, 52, is wanted on 17 felony counts of espionage and conspiracy in the US. The Australian computer programmer and publisher who founded WikiLeaks in 2006 is viewed as an activist by some, while others—specifically the US government—see him as a felon.

On Tuesday, it was announced by Julian Assange's wife, Stella Moris-Assange, that he would file his last appeal in order to avoid extradition to the US. The public hearing will take place on February 20 and February 21 in the High Court of London. Assange could face a sentence of up to 175 years for exposing war crimes committed by the US military in the Afghan and Iraq wars.

Brad Birkenfield, a famed financial whistleblower who exposed international money laundering and income tax evasion in the Swiss bank industry—spoke with Sputnik's Political Misfits and shared his thoughts on Assange and his potential extradition.

"The problem here is very simple," said Birkenfield. "Julian Assange is not an American who has actually uprooted the entire intelligence community by his exposés. WikiLeaks has done a great service to the world... Of course, the people who are breaking the law, don't want to be exposed."

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“And that's what he did,” said Birkenfield, in reference to the nearly 500,000 documents leaked in the early 2010s by WikiLeaks—some of which exposed US war crimes. “So don't take it out on Julian Assange - take it out on the people who are breaking the law to begin with. And certainly nothing has happened to those folks in the military that we know of. So I think the problem you have here is that the Biden administration, who claims to be so righteous, has done nothing to protect this gentleman who has done a lot to clean up the system. ”

“But with Julian's options here, it's hard to say exactly what's going to happen because it's not that transparent,” he continued. “Whatever the verdict here... will really be up to what's going on behind the scenes, in my opinion. I don't think this will be a fair system.”

“You really think the U.S. government and the U.K. government is going to change their tune? I highly doubt it,” he added. “Hopefully people will revolt over this.”

Birkenfield went on to address the double standard of the Biden administration. An administration, he says, which claims to uphold human rights standards, but yet “wants to make him the scapegoat”. Though, the extradition battle against Assange was very heavily escalated under the authority of then-President Donald Trump, and this battle would be passed over to Biden’s desk depending on the decision.

Assange, who has essentially been in solitary confinement since 2010, was in the Ecuadorian embassy in London until four and a half years ago. Then, he was forcibly removed and put in maximum security Belmarsh Penitentiary in south London, where he spent most of his time, again, in solitary confinement.

“I really feel bad for Mr. Assange because I don't think you'll get a fair hearing,” said Birkenfield who adds that the US is lashing out against the whistleblower because he made them “look bad”.

“I can't imagine people haven't stood up to help in this regard. And so it's going to take lawyers and protesters to really raise the red flag here, and I hope President Biden... he really deserves to be criticized for not doing something to pardon [Assange] from my point of view. He should be pardoned immediately.”

“I don't think it will be pretty number one,” said Birkenield when asked what incarceration for Assange would look like. “The Justice Department can never be trusted. Time and time again, they lie, they obstruct, they hide evidence and so on and so forth. And they really don't go after the real perpetrators of crimes in the US because the problem is there's too many overlapping interests”

“He's just going to be dragged through this process, which they claim is righteous, which it isn't. And it's really discriminatory to him. Why is he in solitary confinement? I mean, he hasn't done anything physically bad, he's just exposed what they did,” answered Birkenfeld, when asked how long Assange would have to wait before he actually goes to trial.

“So, quite frankly, it's mind boggling to think about this, to think that they should have the right to really punish him in this fashion. And it's really not the way America should be seen.”

The impending verdict in Julian Assange's final appeal against extradition to the US is fraught with significance, not only for Assange himself but also for the principles of journalistic freedom and transparency. With Assange's history of exposing uncomfortable truths through WikiLeaks, his case has become a litmus test for the limits of free speech and the protection of whistleblowers. As Birkenfield points out, the perceived lack of fairness in the proceedings and the potential for political motivations behind the extradition request raise serious concerns about

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the integrity of international justice systems. The outcome of this case will likely have far-reaching implications for the treatment of similar cases in the future, underscoring the precarious balance between national security interests and the public's right to know.

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US Releases Maduro's 'Close Ally' in Exchange for Jailed Americans – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration has agreed to free a "close ally" of President Nicolas Maduro in exchange for jailed Americans, The Associated Press reported on Wednesday.

Alex Saab, who was arrested on a US warrant for alleged money laundering in 2020, was released from custody on Wednesday, the report said.

As part of the swap, Maduro will free some, if not all, of the at least 10 US citizens who remain imprisoned in Venezuela, the report added, citing a person familiar with the situation.

Reuters reported, citing a high-level Venezuelan source, that the Maduro government will release a total of 36 people, including 12 Americans.

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Austin Visits Gerald R. Ford Aircraft Carrier in Eastern Mediterranean Sea – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Wednesday visited the Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, Reuters reported.

The Pentagon chief thanked the aircraft carrier crew for their role in efforts to prevent a broader conflict in the Middle East amid the Israel-Hamas war.

Austin pointed out that the carrier is "making history."

"Sometimes our greatest achievements are the bad things that we stop from happening. And at a moment of huge tensions in the region, you all have been the lynchpin to preventing a wider regional conflict," the secretary said.

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Xi Warned Biden That Taiwan Reunification Will Occur, But Timing Undetermined - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – Chinese President Xi Jinping warned US President Joe Biden during their November summit in San Francisco that China would eventually reunify with Taiwan, but on a schedule yet to be determined, NBC reported on Wednesday, citing three

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current and former US officials.

Xi said during the meeting that China prefers that the reunification occurs peacefully, rather than through force, the officials said. They described his remarks as candid, but not confrontational.

Xi also said that US military leaders were incorrect to predict that China would seek to reunify with Taiwan in 2025 or 2027, as the timing had yet to be determined.

Chinese officials requested prior to the summit that Biden issue a public statement afterward that the US supported China's goal of peaceful reunification and not Taiwanese independence, the report said. However, the White House refused the request.

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'That's Not a Real Democracy': RFK Jr. Says Voters Should Choose Trump's Fate, Not Courts

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Independent US presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said Tuesday that voters ought to determine former US President Donald Trump's political future, not the court system.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that Trump is disqualified from the 2024 Republican primary ballot due to his role in the January 6 US Capitol riot, citing the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution. The amendment restricts people who are "engaged in insurrection" from holding public office.

"Trump blocked from the ballot in Colorado. When a court in another country disqualifies an opposition candidate from running, we say, 'That's not a real democracy.' Now it's happening here," Kennedy said on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Kennedy said that although he is competing with Trump for the presidency, he wants to beat him "in a fair election, not because he was kicked off the ballot." Depriving a candidate of their right to run also deprives voters of their right to choose, Kennedy said.

Trump supporters will not accept 2024 election results if he is kept from office through the court system instead of through the electoral process, Kennedy said, adding that he hopes the court reverses its decision.

Fellow presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy also pledged to withdraw from the Colorado primary ballot unless Trump is allowed to run in the state and urged other Republican candidates to do the same.

