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12/18/23 Monday

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Southwest Airlines Handed Record $140 Million Fine for 2022 Holiday Travel Bungles

The US Department of Transportation (DoT) on Monday fined bargain air carrier Southwest Airlines its largest-ever financial penalty in response to the fiasco that beset American air travel during the 2022 Christmas holiday season.

Southwest Airlines was ordered to pay $140 million in fines and to return another $600 million to passengers who were left stranded by the airline, compensating them for expenses such as meals, hotels, reservations, and of course plane tickets, that were negatively impacted by travel delays found to be the fault of the airline.

"Today's action sets a new precedent and sends a clear message: if airlines fail their passengers, we will use the full extent of our authority to hold them accountable," US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said in a news release. "Taking care of passengers is not just the right thing to do - it's required, and this penalty should put all airlines on notice to take every step possible to ensure that a meltdown like this never happens again."

The fine is 30 times larger than the $4.5 million fine given to Air Canada in 2021, which until Monday was the DoT's largest-ever penalty.

According to the DoT, Southwest disputed the government's assertion that it had violated the law by being so unprepared for severe weather as to have infringed upon legally mandated consumer protections, but it agreed to the penalty to avoid further litigation.

In a statement, Southwest CEO Bob Jordan said the company was "grateful to have reached a consumer-friendly settlement."

"We have spent the past year acutely focused on efforts to enhance the customer experience with significant investments and initiatives that accelerate operational resiliency, enhance cross-team collaboration and bolster overall preparedness for winter operations," Jordan said.

Storms across the US caused major disruptions during the Christmas and New Years' holidays in North America, and Southwest canceled 16,900 flights. Customers were left stranded, causing them to cancel plans or make alternative travel arrangements, and reported being left on hold by customer service for hours at a time.

After the debacle, Jordan's deputy, Chief Operating Officer Andrew Watterson, was grilled before the Senate Commerce Committee, who blamed many of the failures on changes to the staff scheduling program.

"Tomorrow, the fix will go in, it will be live on our production system. It has already had two rounds in our test system," he said on February 9. However, he also noted a lack of sufficient de-icing equipment in Denver and Chicago, which had contributed to the cancellations, would take longer to fix.

Since the 2020 pandemic, the DoT has cracked down harder on airline failures, handing United Airlines a $1.9 million fine in 2021 for unreasonably long tarmac wait times, with passengers not being allowed to deplane for more than three hours despite being on the ground. The pandemic

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put pressure on airlines as waves of COVID-19 infections caused chronic staffing shortages that led to huge delays and other headaches for travelers.

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Senate Considering Limiting Humanitarian Parole for Afghans, Ukrainians - Manchin

After months of furious debate, some federal lawmakers are suggesting a deal could soon be reached that would include both billions of dollars in aid for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan, as well as new security protocols for the US border. However, many still see a deal before 2024 as impossible.

Speaking to the US press on Sunday, US Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV) said the Senate was considering several additions to the bill, including stricter requirements for people who want to claim asylum, a new way to expel migrants more quickly, and limits on humanitarian parole.

"It's very, very dangerous," Manchin said of the number of people being allowed to enter the US. "You have to raise the threshold on the definition of asylum. You just can't just say 'someone threatened me, I've got to come into your country,' you have to show and have proof that this type of threat to you and your family is basically untenable and you cannot live in those conditions. That's going to change things," Manchin said.

He said it would give authorities more time to "adjudicate" the thousands of refugees "dispersed" throughout the country as well as to deal with "those who came for the wrong reason, or who came just because of the relaxed rules."

Humanitarian parole, also called humanitarian sponsorship, is a Department of Homeland Security program by which refugees from a select few countries can gain quick admission to the United States by way of an in-country sponsor who agrees to connect the refugee to housing, employment, and other resources once they arrive in the US.

Manchin, who has long frustrated Democrats for his propensity to cross the aisle and side with Republicans, said that bipartisan compromise was the only way the White House's bill would get through Congress.

Some Republicans who have objected to the US sending further aid to Ukraine without some kind of accountability or benefit for Americans, have sought to tie further Ukraine aid to border security provisions. A bill that the House passed last month that separated aid for Israel, which is engaged in a slogging ground invasion of Gaza and low-intensity conflicts with several other militant groups in the region, from the rest of the aid bill. However, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) declined to take up the legislation, seeking to tie Israel aid to Ukraine aid as well.

Contrary to Manchin's expectation that a deal would soon be reached, South Carolina Republican Senator Lindsey Graham told US media that same day that conservatives were "being jammed" in the negotiations.

"We're not anywhere close to a deal," he said. "It'll go into next year."

However, the White House has pressed lawmakers to vote before leaving for their end-of-year recess, as Ukraine aid is expected to "run out" by the end of the year. The House adjourned

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until January on Thursday, but the Senate has delayed in order to continue negotiations. Schumer told US media he intends to hold a vote this week.

Paolo Raffone, a strategic analyst and director of the CIPI Foundation in Brussels, told Sputnik on Monday that the US had demonstrated it was "eminently not interested in the fate of the Afghans" after withdrawing from the country in 2021, ending a 20-year-long occupation war.

"The US and NATO ran away from Afghanistan in a dishonorable manner," he said. "Moreover, they abandoned many people who had collaborated with them over the past 20 years. Those people are running out of Afghanistan because the new regime considers them 'traitors' and their lives are at risk. The US is eminently not interested in the fate of the Afghans."

"The EU has done nothing to set up a process to accept regular migration or protection procedures from Afghanistan. Also in the case of Ukraine, the US is not interested in receiving Ukrainian migrants. Ukrainians who fly from conscription and political persecution can only pour in EU countries. The responsibility for the outflow of Afghan and Ukrainian migrants rests with US/EU policies in these countries."

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"This is how the censorship industrial regime works – they seize on every alleged crisis to justify new censorship," said American journalist and free speech advocate Glenn Greenwald.

Greenwald slammed the European Union's opening of a formal investigation into Elon Musk's X platform Monday.

The bloc announced they were examining whether the social media site violated regulations relating to content moderation, "information manipulation," and data transparency.

The European Commission has expressed concern over an alleged rise in "Russian disinformation" and anti-Israel content on the platform; European countries often crack down on public displays of pro-Palestine sentiment.

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American lawmakers calling for TikTok to be banned may be given ammunition by a new report suggesting the social media platform is damaging the US Army's recruitment efforts.

Veterans and even current members of the country's armed forces have turned to social media to air complaints on a variety of matters.

"No sleep," "the pay sucks," and "sh**ty food" are among some of the complaints young veterans have reportedly shared on the video sharing site.

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The US military is in the midst of a major recruiting crisis, having fallen short of its goals by thousands in the past years.

Various controversies have dogged the Army over its attempts at social media outreach, but the Pentagon continues to shape perceptions by consulting on popular films and video games.

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Moderation or Censorship? Illicit Content on Elon Musk's X Draws EU Investigation

Government oversight of social media has spurred debate over free speech and how online platforms should moderate content.

The European Union announced a formal investigation into Elon Musk's X social media platform Monday, suggesting the website may have run afoul of several provisions of the bloc's Digital Services Act (DSA) passed in 2022.

A press release on the body's website claimed the investigation would relate to content moderation, risk management, "information manipulation," data transparency, and alleged "deceptive design" of the platform relating to the "Blue check" subscription feature.

"Today's opening of formal proceedings against X makes it clear that, with the DSA, the time of big online platforms behaving like they are 'too big to care' has come to an end," said Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton. "We now have clear rules, ex ante obligations, strong oversight, speedy enforcement, and deterrent sanctions and we will make full use of our toolbox to protect our citizens and democracies."

"We will now start an in-depth investigation of X's compliance with the DSA obligations concerning countering the dissemination and amplification of illegal content and disinformation in the EU, transparency of the platforms and design of the user interface," Breton added.

The announcement marks an escalation of the war of words taking place between EU officials and Musk since the tech mogul bought the social media platform previously known as Twitter last year. A self-styled champion of free speech, Musk reduced content moderation on the platform and unbanned several controversial accounts, most recently that of radio show host Alex Jones.

Musk's moves relating to the San Francisco-based social media giant have put him at odds with regulators throughout Europe, where expression is often regulated to a greater degree than in the United States.

In recent months, several high-profile advertisers have left the X platform in response to a demonstrated rise in incendiary content on the site, including from neo-Nazis and alleged terrorist groups.

Tensions with the EU came to a head in October after Hamas' surprise attack in Israel, when the European Commission opened a preliminary inquiry into "terrorist and violent content and hate speech" on the platform.

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The EU claims a mandate to “safeguard” its citizens online, but critics say the bloc’s conduct demonstrates its political leanings.

Germany, often considered the most powerful country within the EU, takes a particularly strong pro-Israel stance and has arrested scores of protesters at “unauthorized” pro-Palestine demonstrations. France also banned pro-Palestine marches entirely for a time and continues to crack down on demonstrations on a “case-by-case” basis.

“This is how his [Breton’s] censorship industrial regime works,” saidAmerican journalist and free speech advocate Glenn Greenwald, referring to Breton as “the EU’s chief censor.”

“They seize on every alleged crisis to justify new censorship: Russiagate, COVID, Jan 6, the war in Ukraine,” Greenwald remarked in a social media thread. “He's [Breton] been threatening to use their new online censorship law against all Big Tech platforms, but is focusing on X due to perceived political vulnerabilities of Musk.”

Critics claim a panic over “disinformation” is being used to tighten control over online discourse, especially since events like the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the UK’s vote to leave the European Union shocked establishment politicians in the West. A recently-released European Commission study focused on an alleged rise in “Russian disinformation” on the X platform in 2023, suggesting the bloc’s concern over “safeguarding” users extends to protecting them from narratives and information disfavored by traditional power centers.

Despite Musk’s rhetoric, a recent report found his X platform is actually complying with more government requests to remove content than before he took over the social media giant. The report found that X has fully complied with more than 80% of government and court takedown requests, compared to about 50% of requests that were complied with previously.

Social media giants like Facebook* and X have been known to fill their “trust” and “safety” teams with ex-CIA and FBI officials in an attempt to assuage US government regulators’ concerns over discourse on the platforms.

Recently, several US lawmakers called for the platform TikTok, which originated in China, to be banned entirely due to a purported increase in pro-Palestine content on the video sharing site. The platform is widely used by young people in the United States.