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US House Speaker Calls Colorado Ruling to Bar Trump From 2024 Vote 'Partisan Attack'

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said the Colorado court's ruling to bar former President Donald Trump from the state's primary election is a

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partisan attack.

Earlier in the day, the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that Trump is barred from being in the state's 2024 Republican primary vote.

"Today's ruling attempting to disqualify President Trump from the Colorado ballot is nothing but a thinly veiled partisan attack," Johnson said in a statement on Tuesday.

Johnson said that regardless of political affiliation, every US voter should not be denied the right to support Trump, who is the leader in every poll of the Republican primary.

The House Speaker added that he trusts the US Supreme Court will set aside the court's "reckless" decision and let the American people decide the next US present.

Trump's campaign said they will appeal the court ruling and described it as a flawed decision.

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Biden Says Trump Quoting Putin 'No Surprise' - Press Pool

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said former President Donald Trump recently quoting Russian President Vladimir Putin is not surprising and accused Trump of allegedly having ties with Moscow, according to the White House press pool.

On Saturday, Trump during a campaign rally quoted Putin as saying that the cases against the former president are "politically motivated" by Biden and it shows the "rottenness" of the American political system.

"This weekend Trump was embracing his old pal Putin," Biden said as quoted by the press pool on Tuesday. "Trump even quoted him this weekend. That's no surprise. After all there's a lot of agreement between Moscow and Mar-a-Lago."

Biden said Trump is the greatest threat to US democracy.

In later remarks, Trump at a campaign speech in Iowa said Biden is the greatest threat to US democracy and accused his administration of conducting election interference in the 2024 presidential election because of the federal cases against him for alleged election meddling in the 2020 vote.

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Trump Says Will Challenge Colorado Ruling Baring Him From 2024 Primary Vote

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump will challenge a ruling from the Colorado Supreme Court barring him from the state's primary vote for the upcoming election, Trump campaign spokesperson Steven Cheung said in a press release.

"The Colorado Supreme Court issued a completely flawed decision tonight and we will swiftly file an appeal to the United States Supreme Court and a concurrent request for a stay of this deeply undemocratic decision," Cheung said on Tuesday. "We have full confidence that the US

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Supreme Court will quickly rule in our favor and finally put an end to these unAmerican lawsuits."

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Colorado Court Rules Trump 'Disqualified' From 2024 Primary Ballot - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) -The Colorado Supreme Court ruled that former President Donald Trump is disqualified from being on the 2024 Republican primary ballot, court documents revealed.

"This appeal from a district court proceeding under the Colorado Election Code, the supreme court considers whether former President Donald J. Trump may appear on the Colorado Republican presidential primary ballot in 2024. A majority of the court holds that President Trump is disqualified from holding the office of President under Section Three of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Because he is disqualified, it would be a wrongful act under the Election Code for the Colorado Secretary of State to list him as a candidate on the presidential primary ballot. The court stays its ruling until January 4, 2024, subject to any further appellate proceedings," the court stated on Tuesday.

Section Three of the Fourteenth Amendment states that no person who has "engaged in insurrection" or given aid to enemies thereof shall be eligible to hold public office in the United States.

The plaintiffs' case contends that Trump is ineligible to run for president in 2024 due to his alleged role in the January 6 US Capitol riot. Although Trump urged demonstrators to protest peacefully, the case argues that the former president nevertheless organized the group and incited them to breach the US Capitol.

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US Rights Group Sues Texas Over Immigration Policy That Allows State to Deport Migrants

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a lawsuit against the state of Texas for adopting a law that allows local authorities to arrest illegal migrants and deport them, the US rights group said in a statement.

"We're suing to block Texas from enforcing the most extreme anti-immigrant law in the nation," the ACLU said on Tuesday. "This unconstitutional law allows Texas judges to deport people and allows police to arrest people over suspicions about immigration status."

On Monday, Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed a law that will allow local authorities to arrest and deport illegal migrants - a role that usually falls on the federal government to conduct.

However, the federal government usually releases illegal migrants into the United States after they are apprehended and processed so they can await their immigration court date, which can

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take months or years to set.

Some migrants skip out on the immigration proceedings and remain in the United States as illegal migrants.

The US southern border has turned into a crisis that has seen three consecutive record-breaking years of illegal crossings since President Joe Biden came into office and relaxed immigration policies, which has summed up to more than 5.4 million to date.

The White House is reportedly considering approving strict immigration policy changes to deter the influx of migrants arriving at the US-Mexico border. The changes will be included in the $106 billion supplemental bill that includes more than $60 billion for Ukraine.

Republicans recently blocked an effort to advance the bill towards a final vote in the Senate because it lacked "credible" measures to address the border crisis.

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US House Judiciary Panel Chair Subpoenas Garland for Information on 'Spying on Congress'

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan sent a letter and a subpoena to US Attorney General Merrick Garland seeking information about the Justice Department's alleged use of its authority to get access to private communications of lawmakers and congressional staff members.

Jordan said in the letter on Tuesday that the Justice Department changed its policies and procedures concerning criminal probes involving members of Congress and their staff, but has not provided clarification to date on its subpoenas to obtain private communications of certain congressional staff members.

"The Executive Branch used its immense law-enforcement authority to gather and search the private communications of multiple Legislative Branch employees who were conducting Constitutional oversight of the Department's investigative actions - actions that were later found to be unlawful," Jordan said, referring to an investigation into former President Donald Trump's campaign associate Carter Page.

Jordan explained that the requested information would help the Judiciary Committee articulate any potential legislative proposals on the issue, including those that would require the Justice Department to provide appropriate notice when it seeks to access private information belonging to an employee of Congress.

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US Lawmaker Warns That Assange Conviction in US Would Set 'Dangerous Precedent'

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The potential conviction of Wikipedia founder Julian Assange in US court would set a dangerous precedent that could be used to silence American

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journalists in violation of their constitutional right, US Congressman Paul Gosar told Sputnik.

"The case of Julian Assange has brought to light the importance of protecting journalistic activities and the potential consequences of restricting them," Gosar said in a statement on Tuesday. "If the US government succeeds in prosecuting Assange for publishing information, it sets a dangerous precedent that could be used to silence other journalists and publishers in the future."

Gosar, in light of Assange's case, further said that the public has a right to know what the US government is up to, even when governments make "major mistakes."

Gosar explained that his resolution expresses the sense of the House of Representatives that regular journalistic activities are protected under the First Amendment and that the United States should to drop all charges and attempts to extradite Assange, Gosar said.

Gosar highlighted that Assange has been "unfairly" imprisoned for his disclosure of Afghanistan war records which promoted US public transparency by "exposing the hiring of child prostitutes by Defense Department contractors, friendly fire incidents, civilian killings, and more."

Earlier in the day, media reported that a final appeal hearing to prevent the extradition of Assange to the United States will be heard in London over two days in late February.