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US v. Gen Z: TikTok Complaints Reportedly Aiding Poor Military Recruitment

The United States Army has struggled for years to effectively use social media as it seeks various avenues to shape public perception.

Lawmakers calling for TikTok to be banned may be given ammunition by a new report suggesting the social media platform is damaging the US Army’s recruitment efforts.

“No sleep,” “the pay sucks,” and “sh**ty food” are among some of the complaints young veterans have reportedly aired on the video sharing site. One video making such claims has been viewed over 600,000 times since being posted three years ago, according to a British tabloid.

Another video alleges a lack of privacy and complains about fitness requirements.

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“You had a boujee life as a civilian but were really stupid at 18 so you joined the military and now you're forced to sleep and s**t out in the woods like an animal,” wrote TikTok user Itzel Hernandez in another video.

Some may dismiss the social media activity as a harmless way for service members to blow off steam, but it comes in the midst of a major recruiting crisis for the US military. The Army fell 15,000 recruits short of its goals in 2022. The service performed slightly better in 2023, but still missed the mark by 10,000 recruits.

Fitness requirements have proven to be a major barrier to recruitment; researchers at Johns Hopkins have found more than half of 18 to 15-year-old Americans are overweight or obese. Drug use and mental health problems round out the causes for many young Americans to be disqualified from joining the armed forces.

Recently, the Army relaxed long-standing rules against visible tattoos in order to boost enlistment.

The US Army has struggled for years to effectively communicate with younger generations via social media. Controversy has been generated by its use of “e-girl” and “thirst trap” accounts online, using sex appeal to promote enlistment.

The influencers are paid members of the Army’s psy-ops division, utilizing a tactic often employed by the Israeli military.

In 2020, the Army began banning people from its esports Discord server after a trend emerged of users posting links to the Wikipedia article on war crimes committed by the United States. Administrators were forced to lift the bans after a successful lawsuit led by the American Civil Liberties Union.

The US military attempts to appeal to younger Americans through various avenues, including consulting on major Hollywood films. The efforts have given rise to the term “the military-entertainment complex” to describe the Pentagon's attempts to shape the media. The military also seeks to boost recruitment through video games, consulting on first-person shooter titles and popular franchises such as “Call of Duty.”

A new poll by YouGov is giving a stark perspective on the mistrust Americans feel with the news media. And while those numbers differ between party lines, the difference isn’t significant.

Both Democrats and Republicans trust their “friends and family” more than “poll results” or the “news media”. But Democrats were significantly more likely than Republicans to trust poll results, the news media, and political campaigns.

At least 68% of Americans do not trust social media as a viable place to get their news information, and 26% do. For political campaigns, 70% distrust these efforts to persuade voters while 24% of people showed trust in them.

Age, too, was a factor in the polls. Younger voters (people under the age of 30) were more likely to trust non-family sources for their information than those older than them. They were also much more likely to trust social media than those who are older than them, and seem to view social media with nearly the same trust as the news media.

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Nearly 1 Million Americans Left Without Power as Storm Blasts US East Coast

The storm swept the US Northeast on Monday and left hundreds of thousands without power. Trees were ripped down by heavy winds, roads were flooded or closed, flights were canceled and schools were shut down.

Heavy rain and winds were responsible for knocking out power to nearly three quarters of a million customers after a storm that hit Florida on Saturday worked its way up the US East Coast.

Customers stretching between Virginia and Maine suffered outages, but the worst blackouts seemed to affect the states of Massachusetts, Maine and Connecticut. At 2:05 p.m. EDT, Maine had 327,836 customers without power, Massachusetts had 268,821 customers without power, and Connecticut had 68,839 customers left in the dark.

“With the storm expected to grow stronger in the coming hours, I encourage all Maine people to be safe and vigilant and to exercise caution when traveling,” Maine Governor Janet Mills said in a statement.

A high wind warning was issued on Monday for parts of coastal New England and Long Island where wind gusts of up to (and in some case more than) 70 miles per hour were predicted.

Wind gusts measured at 60 mph were reported in Cape Cod, while winds of up to 55 mph were reported in the Boston metro area.

Blue Hill Observatory in Milton, Massachusetts, reported wind gusts of up to 90 mph, nearly beating the observatory's highest wind gust record, which was set on December 29, 1966, at 95 mph. A wind gust speed of 74 mph is considered to be hurricane strength.

Early Monday saw a hurricane-force wind warning issued for the coast of Maine, stretching from Lubec to Bar Harbor.

The US National Weather Service issued flood watches through Monday night for more than 40 million Americans stretching from Maryland to Maine, with flash flooding being reported in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and parts of New York. These three states experienced the heaviest rain which persisted throughout Monday.

"Check your route before your morning commute, don't drive through standing water, and don't touch downed wires," New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy posted on X. "Remember: Turn around, don't drown."

New Hampshire and Maine also received risk of rainfall exceeding flash flood guidance that was “moderate” (a 40% chance), according to the Weather Prediction Center.

“We are asking people to avoid traveling at this time if they can as most people are safest at home,” Vanessa Palange, a spokesperson for the New Hampshire Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, said in a statement.

Coastal flood warnings and advisories were reported from the Outer Banks of North Carolina stretching to Maine. In Boston, the National Weather Service warned of significant coastal flooding during the afternoon high tide.