Assange, 52, is wanted on 18 charges, including espionage charges, and has been detained in the high-security Belmarsh Prison in southeast London since April 2019.

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US Launches International Exchange Program 'Cultural Heritage Forward' - Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is launching an international exchange program dubbed Cultural Heritage Forward to make museums more inclusive, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken announced.

"We're launching a new international exchange program called Cultural Heritage Forward. This initiative will bring together experts from museums, from governments, cultural organizations and community groups who are building more inclusive museums," Blinken said on Tuesday.

Blinken made the announcement during remarks at the State Department upon signing a memorandum of understanding with the Smithsonian Institution.

Blinken also said the experts who will be part of the exchange program will exchange information on the best methods for preserving cultural heritage.

The memorandum of understanding seeks to enhance collaboration and reaffirm the United States' commitment to cultural, educational and scientific activities, according to the State Department.

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US Trading Firm Chief Pleads Guilty in Scheme to Export Avionics to Russia - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - President of KanRus Trading Company Inc. Cyril Gregory Buyanovsky pleaded guilty in connection with a prolonged scheme to violate US export regulations and persisting in the illicit sale and export of advanced avionics equipment to Russia.

"Cyril Gregory Buyanovsky, 60, of Lawrence, Kansas, the owner and president of KanRus Trading Company Inc., pleaded guilty today for his role in a years-long conspiracy to circumvent US export laws by filing false export forms with the US government and, after Russian's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, continuing to sell and export sophisticated and controlled avionics equipment to customers in Russia without the required licenses from the US Department of Commerce," the Justice Department said on Tuesday in a statement.

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Russia Open to Sharing Experience on AI Development With Other Countries - UN Delegation

UNITED NATIONS, January 20 (Sputnik) - Russia is open to sharing its experience responsibly developing artificial intelligence (AI) technology with other nations, member of the Russian delegation to the UN Tatiana Balandina said during an informal meeting of the Security Council.

"In Russia, with the support of the state, the major IT companies have developed a national code of ethics in the sphere of artificial intelligence that provides guidance to developers and users for the safe and ethical creation and use of systems involving the use of AI," Balandina said on Tuesday. "We invite interested colleagues to a mutually beneficial exchange of experience in this area."

It is premature to consider AI as a threat to peace and security, Balandina said. AI technologies are tools that reflect the will of their creators, Balandina said.

Russia believes that measures included in UN Security Council resolution 2686 provide the necessary, basic guidance on the use of AI in contexts such as combatting disinformation, Balandina said.

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Iranian National Charged With Getting US Microelectronics for Tehran - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The US government has charged an Iranian national and his colleague with defying sanctions and seeking to procure microelectronics for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Justice Department announced in a press release.

"Today, the Justice Department unsealed an indictment charging Iranian national Hossein Hatefi Ardakani and co-defendant Gary Lam, who worked for a Chinese company, with crimes

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related to the procurement of US-manufactured dual-use microelectronics for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force Self Sufficiency Jihad Organization's (ASF SSJO) one-way attack unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) program," the release said on Tuesday.
Ardakani and Lam are charged with conspiracy to export US goods to Iran and to defraud the United States, which carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison; unlawfully exporting and attempting to export goods to Iran, which carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison; and with conspiracy to engage in international money laundering, which carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison, the release said.
Ardakani and Lam remain at large and are believed to reside abroad, the release added.

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US Delays Second Time in 1 Day UN Security Council Vote on Gaza Resolution - Source

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has delayed for the second time in one day voting on a UN Security Council draft resolution on welcoming a humanitarian ceasefire and establishing a monitoring mechanism in the Gaza Strip, a UN source told Sputnik.
The United States at first requested voting to take place on Tuesday afternoon instead of the morning because its mission to the United Nations wanted more time to consult the text of the resolution drafted by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the source said on Tuesday.
However, the United States later said it wanted to delay a vote on the resolution until Wednesday morning, the source said.
The United States is the only member of the UN Security Council who has vetoed all previous resolutions on Gaza.
US diplomats have said the United States wants to see text in the resolutions condemning the Palestinian movement Hamas. Other UN Security Council members have opposed including such provisions in the resolutions.

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US Maneuvers Near DPRK Looking More Like Preparations for Offensive - Russian UN Diplomat

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) – US military maneuvers near North Korea are increasingly looking like a preparation for an offensive operation against Pyongyang, Deputy Ambassador to the UN Anna Evstigneeva said at a Security Council meeting.
"A month ago, a US strike group led by the aircraft carriers Carl Vinson and Ronald Reagan visited the port of Busan. The day before, yesterday December 17, the US submarine Missouri also visited the South Korean port. This picture is looking more and more like preparations for an offensive operation. Claims that there are no hostile intentions in these actions appear

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ludicrous," Evstigneeva said on Tuesday.

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Post-War Future of Gaza 'Complicated Question', Only Israel Can Ensure Order Now – Herzog

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – Israeli President Isaac Herzog said on Tuesday that the issue of the post-conflict future of Gaza was a "complicated question" and that until someone else could ensure the safety of the Jewish State, only Israel would assume the responsibility.

The President's remarks at the Atlantic Council addressed a question about the post-war future of the Gaza Strip, what Israel planned on doing once it had full military control of the area and who would rule the land.

"It's a complicated question, and so long as there's no answer to that, only Israel can make sure that terror will not emanate again … from that area." Herzog said.

The President added that there were many potential alternatives to the future of Gaza, and that many idea was being discussed in "very important rooms" in Israel, the United States, and in Europe. Herzog said he believes such was the purpose of the latest visit to Tel-Aviv by White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

However, when it comes to the post-war period, Herzog said he personally would differentiate between the civilian and military aspects on the issue, noting that one must be "reasonable" about who will succeed Israel in sending troops on the ground from outside of Gaza.

"I think there's a lot of work being done. There's teams working on it. Many ideas thrown to the table. It will have to be probably an amalgamation of forces working on it together and coming forward with a solution, including regional players," Herzog said, adding that it could potentially create an optimistic perception for the future.

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US Homebuilding Hits Over 18 Month High in November as Mortgage Rates Dip - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Construction of US single family homes hit more than 18 month highs in November, data from the US Commerce Department showed on Tuesday as declining mortgage rates from interest rates held steady in recent months helped bring buyers back.

Single-family housing starts, which dominate US homebuilding activity, surged 18% to 1.143 million, according to the Census Bureau, a unit within the Commerce Department.

Historical data showed it was the most homebuilding in a month since April 2022. Analysts attributed the spike to sliding mortgage rates after a hold in US interest rates since July.

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"Mortgage rates are coming down which may be encouraging more building and may also lighten the incentives in the process," economist Greg Michalowski said on the ForexLive platform. "We will see how the story line plays out."

Prior to November, high mortgage rates had dampened new construction activity as the Federal Reserve hiked interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and June 2023.

Permits for future construction of single-family housing last month increased to the highest level since May 2022, the report from the Commerce Department on Tuesday also showed.