Unseasonably warm weather has exposed some states, like Maine, to extreme weather from low-level jets. The ground has become soft too, and as a result tree root systems are weaker, making it easier for strong winds to cause widespread destruction.

At least two people have died thus far as a result of the storm. A man was trapped inside a small travel trailer when a tree fell onto it, the Plymouth County District Attorney’s Office in

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Massachusetts said. He suffered severe head trauma from the incident and died later at a local hospital.
A second man in Maine was on his roof trying to clear a large pine tree that had fallen during the storm. A second piece of the tree broke off and hit him, killing him on impact.
At least four people in Danbury, Connecticut, had to be rescued after flooding on Monday.
The storm is expected to end by Monday night.

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More Americans Turn to Friends & Family for Election Info Over Polls, News Media

A separate poll conducted in August showed Trump's "big lie" endured: nearly 70% of Republicans believed the 2020 election was rigged, and that Biden's win was illegitimate.
A new poll by YouGov is giving a stark perspective on the mistrust Americans feel with the news media, and while those numbers differ between party lines, the difference isn't significant.
Both Democrats and Republicans trust their "friends and family" more than "poll results" or the "news media," recent findings have suggested, noting that Democrats were significantly more likely than Republicans to trust poll results, the news media, and political campaigns.
Overall, the results show a grim outlook for the industries and institutions responsible for conveying election information.
When asked if they trusted poll results for accurate information about elections, 47% said "not much" and "not at all" while 46% said "a great deal" or "a fair amount." Just 44% showed trust in the news media, with 51% distrusting the news media.
Findings further indicated that at least 68% of Americans do not trust social media as a viable place to get their news information, while 26% do. For political campaigns, 70% distrust these efforts to persuade voters while 24% of people showed trust in them.
Age, too, was a factor in the polls. Younger voters (people under the age of 30) were more likely to trust non-family sources for their information than those older than them. They were also much more likely to trust social media than those who are older than them, and seem to view social media with nearly the same trust as the news media.
In an analysis conducted by columnist Philip Bump, he highlighted Pew Research Center polls that showed very few Americans knew people who supported a different presidential candidate than one they supported.
Therefore: people who support President Joe Biden will turn to others who support the Democrat for their political information. Likewise, those who support former President Donald Trump will also turn to fellow Trump-supporters for their information.
Despite no evidence of voter fraud in the US 2020 election, many Republicans have continued to indulge the former president's unsubstantiated claim that the election was rigged or stolen.
The former president is now facing indictments related to his efforts to overturn the results of the election. However, support for the former president hasn't wavered, and the YouGov poll showed that 65% of Republicans still want Trump to run for president in 2024, and 61% also say Trump is their first choice for candidate.

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Spying Devices Found Inside Zaluzhny's Office Sign of 'Growing Chaos' Within Kiev Regime

On Sunday, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) found non-functioning spying devices in an office intended for Ukrainian Armed Forces General Valery Zaluzhny. Following the discovery, the service launched a criminal probe.

The discovery of eavesdropping equipment is an incident that could work in favor of Zaluzhny and make him be seen as an unfairly persecuted war hero in the eyes of Ukrainians.

Volodymyr Oleynyk, a Ukrainian politician and former MP of the Ukrainian parliament has argued that the incident could have originated from several different places: people who work under Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Russian special services, or people under Zaluzhny as he may wish to bolster up his image. Two intelligence agencies could have been responsible as well: the SBU which is subordinate to Zelensky, or the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, headed by Kyrylo Budanov.

Larry Johnson, a retired CIA intelligence officer and State Department official spoke with Sputnik about the incident and weighed his take on who may have been responsible for the incident.

According to the analyst, the first idea that came to his mind after recieving the news story was that Zaluzhny himself installed the bugging devices to gain political points for fighting Zelensky's oppression.

“I don't mean to be conspiratorial, but as soon as you see that story come out, my first reaction was that Zaluzhny was putting that out himself, maybe even having planted the bugs in order to create a narrative that will justify him moving against Zelensky and possibly [Kyrylo] Budanov, that he wants to establish the fact that he has been subject to this unwarranted spying," Johnson stressed.

The ex-CIA officer also speculated that there could be other culprits responsible for the incident, including Zelensky's aides, Budanov's subordinates, or the SBU head.

"It's also possible that it was done by either someone connected to Zelensky or someone connected to Budanov. I don't necessarily put those two, the SBU head, in the same camp as Zelensky," the analyst explained.

However, in this case "the more" is not "the merrier" as the growing number of people unsatisfied with the incumbent Ukrainian president signifies the aggravating chaos inside the Kiev regime, according to Johnson.

"So there are lots of possibilities. But what we can say for certain is this is just one more indicator of growing chaos within the Ukrainian government. And the fact that Zelensky is, his position, I think, is becoming more precarious with each passing day,” Johnson emphasized.

Commenting on the timing of the incident, the ex-CIA officer stated that the situation in Ukraine has been getting worse, with the Ukrainian establishment increasingly panicking.

“Again, things are moving towards a climax. Getting these kinds of reports show that there'll be increased, I guess, chaos within the current Ukrainian government... It's growing. It's not receding,” the analyst clarified.