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 2008-2009 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 coronavirus pandemic measures 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 had also discouraged buying.

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US Vessels Placed in Red Sea as Appropriate to Threats From Yemen - White House

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The United States emphasized that the placement of vessels in the Red Sea, as part of a task force, ensures the protection of commercial vessels amid potential threats from Yemen, Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"You shouldn't think about this in terms of World War Two aggregating a fleet... These vessels will be operating as one unit...But they will be placed in the Red Sea, as appropriate to the presence of commercial vessels, and, as appropriate, to the threats coming out of Yemen," Kirby said during a press briefing.

The remarks were in response to a reporter's question about whether Operation Prosperity Guardian can protect a merchant vessel from a drone strike. The query pondered the feasibility of such protection.

On Monday, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced the establishment of a multinational operation to secure the Red Sea amid a surge in Houthi attacks on cargo ships. Operation Prosperity Guardian will involve the navies of the US, the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, and Spain.

After the armed conflict between Israel and Palestinian movement Hamas escalated in October, Yemen's Ansar Allah rebel movement, also known as the Houthis, has intensified its attacks on cargo ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The Houthi rebels have vowed to keep preventing the passage of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until the latter ends its military actions in the Gaza Strip.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) –

HOUTHI ATTACKS IN THE RED SEA

* The United States seeks to rally the international community to address the growing threat to shipping by Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

* The United States would welcome China playing a constructive role in trying to prevent Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said.

* The United States would welcome the participation of other countries in a US-led multinational security operation to protect ships transiting the Red Sea from Houthi attacks, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

* Yemen's Ansar Allah rebel movement, also known as the Houthis, said that it will attack the vessels of those countries that join the US-led coalition to protect ships in the Red Sea.

ISRAELI INVASION IN GAZA

* The United States would welcome a United Nations Security Council resolution that addresses the humanitarian needs of Gazans but the details of the document matter very much, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

* The United States is the only state in the international community that stands against a humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said.

* China has called for the convening of an international peace conference that would be larger in scale, scope and effects, seeking to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a two-state solution, Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun said.

* Israel is ready for another humanitarian pause in the Gaza Strip in order to free the remaining hostages, and also agrees to allow the entry of additional humanitarian aid for the residents of the enclave, Israeli President Isaac Herzog said.

* At least 100 people were killed in the Gaza Strip as a result of Israeli strikes on Tuesday, a spokesperson for the enclave's Health Ministry said.

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

* The Russian government and Russian oil giant Rosneft presented the Vostok oil and gas project to Chinese partners, who are currently studying it now, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Tuesday.

* Global oil prices have now increased, with the market situation balancing, so it is impossible to talk about need for any action on part of OPEC+, Novak said.

* Hungary received a notification from Bulgaria about the abolition of the tax on gas transit from Russia and is ready to lift the veto on Bulgaria’s entry into the Schengen visa-free area, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Russia was the only guarantor of Ukraine's sovereignty and integrity, Russian President

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Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday.
* The Russian armed forces will continue the military operation next year until all tasks are fully completed, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.
* Ukraine received $203 billion from external donors, which is 30 billion more than its GDP, Shoigu said.
* The Russian armed forces have liberated the territory that is five times larger that the Luhansk and Donetsk people's republic occupied before the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine, Shoigu said.
* US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that he is more optimistic about negotiations on Ukraine aid and border security than he was last week, which he plans to conclude early next year.
RUSSIAN MILITARY PLANS
* Modern military equipment accounts for 95% of Russia's strategic nuclear forces, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday.
* The Russian armed forces will conduct combat training in 2024, taking into account the threats of further NATO expansion to the east, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.
* Russia's plans on the manning of its army and navy have been achieved in 2023, their number has reached 1.15 million people, Shoigu said.
* Shoigu instructed Russian military contingents to ensure preservation of peace and stability in Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh in a changing environment.
PUTIN-ERDOGAN MEETING
* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Tuesday that he hoped to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the near future to discuss the Black Sea Grain Initiative.
* The date and the venue of a meeting between Putin and Erdogan have not yet been determined, and it will be agreed soon, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik.

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UNGA Approves Russian Resolution on Fight Against Glorification of Nazism

UNITED NATIONS, December 19 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly on Tuesday adopted a Russian-drafted resolution on combating the glorification of Nazism.
The resolution was approved in a 118-49 vote, with 14 member states abstaining. Russia, China, and Israel were among those that voted in favor. The United States, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and Germany voted against.
The resolution was approved in the UN Third Committee in November and then was submitted for a UN General Assembly vote. The resolution is annually adopted by the UN General Assembly.
The document is titled "Combating the glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to the escalation of modern forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance."
The resolution recommends that countries take appropriate concrete measures, "including in

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the field of legislation and education, in accordance with their international obligations in the field of human rights, in order to prevent the revision of the history and results of the Second World War and the denial of crimes against humanity and war crimes committed during the Second World War."

The resolution also calls on member states "to take active measures to ensure that education systems develop the necessary content to provide accurate accounts of history, as well as promote tolerance and other international human rights principles."

The authors of the document strongly condemn incidents related to the glorification and propaganda of Nazism, in particular, the application of pro-Nazi graffiti and drawings, including on monuments to victims of World War II.

The resolution urges states to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination by all appropriate means, including, if circumstances so require, by legislation. In addition, the document strongly condemns the use of educational materials, as well as rhetoric in the course of training, that promote racism, discrimination, hatred and violence based on ethnic origin, nationality, religion or belief.

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UN Official Says Concerned About Impacts of AI on Disinformation, Hate Speech

UNITED NATIONS, December 19 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications Melissa Fleming said on Monday that the UN is concerned about the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) technology on disinformation and hate speech problems.

“Targeted disinformation is already impacting UN peace and security efforts,” Fleming said during an Arria-formula meeting on AI.

Generative AI technology, which can create so-called “deepfakes,” also has implications for human rights, Fleming said. The technology has been used to create realistic child sexual abuse content and fake pornographic images of officials and journalists, Fleming said.

The UN is also concerned about the exacerbation of hateful content by AI, which can lead to physical violence, Fleming said.

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Israel Ready for Humanitarian Pause to Free Hostages, Decision Up to Palestinians – Herzog

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – Israel is ready for another humanitarian truce in Gaza to release the remaining hostages, but such decision belongs to the leader of Palestine’s Hamas, Yahya Sinwar, Israeli President Isaac Herzog said on Tuesday.

“I've said it today and I repeat. Israel is willing to enter another humanitarian pause and bring in additional humanitarian aid in order to bring back the hostages. So, the entire responsibility for

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this issue lies with [Yahya] Sinwar and with his people," Herzog said at the Atlantic Council.

When pressed on whether this was an official offer to Hamas, Herzog said he was not privy to much information as he was not directly involved in the matter but noted that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had met with hostage families earlier on Tuesday to inform them that Mossad's Head David Barnea was sent to Europe twice in a bid to restart the negotiations process.

However, the President stressed that Israel had no intention to stop its attacks on Hamas, as it seeks to undermine its military capabilities and abilities to run Gaza. "We intend to change the course of history," he added.

Herzog further added if Hamas was to refuse to restart the negotiations process leading to the liberation of all remaining hostages and other prisoners, Israel would continue to act without limitation.

"We want to bring the hostages back. This is a basic humanitarian duty, and that's what people of morality do. Bring them back home. We will do whatever it takes through various means to bring them back home," Herzog said.

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Israeli President Denies Indiscriminate Bombing of Gaza

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - Israeli President Isaac Herzog said on Tuesday that Israeli forces are not carrying out indiscriminate bombings of the civilian population of Gaza.

Herzog made the remarks at the Atlantic Council when asked to comment on US President Joe Biden's remarks made at a campaign event earlier in December that Israel is losing international support over its "indiscriminate bombing" of Gaza.

"First of all, I don't think we are carrying out any indiscriminate bombing. All our activities are followed very closely by legal counsel," Herzog said at the Atlantic Council.

The Israeli president said that his country's military checks all targets and issues notices through leaflets, text messages and/or calls to the civilian population before proceeding with any kind of attack.

"We give them hours to prepare," he stated.

Locations that are determined to be questionable are not attacked, Herzog said. He, however, noted that due to the nature of conflict in an urban and densely populated setting, "tragic damages" could result from strikes. Israel follows international law, treats individuals with caution, takes and seeks advice and exchanges opinions with its partners, Herzog argued.

"One thing is clear. The people of Gaza are not our enemy. The enemy is only Hamas, and we're fighting Hamas and its partners," Herzog said.

The death toll from Israel's bombing of Gaza has topped 19,000 since the October 7 Hamas attack.

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US, NATO, EU Condemn Houthi Interference in Waters Around Arabian Peninsula - Statement

WASHINGTON, DECEMBER 19 (Sputnik) - The US, High Representative Josep Borrell on behalf of the European Union, and Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on behalf of NATO in a joint statement on Tuesday condemned Houthi interference, jeopardizing navigational rights in the waters around the Arabian Peninsula.

"The undersigned condemn Houthi interference with navigational rights and freedoms in the waters around the Arabian Peninsula, particularly the Red Sea," the statement said.

The statement said the grave threat posed by multiple Houthi attacks on December 3 in the Southern Red Sea to international commerce and maritime security, condemning the alarming seizure of the Galaxy Leader on November 19 and the unjust detention of its 25-member crew, emphasizing the widespread impact on global movement of essential commodities.

"The undersigned further encourage all states to refrain from facilitation or encouragement of the Houthis. There is no justification for these attacks, which affect many countries beyond the flags these ships sail under. We again call on the Houthis to release the Galaxy Leader crew and ship immediately and to cease additional attacks on commercial vessels in the region's vital waterways," the statement added.

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Pyongyang, Seoul Should Reinstate Communication on Military Level - UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, December 19 (Sputnik) - The United Nations believes in the paramount necessity of communication on the military level between North Korea and South Korea, Assistant Secretary-General for Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, Khaled Khiari, said on Tuesday.

"I emphasize again the importance of reinstating communication channels, particularly between military entities. Exercising maximum restraint is critical to avoid unintended escalation," Khiari, who heads the Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations, told the Security Council.

The UN is also concerned over the humanitarian situation in North Korea and is ready to assist in addressing the needs of its people, he added.

North Kroea's official news agency said Pyongyang launched a Hwasong-18 type intercontinental ballistic missile on Monday. The missile was going a distance of approximately 1,000 km and reached an altitude of 6,500 km before ending up in the sea.

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White House Says US Monitoring Bomb Threats Received by Jewish Synagogues, Schools

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration is closely monitoring hundreds of emails with bomb threats received by synagogues in the US, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

"We are closely tracking hundreds of emails and bomb threats to Jewish synagogues, schools and other institutions over the weekend. Local and federal law enforcement are investigating each and every one of them," Jean-Pierre told reporters.

She stressed that anti-Semitism is unacceptable, as well as other kinds of ethnic-based hate and violence.

US President Joe Biden is aware of the situation, Jean-Pierre said. She also promised to do everything to ensure the safety of Jewish communities.

US media reported that over 400 synagogues received bomb threats during the weekend. The FBI has launched a nationwide investigation but said there were no explosives found at this moment, according to the reports.

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McConnell Says Unhappy With Progress of US Senate in 2023

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Tuesday that he is unhappy with legislative progress made by the upper chamber of Congress in 2023.

“I don’t think the Senate has been nearly as productive as it could have been,” McConnell said during a press briefing, when asked about his opinion of legislative progress in 2023. “I’m not very happy with how productive the Senate has been this year, and hopefully it will get better soon.”

The Senate could have utilized more floor time to process appropriations bills, McConnell said.

The Senate is also ending the year with unresolved negotiations on Ukraine aid and border security, although Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday that lawmakers hope to reach a deal by the time lawmakers return from their winter holiday break.

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Schumer Says More Optimistic About Ukraine Aid, Border Deal Than Last Week

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that he is more optimistic about negotiations on Ukraine aid and border security than he was last week, which he plans to conclude early next year.

"I am much more hopeful today than I was last Thursday," Schumer said during a press

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conference, when asked about negotiations.

Lawmakers will continue negotiations through the December and January breaks and intend to reach a deal as soon as the Senate returns to business, Schumer said.

Republican members of the US Congress have insisted on the inclusion of more stringent border security measures in a multi-billion dollar supplemental funding request from the Biden administration, which includes aid for Ukraine and Israel.

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US Ready to Discuss Denuclearization With DPRK – White House

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – The United States is still ready to discuss with the DPRK the denuclearization of the region, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"We would sit down with Kim Jong Un without preconditions to start to talk about the denuclearization of the [Korean] Peninsula. That remains the case today," Kirby told reporters.

He pointed out that Pyongyang presents a "growing threat" to the region, so the US is doing everything possible to revitalize its alliances and partnerships.

"We added the military capabilities to the region, including intelligence collection capabilities, and it is not going to change," Kirby added.

The United States, Japan, and South Korea announced in a joint statement earlier on Tuesday that they have fully activated a real-time warning and data-sharing system to guard against missiles launched from North Korea. The three parties also said that they established a multi-year trilateral exercise plan that will begin in early 2024, regularizing and systematizing trilateral exercises moving forward.

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US Would Rally International Community to Address Threat to Shipping Posed by Houthis

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The United States seeks to rally the international community to address the growing threat to shipping by Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"The United States would rally the international community to address the increasing threat posed by Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Ships and aircraft from multiple nations are and will continue to join the United States in conducting maritime surveillance and taking defensive actions, Kirby added.