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Asked about the reasons for this scandal to happen, Johnson reiterated his statement that Zaluzhny's ambition to replace Zelensky is one of the most probable explanations of the incident.

“Well, the one possible agenda is that, as I pointed out, that Zaluzhny is staging this in order to be able to create a justification for moving against Zelensky. That is one possibility," the ex-CIA officer highlighted.

However, the spying devices may have actually been placed by Zelensky's subordinates because the president "doesn't trust Zaluzhny and was wanting to find out what the heck was going on," the analyst argued.

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Canadian Teen Charged With Terrorism, Explosives Offenses in Plot to Attack Jews - Police

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - An Ottawa teenager arrested last week over an alleged terror plot against Canadian Jews has been charged with additional counts, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) said.

On Friday, the police arrested and charged a young person over facilitating a terrorist activity by communicating instructional material related to an explosive substance and instructing, directly or indirectly, a person to carry out a terrorist activity against Jewish persons.

"RCMP Federal Policing Integrated National Security Enforcement Team (INSET) executed a search warrant on the residence of the Ottawa youth arrested on terrorism offences. The search of the residence uncovered materials that are used in creating explosive substances," the RCMP said in a statement on Monday.

As a result, the young individual was charged with three additional offenses — knowingly facilitating a terrorist activity by being in possession of explosive substances, possession of explosive substances with intent thereby to endanger life, and possession of explosive substances contrary to subsection 82 (1) of the Criminal Code.

The RCMP in the statement expressed concern over the rise in violent extremism in Canada, in particular, the increase in youth involvement. The agency has called on Canadians to tip off law enforcement if they know or suspect someone who is considering carrying out an act of violence.

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US Discloses Decryption Tool to Combat Blackcat Ransomware Attacks – Justice Department

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – The FBI has developed a decryption tool to enable more than 500 victims of Blackcat ransomware attacks to restore their computer systems, the

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US Department of Justice said on Tuesday in a press release.

"The FBI developed a decryption tool that allowed FBI field offices across the country and law enforcement partners around the world to offer over 500 affected victims the capability to restore their systems. To date, the FBI has worked with dozens of victims in the United States and internationally to implement this solution, saving multiple victims from ransom demands totaling approximately $68 million," the release stated.

A search warrant unsealed on Tuesday in the Southern District of Florida also indicated that the FBI had seized several websites operated by Blackcat, which is also known as ALPHV or Noberus.

Blackcat has been previously linked to Russian hackers. It has been the second most prolific ransomware group in the past 18 months, based on the hundreds of millions of dollars paid by its victims around the world.

The unsealed warrant also noted that Blackcat ransomware attacks have affected US critical infrastructure, including government facilities, emergency services, defense industrial base companies, critical manufacturing, and healthcare and public health facilities.

Blackcat uses a ransomware-as-a-service model in which developers are responsible for creating and updating ransomware and for maintaining the illicit internet infrastructure. Affiliates are responsible for identifying and attacking high-value victim institutions with the ransomware. After a victim pays, developers and affiliates share the ransom.

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US, Japan, South Korea Activate DPRK Missile Warning Data Sharing System – Statement

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – The United States, Japan, and South Korea announced on Tuesday that they have fully activated a real-time warning and data sharing system to guard against missiles launched from North Korea, according to a joint statement.

"Following recent tests that verified the full operational capability of the DPRK missile warning data sharing mechanism, the mechanism is now active. The three countries established this mechanism to improve their ability to ensure the safety of their peoples by trilaterally detecting and assessing missiles launched by the DPRK in real-time," the statement said.

They also announced that they have established a multi-year trilateral exercise plan that will begin in early 2024, regularizing and systematizing trilateral exercises moving forward.

Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin, Japanese Minister of Defense Minoru Kihara, and South Korean Minister of National Defense Shin Wonsik agreed at the United States-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Ministerial Meeting in November to finalize both initiatives by the end of the year.

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Pentagon Chief Calls on Dozens of Countries to Collectively Deter Houthi Attacks

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin called on dozens of countries during a virtual meeting to participate in US-led initiatives to deter further attacks by Yemen's Houthi group on vessels in the Red Sea, according to a release Tuesday.

On Monday, 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.

"To address this unprecedented series of attacks, the Secretary urged participants to join US-led and other international initiatives and work with US Naval Forces Central Command (USNAVCENT) and the 39-member Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) to restore security in the Red Sea to deter future Houthi aggression," the release said.

The virtual meeting was attended by ministers, defense chiefs, and senior representatives from 43 countries, as well as the EU and NATO. Austin warned that the Houthis' attacks would continue to threaten the commercial shipping industry if the international community did not collectively address the problem. Shipping companies are currently rerouting their vessels through the Cape of Good Hope, increasing delivery times and fuel, insurance, and other costs.

Austin and other senior US defense officials said that the Houthis had conducted over 100 one-way uncrewed aerial systems and ballistic missile attacks, targeting 10 merchant vessels involving more than 35 different nations. The Houthis have also been holding the Galaxy Leader vessel and its 25-member international crew hostage since November 19.

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Marvel Fires Actor Jonathan Majors After He Found Guilty of Assault, Harassment - Source

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - Marvel Studios fired US actor Jonathan Majors, who played the villainous character Kang the Conqueror, after a court found him guilty of assault and harassment against his former girlfriend, a source familiar with the matter confirmed to Sputnik.