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Lufthansa Orders Up to 100 737 MAX for Fuel Efficiency, Carbon Reduction - Boeing

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - Lufthansa has ordered up to 100 737 MAX jets, its first new order for the aircraft in 28 years, Boeing announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"Boeing and the Lufthansa Group today announced a landmark 737 MAX order for up to 100 jets that will see Europe's largest airline group restore the Boeing 737 family into its fleet," the release said. "The commitment includes a firm order for 40 737-8 airplanes with 60 options."

Lufthansa launched the Boeing 737 in 1967, taking delivery of the first of 146 737s until its final delivery of a 737-300 in 1995, the release noted.

"With the new modern, quiet, economical and efficient 737-8 aircraft, we are making progress both in modernizing our short- and medium-haul fleet and in achieving our carbon CO2 reduction targets," Carsten Spohr, chairman of the executive board and CEO of Deutsche Lufthansa AG, said in the release.

The 737 MAX reduces CO2 emissions by 20% and has a 50% smaller noise footprint compared to older generation airplanes, Boeing said.

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US Announces New Iran-Related Sanctions - Treasury Department

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The United States imposed a new package of Iran-related sanctions on Tuesday, targeting individuals and entities allegedly linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Treasury Department said in a notice on Tuesday.

The sanctions target four people in Iran and Indonesia, along with 10 entities in Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia and Hong Kong, according to the notice.

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US Navy Orders 2 Speed-of-Light Microwave Energy Air Defense Prototype Systems - RTX

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has ordered two new microwave directed energy weapon systems to knockout airborne targets at the speed of light, RTX announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"Raytheon, an RTX business, will design, build and test two high-power microwave antenna systems that will use directed energy to defeat airborne threats at the speed of light," the release said.

Under the three-year, $31.3 million contract from the Naval Surface Warfare Center Dahlgren Division, Raytheon will deliver prototype systems to the US Navy and US Air Force as part of the Directed Energy Front-Line Electromagnetic Neutralization and Defeat (DEFEND) program, the release said.

The systems will be designed to be rugged and transportable for front-line deployment, the release said.

"Non-kinetic defense systems are a key part of America's national defense strategy. The new iterations of Raytheon's high-power microwave systems are cost-effective and reliable solutions that operate at the speed of light – enabling our warfighters to defend against faster and more maneuverable threats," Raytheon Advanced Technology President Colin Whelan said in the release.

Work on the project is being conducted in Tucson, Arizona in partnership with the US Air Force Research Lab, Naval Surface Warfare Center Dahlgren Division, the release said.

Prototypes are expected to be delivered in fiscal years 2024 and 2026, the release added.

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Canada to Buy 11 Military Drones in C$2.5Bln Deal - National Defense

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - Canada will be acquiring eleven Remotely Piloted Aircraft System (RPAS) in a C$2.5 billion ($1.9 billion) deal with General Dynamics, the Department of National Defense said on Tuesday.

"The Government of Canada will invest $2.49 billion to acquire a Remotely Piloted Aircraft System (RPAS) capability," the department's statement said. "The acquisition will be completed through a direct commercial sale contract with General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, Inc, with some specific components acquired through a Foreign Military Sale with the United States government."

Accordingly, Canada will acquire 11 RPAS, 6 ground control stations, 2 new aircraft hangars, and 1 new ground control center. Moreover, National Defense plans on purchasing initial weaponry, sustainment services, a training solution that includes training devices, mission crew

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and technician courseware, supporting information management and technology as well as associated work and equipment.

The first deliveries are expected to take place in 2028, with the new RPAS fleet set to be fully operational by 2033, the statement continued.

The latest acquisitions build upon several others since 2022, notably the purchase of 88 F-35 fighter jets, 9 CC-330 Husky strategic tanker and transport aircraft, and up to 16 P-8A Poseidon multi-mission aircrafts, among others.

National Defense said the new aircraft will be stationed at 14 Wing Greenwood, Nova Scotia, and 19 Wing Comox, British Colombia.

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Canada to Deploy 3 Staff Officers to Support Red Sea Security Operation - National Defense

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – The Canadian military will contribute three staff officers to the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect the free flow of commerce and safety of navigation in the Red Sea amid continued Houthi attacks, National Defense said on Tuesday.

On Monday, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced the establishment of a multinational operation to secure the Red Sea amid a surge in Houthi attacks on cargo ships. Operation Prosperity Guardian will involve the navies of the US, the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, and Spain.

"The Canadian Armed Forces are deploying 3 staff officers to support the operation. These CAF members will deploy as early as next week under Op ARTEMIS – the CAF operation in support of peace and security in Middle East waters," the ministry said in a statement.

As part of Operation Artemis, the CAF periodically deploys ships and aircraft, as well as land-based support, to work with international partners to help secure the region, the statement said.

National Defense characterized the Red Sea as a "crucial artery" for the world economy, reiterating that Canada remains committed to ensuring freedom of navigation under the 1958 Convention on the High Seas.

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Google to Pay $700 in Damages to Eligible Consumers in Lawsuit Settlement

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - Google has agreed to pay a combined sum of $700 million to US consumers throughout the United States as part of a settlement with state attorneys general over fees the company charges for use of its app store.

The settlement administrator has estimated that at least 70% of the eligible consumers will

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collect damages directly via automated payments without being required to submit a claim, according to the terms of the settlement made available late on Monday.

The company will provide $630 million to a fund to pay more than 100 million consumers and an additional $70 million will be paid into a fund for US states to disburse to consumers for similar claims.

In 2021, a lawsuit was brought against Google over the alleged abuse of its market dominance by charging exorbitant fees for app creators.

Google Vice President of Government Affairs and Public Policy Wilson White said in a blog post on Monday that the company will now allow users of its Android mobile devices to directly download apps, bypassing the Play Store altogether.

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US Would Welcome China's Role in Trying to Prevent Red Sea Attacks - State Dept

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The United States would welcome China playing a constructive role in trying to prevent Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"Yes, we would welcome China playing a constructive role in trying to prevent those attacks from taking place," Miller said, when asked by a reporter about China's potential role in ensuring security in the Red Sea region.

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US Would Welcome Other Countries Joining Security Operation in Red Sea - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – The United States would welcome the participation of other countries in a US-led multinational security operation to protect ships transiting the Red Sea from Houthi attacks, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"Of course, we would welcome other countries' participation, whether it's countries from in the region or countries from outside the region," Miller said during a press briefing.

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US Would Welcome UNSC Resolution That Addresses Gazans' Humanitarian Needs - State Dept.

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WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The United States would welcome a United Nations Security Council resolution that addresses the humanitarian needs of Gazans but the details of the document matter very much, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"We would welcome a [UNSC] resolution that fully supports addressing the humanitarian needs of the people in Gaza, but as I said … the details of it very much do matter," Miller said during a press briefing ahead of a vote later in the day.

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US Senator Says Lawmakers Unable to Reach Deal on Border, Ukraine Aid This Week

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The US Senate will be unable to pass a deal on border security and Ukraine aid this week, Senator James Lankford said in an interview.

"We're clearly not going to have text complete this week to be able to have a vote to be able to pull this stuff together," Lankford said on Monday.