"We will not be moving forward with Jonathan Majors," the source said on Monday.

No additional information is available on the matter, the source added.

Earlier in the day, a New York court convicted Majors, 34, of one count of reckless assault in the third degree and a non-criminal charge of harassment as a violation against his girlfriend in a domestic dispute.

Majors played the character Kang the Conqueror in the third installment of Marvel Studios' Ant-Man movies and was set to play a major role in several more projects planned for the coming years, including in a new Avengers movie. Majors also played variants of Kang the Conqueror in seasons one and two of Marvel Studios' Loki series.

Media reported that US Judge Michael Gaffey set a sentencing date for Majors on February 6 and he faces up to one year of jail.

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Houthis Carry Out Attacks Against 2 Commercial Ships in Red Sea, No Casualties - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - Houthi rebels carried out two new attacks against commercial shipping vessels transiting the southern Red Sea, US Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a press release.

"On December 18, at approximately 9:00 (Sanaa time) [6:00 a.m. GMT], there were two Houthi militant attacks against commercial shipping in the Southern Red Sea," the release said on Monday.

According to CENTCOM, the chemical/oil tanker Swan Atlantic was attacked by a drone and an anti-ship ballistic missile launched from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen. The ship reported that it was hit during the attack and requested assistance, the release said.

The release added that the USS Carney responded to assess damage on the Swan Atlantic vessel.

At about the same time as the Houthi attack against the Swan Atlantic, the rebel group also carried out an attack against the cargo ship Clara, which reported an explosion in the water near their location, release said.

The Clara did not request support or report damage to the ship, the release noted.

CENTCOM said there were no injuries reported during either of the two attacks.

Earlier in the day, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in a statement said that the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, and Spain will take part in a new multinational operation to secure shipping routes in the Red Sea amid a surge of attacks by Houthi rebels.

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US Intelligence Believes Russia Aimed to 'Denigrate' Democrats Before 2022 Vote - Report

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The US intelligence community (IC) believes that Russia allegedly aimed to denigrate the Democrats ahead of the midterm elections in the United States in 2022, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said in a declassified report.

"The IC assesses that the Russian Government and its proxies sought to denigrate the Democratic Party before the midterm elections and undermine confidence in the election, most likely to undermine US support for Ukraine," the report stated on Monday. "We have high confidence in this assessment."

Russia has repeatedly denied interfering in US elections.

The US intelligence community also assesses that China "tactically" approved efforts to meddle in several US midterm election races involving candidates of both the Republican and Democratic parties, the report said.

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On Iran, the report claims that Iran aimed to exploit perceived social divisions in the United States and to undermine confidence in US democratic institutions during the midterm vote cycle. Moreover, the intelligence community assesses that a range of other foreign actors also tried to undermine US politicians seeking reelection in 2022, according to the report.

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Hunter Biden to Make Initial Appearance in Court on January 11 for Tax Charges - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden will be arraigned and have his initial appearance in federal court on new tax-related charges on January 11 in Los Angeles, a court filing revealed.

The filing stated on Monday that Biden will appear before Judge Alka Sagar in the US District Court in the Central District of California to be arraigned on four tax evasion charges.

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Election Workers File New Defamation Complaint Against Ex-Trump Lawyer Giuliani - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - Two Georgia election workers who successfully sued former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani over defamation charges have filed a new complaint asking a judge to prohibit Giuliani from persisting to accuse them of vote fraud.

On December 15, a court ordered Giuliani to pay a fine of $148 million for defaming the two Georgia election workers - Ruby Freeman and Shaye Moss. Giuliani, who served as an attorney for former President Donald Trump, had repeatedly accused Freeman and Ross of voter fraud in the 2020 election.

"This is an action for injunctive relief to permanently bar Defendant Rudolph W. Giuliani from persisting in his defamatory campaign against Plaintiffs, [Freeman and Moss]," the lawsuit said on Monday. "Specifically, repeating over and over the same lies that Plaintiffs engaged in election fraud during their service as election workers during the 2020 presidential election."

On December 16, a day after losing the defamation lawsuit, Giuliani during an interview on Steve Bannon's podcast, called the trial a "sham" and said he was not allowed to provide evidence that proved Moss and Freeman engaged in election fraud.

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Apple Halting Sale of Several Watches Due to Patent Dispute - Reports

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WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - Apple is halting the sale of particular versions of its watches due to a patent dispute, CNN reported.

The report said on Monday that the company will no longer sell Apple Watch Series 9 and Apple Watch Ultra 2.

The sales of these specific Apple Watch models will halt on the company's online store on Thursday followed by a suspension of sales at Apple retail stores after December 24, the report said.

Apple is taking the watches off the market because of an ongoing dispute with medical maker Masimo over its blood oxygen feature, the report added.

The company is awaiting the completion and findings of a review period that is in progress with the International Trade Commission on this dispute, according to the report.

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US Lawmakers Urge Biden Admin. to Reject Export Licenses to China Drone Maker DJI - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of US lawmakers are urging the Biden administration to consider canceling US export licenses for Chinese drone maker Da Jiang Innovations (DJI) due to national security concerns, according to a letter obtained by Sputnik.

"We are writing you today with concerns that US companies are exporting critical technology to Da Jiang Innovations (DJI), a PRC drone company, that aids our adversaries in carrying out attacks on America's closest allies and is listed on US Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security's (BIS) Entity List," the letter stated on Monday.

The letter sent to US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo was signed by Congresswoman Elise Stefanik, House Committee on China Chairman Mike Gallagher, US Senators Joni Ernst, Marco Rubio, and 11 other lawmakers.

The letter noted that the US Commerce Department blacklisted DJI in 2020 for alleged human rights abuses in China.

"Given DJI's placement on the Entity List ... American companies cannot export their technology to DJI unless they receive an export license from the US government," the letter noted. "Credible industry reports provide evidence of several cases where US components are found inside DJI drones, suggesting that the US government is granting these licenses."

The US Defense Department should not be recommending approval of export control licenses for US technology that advances DJI's capabilities given concerns they are allegedly being used in attacks against US allies and partners from Eastern Europe to Israel, the letter said.

The lawmakers asked the Biden administration to respond to their concerns by January 15, according to the letter.

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

US Should Recognize Its Responsibilities Under Iran Nuclear Deal - China's UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 19 (Sputnik) - The United States should realize its responsibilities under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) given that it has triggered the Iranian nuclear crisis, the Chinese Ambassador to the UN Geng Shuang said on Monday.

"The United States, as the initiator of the Iranian nuclear crisis, should recognize its own responsibilities and demonstrate political sincerity of various commitments under the JCPOA," Shuang told the Security Council members during a meeting on Iran.

China believes that the JCPOA is the only path to resolving the Iranian nuclear issue and that is why all parties need to cherish the hard won results, he added.

Iran, Germany and the five permanent UN Security Council members negotiated the JCPOA in 2015. The United States unilaterally withdrew in 2018 under the Trump administration, causing Iran to suspend the deal. The Biden administration has since pursued a return to the deal, although talks have stalled between the parties.

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IMF Approves Increase in Member Quotas by 50% to Bring Total to $960Bln - Statement

(Updates with more details in paras 5-8)

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has approved an increase in member quotas by 50%, or $320 billion, which will bring the total to $960 billion, the IMF said in a statement.

"On December 15, 2023, the Board of Governors of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) concluded the 16th General Review of Quotas and approved an increase of IMF members quotas by 50 percent (SDR 238.6 billion, or US$320 billion), which will bring total quotas to SDR 715.7 billion (US$960 billion)," the statement said on Monday.

The governors, which represent 92.86% of the total voting power, cast votes in favor of the resolution, exceeding the 85% required, the statement said.

IMF member states have to provide consent to their respective quota increases by November 15, 2024, the statement added.

IMF Finance Department Deputy Director Zuzana Murgasova emphasized the importance of the increase in member quotas.

"The decision is a truly historic achievement that has been in the works for three years through extensive discussions among the membership," Murgasova said.

Once the 50% quota increase comes in effect, the resulting share of quotas of IMF resources will increase from the current 49% to around 70%, Murgasova said.

"This is a significant step towards maintaining strong quota-based and adequately resourced

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IMF at the center of the global financial safety net," she added.

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US Violations of Iran Nuclear Deal 'Chronic,' UN Chief Decides to Ignore - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, December 19 (Sputnik) - The United States' violations of the Iran nuclear deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action are repetitive and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres continues to ignore them, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said.

"The situation has now become worse. The US' violations of the JCPOA provisions and Resolution 2231 have long ago become chronic in nature. Unfortunately, this obvious fact is one that the UNSG still prefers to ignore," Nebenzia said on Monday during a Security Council meeting on Iran.

Washington is not implementing any conditions of the nuclear deal, while London and Berlin are partially implementing them, he added.

Iran, Germany and the five permanent UN Security Council members negotiated the JCPOA in 2015. The United States unilaterally withdrew in 2018 under the Trump administration, causing Iran to suspend the deal. The Biden administration initially pursued a return to the deal, although talks stalled between the parties.

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Austin Says UK, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy to Take Part in Operation to Secure Red Sea

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in a statement said that the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, and Spain will take part in a new multinational operation to secure shipping routes in the Red Sea amid a surge of attacks by Houthi rebels.

"Operation Prosperity Guardian is bringing together multiple countries to include the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles and Spain, to jointly address security challenges in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, with the goal of ensuring freedom of navigation for all countries and bolstering regional security and prosperity," the statement said on Monday.

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Austin Announces Multinational Operation to Secure Read Sea Amid Houthi Attacks -Statement

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WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in a statement announced the establishment of a multinational operation to secure the Red Sea amid a surge of Yemeni Houthis' attacks on cargo ships.

"[T]oday I am announcing the establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian, an important new multinational security initiative under the umbrella of the Combined Maritime Forces and the leadership of its Task Force 153, which focuses on security in the Red Sea," the statement said on Monday.

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Human Rights Activists From Virginia Urge Senators to Oppose Funding Israel- Letter

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) – Over 40 civil society organizations and human rights activists from Virginia sent an open letter to the state Senators in US Congress, Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, on Monday urging them to oppose providing additional funding for Israel.