Lawmakers will continue to negotiate until they reach an agreement, Lankford said. All senators will return to Washington in January to work on the deal, Lankford added.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and the White House have urged lawmakers to continue working to pass a supplemental funding request, which includes aid for Ukraine and Israel, before the end of the year. However, Republican members of Congress have insisted on the inclusion of more stringent border security measures, delaying passage of the request.

Although the Senate remains in session, the US House of Representatives concluded business last week and is not set to return until the new year.

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Canada Unveils Plan to Reach 100% Zero-Emission Vehicles Sales by 2035 – Envt. Ministry

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – The Canadian Ministry of Environment and Climate Change unveiled on Tuesday its plan to achieve its target of 100 percent zero-emission vehicle sales by 2035.

"Today, the Honourable Steven Guilbeault, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, announced Canada has finalized its new Electric Vehicle Availability Standard to increase the supply of clean, zero-emission vehicles available to Canadians across the country," the ministry's statement said. "The Standard complements additional actions underway by the federal government to develop a robust electric vehicle supply chain and infrastructure that creates good, middle-class jobs and ensures a cleaner, safer environment."

Accordingly, under the Standard, the Canadian government will ensure it reaches its target of 100 percent zero-emission vehicle sales by 2035. The interim period will be marked by two

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provisional targets of 20% by 2026, and at least 60% by 2030, aimed at channeling supply to the national market instead of going abroad, as well as reducing customer wait times.

Environment Canada stressed that switching from oil powered vehicles to electric ones would be the most affordable option for Canadians on the long term. With charging costs of up to C$10.00 per 400 kilometers, the average cumulative ownership costs would fall from C$82.515 to C$48.943 in the span of a decade.

Furthermore, in order to ensure proper availability of charging stations, Ottawa is investing C$1.2 billion to build 84,500 additional chargers across the country by 2029, the statement said.

According to government estimates, Canadians would be saving up to C$36.8 billion in energy costs between 2024-2050, and the total phasing in of new electric vehicle sales would reduce over 360 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions over the same period, and prevent C$100 billion in global damages.

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US Air Force F-35 Jet Drops Fuselage Panel Over Pacific During Training Flight - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - A US Air Force F-35 Joint Strike Fighter dropped a side panel from its fuselage during a training flight over the western Pacific Ocean, a US military official confirmed on Tuesday.

The fighter jet returned to Kadena Air Base at 10:24 a.m. local time on Monday missing a 12 inch by 18 inch hexagonal side panel that weighed two pounds (0.9 kilograms), spokesperson Robert Dabbs confirmed in an email.

Dabbs said the panel fell from below the aircraft's cockpit on the right side.

The panel covered electronic devices and without it the aircraft could lose its stealth capabilities, according to published reports.

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Blue Origin Completes 70-Mile-High New Shepard Space Mission After Successful Launch

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - Blue Origin successfully completed its first attempted space mission in 22 months when its New Shepard rocket carried 33 science payloads into space for zero gravity experiments in an ascent 70 miles above the surface of the Earth on Tuesday.

The booster was successfully launched at 11:37 a.m. EST (16:37 GMT) from the company's pad in the West Texas Desert. It also carried 38,000 Postcards for the Future from students.

It was New Shepard’s 24th flight and 13th payload mission. New Shepard is planned to be a human-carrying rocket that will take tourists to the brink of space.

An unmanned flight failed in September 2022 when the rocket emitted a burst of flames

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although the capsule was successfully separated and made a safe landing.

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Philadelphia Authorities Arrest LGBTQ+ Activist on Charges of Pedophilia - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The authorities in Philadelphia have arrested Kendall Stephens and charged him with raping two minors, among other charges, CBS News Reported on Tuesday.

Stephens is an activist for the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer+ (LGBTQ+) community in Philadelphia, the report said.

Stephens has been charged with rape, involuntary sexual intercourse, unlawful contact with minors, corruption of minors, indecent assault against people less than 13 years of age, obscenity to minors and endangering the welfare of children, the report said.

The charges were revealed by court documents following a preliminary arraignment in Philadelphia Municipal Court on Monday, the report also said.

A judge in the case set bail for Stephens at $250,000, and scheduled the next court hearing for December 29, the report added.

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US Sole State Standing Against Humanitarian Ceasefire in Gaza - Russian Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 19 (Sputnik) - The United States is the only state in the international community that stands against a humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday.

"It would not be an exaggeration to say that there's a consensus in the world about the need to have an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza and the only state which stands against, pitting themselves against the entire international community, is the United States," Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting.

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China Calls to Convene Peace Conference on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 19 (Sputnik) - China has called for the convening of an international peace conference that would be larger in scale, scope and effects, seeking to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a two-state solution, Chinese Ambassador to the United

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Nations Zhang Jun said on Tuesday.
"China calls for the convenience of an international peace conference that is larger in scale, scope, and effects, and for the formulation of a timetable and a roadmap so that the two-state solution can truly be realized," Zhang told the UN Security Council.
The Chinese ambassador said that any return to the Palestinian question should respect the will of the Palestinian people, take into account the concerns of regional countries and not deviate from the two-state solution.

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UNTSO's Military Observers Ensure Security on Blue Line, Golan – Maj. Gen. Gauchat

UNITED NATIONS, December 19 (Sputnik) – The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) have adopted a series of measures to ensure the security across the Blue Line and on the Golan, Major Gen. Patrick Gauchat said on Tuesday.
"UNTSO's Military Observers, who constitute Observer Group Lebanon (OGL) and Observer Group Golan (OGG) under the operational control of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) respectively, took appropriate and adapted security measures," Gauchat told the UN Security Council.
Accordingly, UNTSO continues to assure accurate military observation, investigation of ceasefire violations, inspections in the Golan, and reporting to enable liaison with the parties, including for de-escalating tensions.
Gauchat noted that the military crossing points used by UNTSO between Israel and Lebanon, and between Israel and Syria, have been closed. Moreover, amid "escalatory patterns" patrols along the Blue Line continue, the Major General said, further noting that international presence influences restraint by the involved parties.

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Before Gaza Crisis Israel Mounted Pressure by Settlement Activity in West Bank-UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, December 19 (Sputnik) - Prior to the crisis in Gaza, Israel was increasing its pressure in the West Bank with its increasing settlement activities, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland said on Tuesday.
"In our focus on Gaza, let us not forget that our attention during the first nine months of the year was on a West Bank in crisis, with mounting pressures from settlement activity – which I note more than doubled to a reach a new annual record since 2017 - settler violence, increased Palestinian armed attacks, Israeli security forces operations, a rapidly deteriorating fiscal and economic situation, and a Palestinian Authority struggling to face these challenges," Wennesland told the Security Council members during a meeting on Palestine. "Most of these

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trends have continued and intensified."

Now the fiscal situation is worsening further as some 150,000 Palestinian workers are not able to get to their jobs because of tight Israeli restrictions following the October 7 attack, he added.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing over 1,200 people and abducting some 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. According to the Health Ministry of Gaza, over 19,453 people, about 70% of whom are said to be women and children, have been killed so far in the enclave as a result of the conflict.

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Most Americans Believe Biden Handling Crime in US Poorly - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - A plurality of likely voters in the United States believe that President Joe Biden is handling crime in the United States poorly, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Tuesday.

Most of the likely US voters, 48%, rate Biden poorly on issues concerning crime, a report on the poll said.

Thirty-five percent of respondents rated Biden's handling of crime as "good" or "excellent," the poll report said. That figure is down from 43% in August, the poll report added.

The poll surveyed 892 likely US voters on December 6-7 and 10. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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UN Concerned About Wider Impacts of Gaza War, Risk of Regional Escalation - Official

UNITED NATIONS, December 19 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is concerned about the wider impacts of the war in Gaza including the potential for a spillover of the crisis into the region, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland said on Tuesday.

"I remain concerned about the wider impacts of the war in Gaza and the risk for escalation in the region," Wennesland told the Security Council members during a meeting on Palestine. "Daily exchanges of fire across the Blue Line have continued with the risk of miscalculation and escalation posing a grave threat to regional stability. It is imperative that Lebanon not be dragged into a regional conflagration and that the parties return to a cessation of hostilities under the framework of resolution 1701 (2006)."

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Israel's Limited Steps to Allow Aid Into Gaza Not Enough to Meet Needs - UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, December 19 (Sputnik) - The limited steps Israel is taking to allow some supplies into Gaza are welcome but are not enough to alleviate the suffering of the civilian population, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland said on Tuesday.

"Limited steps by Israel, including allowing entry of more fuel, food and cooking gas, and opening Kerem Shalom for the entry of humanitarian supplies, are positive, but fall far short of what is needed to address the human catastrophe on the ground," Wennesland told the Security Council members during a meeting on Palestine.

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Over Half of US Voters Disapprove of Biden's Handling of Israel-Palestine Conflict - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – Fifty-seven percent of registered US voters disapprove of President Joe Biden's handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with American society divided in their assessments on whether Israel should stop its military operation, according to a New York Times and Siena College poll released on Tuesday.

Only 33% of US voters approve of Biden's handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Forty-six percent said that they trust former President Donald Trump over Biden when it comes to resolving the conflict, while 38% trust the incumbent president more.

When asked about whether Israel should stop its military campaign even if some of their objectives are not met, 43%-44% of likely voters replied in the affirmative. Between 39% and 41% said Israel should continue its military operation.

Forty-eight percent of voters think that Israel is not taking enough precautions to avoid civilian casualties. Only 30% think Israel is doing enough to avoid harming civilians.

The poll was conducted from December 10-14 among 1,016 registered voters nationwide.

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US Hails EU Decision to Extend Suspension of Tariffs on US Steel, Aluminum Products - USTR

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - US Trade Representative Katherine Tai issued a statement on Tuesday hailing the European Union's decision to reciprocally extend the suspension of tariffs on US steel and aluminum products.

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Earlier in the day, the European Commission announced that the European Union has extended the suspension of re-balancing tariffs on US steel and aluminum products until March 31, 2025, after reaching an agreement with the United States. The European Commission pointed out that that EU aluminum and steel exporters will save an estimated 1.5 billion euros ($1.64 billion) in tariffs annually.

"I am glad the European Union has announced that it is taking steps to join us in extending the time for these negotiations and will follow our recommendation by continuing to suspend its tariffs on US products," Tai said in the statement.

In March 2018, then-US President Donald Trump signed two proclamations under US Section 232 to impose duties on certain imports of aluminum and steel into the country, while the European Union introduced rebalancing tariffs on US exports to the bloc.

The US replaced in January 2022 the tariffs with a tariff-rate quota system based on historical trade volumes and the EU suspended its measures on the US goods until December 31, 2023.

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Biden's Reluctance to Admit His Age Worries His Wife, Team - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden's reluctance to admit his old age disturbs his wife, Jill Biden, and team, Axios said on Tuesday, citing sources familiar with the matter.

While senior aides and the First Lady are trying to urge Biden, 81, to rest more and pay additional attention for his health, he usually wants to expand the working schedule and to do more, and sometimes his desires exceed his possibilities, the report said.

"He is his own worst enemy when it comes to his schedule," a former Biden aide said, quoted by the report. However, Biden tries to reassure his team that he is more energetic than younger people. He also often tells his aides and friends that he does not feel his age, the report added.

However, the report said that Biden's unwillingness to acknowledge his limits and his aspiration to do more than he can often create problems when he begins looking tired during public events. Current and former aides pointed out that the President wants to do more travels and events than they think he should, it added.

The First Lady and her team are deeply involved in the president's everyday schedule. Jill Biden also keeps an eye on his diet. Meanwhile, polls indicate that 70% of Americans express concerns over Biden's ability to serve the second presidential term because of his age.

In 2020, Biden, then 77, became the oldest elected President.

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Canada's Inflation Rate Holds At 3.1% in November, Unchanged from October – StatCan

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WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – Canada's year-over-year inflation held at 3.1% in November, remaining unchanged from the previous month, Statistics Canada (StatCan) said on Tuesday.

"The Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose 3.1% on a year-over-year basis in November, matching the 3.1% increase in October," StatCan said. "Higher prices for travel tours put upward pressure on the CPI. Offsetting the upward pressure was slower price growth, on a year-over-year basis, for food alongside lower prices for cellular services and fuel oil."

However, Canadians continue to feel the weight of inflation, as mortgage interest costs, food purchases, and rent prices remained high, respectively at 29.8%, 4.7%, and 7.4%, StatCan said, adding that those were the leading contributors to November's increase.

The statistics agency noted that although the cost of groceries continued to increase, it did so at a slightly slower pace than in October when prices rose by 5.4%. November's reduction marked the fifth consecutive decline in grocery prices.

Earlier in December, The Bank of Canada Governing Council chose to hold the policy rate at 5% after it observed more signs that its monetary policy was moderating spending and relieving price pressures. However, it expressed concern over the ongoing risks posed by inflation and expressed readiness to further raise the policy rate if necessary.

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"The Arab world's poorest country is doing essentially the most for Palestine," Esteban Carrillo, an editor for The Cradle, told Sputnik about the Yemeni Ansarallah movement, which has shut down Israeli trade in the Red Sea.

Biden has criticized Netanyahu, saying Israel no longer wants a two-state solution with the Palestinians. Carrillo said it was the "only playing card" for the US and Arab states after arming Jerusalem to the hilt and doing nothing about the deaths of 25,000 people in Gaza.

"I would imagine that what happens at the end of this, in their view, is the mass displacement, the ethnic cleansing of Gaza, the complete removal of these 2 million people and pushing them into the Sinai. They keep saying 'the Arabs need to help them', and it's for them [Israel] to control Gaza, for them to control the West Bank, to take it over completely."

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