"In the light of this expanding humanitarian disaster, we the undersigned call on U.S. Senators Tim Kaine and Mark Warner to oppose any new funding for Israel. Without U.S. support, Israel would not be able to continue its war against the Palestinian people. We cannot finance this carnage," the activists said.

The signatories, including leaders of Arab and Jewish American organizations and members of African-American and Latino communities, called on lawmakers to act immediately. They also accused Israel of attacking civilians, committing war crimes and violating international laws.

"Denying a civilian population food, water, fuel and medicine is collective punishment explicitly outlawed by international humanitarian law," they said.

The activists also pointed out that the Biden administration uses taxpayers' money to support Israel. "Our tax dollars are paying for mass murder," they said.

The letter was delivered to the offices of both senators in Virginia's capital, Richmond, according to the statement.

On October 7, Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip across 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. Over 19,400 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of the conflict, the local authorities said.

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US Would Exhaust Munitions Within Week in Conflict With China Over Taiwan - Congressman

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WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Mike Gallagher sent a letter to Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks pointing out that recent war-gaming had shown the United States would deplete its supply of long-range, precision-guided munitions within a week in a potential conflict with China over Taiwan.

"Recent war games simulating a conflict with China over Taiwan show that the United States would run out of long-range, precision-guided munitions (PGMs) in less than one week," Gallagher said in the letter on Monday.

Without an adequate supply of long-range PGMs, especially anti-ship cruise missiles, the US and partner forces would be required to engage in closer proximity to Chinese defensive fires, the letter said.

Such a development would, in turn, elevate the risk to air and naval assets, as well as the service members operating them, the letter said.

"With no guarantees that a war in the Indo-Pacific would be limited to weeks or even months, the possibility that we may have to fight for an extended period without the most effective assets in our arsenal is deeply alarming," the letter added.

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Western Countries Should Reject Policy of Unilateral Restrictions Against Iran- Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, December 19 (Sputnik) - Western states should end their policy of unilateral restrictions against Iran, the Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday.

"We believe that Western countries as soon as possible should reject their policy of having unilateral restrictions against the Islamic Republic of Iran," Nebenzia told the Security Council members during a meeting on Iran.

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US Senate Leader Says Progress Made Over Weekend on Reaching Deal on Supplemental Bill

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - US Senate negotiators made progress over the weekend towards reaching a deal on border security-related issues to include in a supplemental bill that Republicans can support, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Monday.

"Over the past week, Democrats and Republicans have made important progress towards an agreement on the national security supplemental," Schumer said during floor remarks. "While the job is not finished, I'm confident we're headed in the right direction...I'm encouraged by the progress we made over the weekend, significant progress, and I urge them to keep going."

Schumer said the understanding is that Republicans and Democrats will each have to make concessions in the ongoing supplemental deal negotiations, which is going to take some more time to get done.

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US Senator Minority Leader Mitch McConnell during floor remarks later in the day also highlighted that senators continued to make progress toward an agreement on border security over the weekend, but that there are a number of significant issues senators are currently working to resolve.

The White House is asking Congress to approve a $106 billion supplemental bill that will include more than $60 billion for Ukraine as funding is slated to run out by December 30.

Republicans in the Senate recently blocked an effort to bring the supplemental bill closer to a final vote in order to force negotiations to bolster border security as the United States struggles to deal with a record-setting crisis on the US southern border.

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IMF Approves Increase in Member Quotas by 50% to Bring Total Quotas to $960Bln - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has approved an increase in member quotas by 50%, or $320 billion, which will bring the total quotas to $960 billion, the IMF said in a statement.

"On December 15, 2023, the Board of Governors of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) concluded the 16th General Review of Quotas and approved an increase of IMF members quotas by 50 percent (SDR 238.6 billion, or US$320 billion), which will bring total quotas to SDR 715.7 billion (US$960 billion)," the statement said on Monday.

The governors, which represent 92.86% of the total voting power, cast votes in favor of the resolution, exceeding the 85% required, the statement said.

IMF member states have to provide consent to their respective quota increases by November 15, 2024, the statement added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) –

EU SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The European Union has adopted its 12th package of sanctions against Russia, including economic and individual restrictive measures, the European Council said on Monday.

* The European Union will introduce a phased ban on the imports of Russian diamonds processed in third countries under the new sanctions package, the Council of the EU said.

* The European Union has added 29 new entities from Russia on the sanctions list as part of the 12th sanctions package against Russia, the European Council said.

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* The European Union's 12th package of sanctions against Russia has included over 140 additional individuals and entities subject to asset freezes, the European Commission said.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN EGYPT

* Incumbent Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi has won the first round of the presidential election by a big margin, receiving 89.6% of the votes, Hazem Badawy, the head of the Egyptian National Election Authority, said on Monday.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin has congratulated Sisi on his re-election as head of state, the Kremlin said.

WESTERN SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

* The United States will use remaining funding available for Ukraine to replenish weapons and for one more security assistance package, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

* The White House has been engaged in active discussions over the weekend to unblock the requested multi-billion aid packages for Ukraine and Israel amid the impasse in Congress, Kirby said.

* An extraordinary summit of the European Union, where the long-term financial aid to Ukraine will be discussed, will take place on February 1, 2024, European Council President Charles Michel said.

ISRAELI INVASION IN GAZA

* US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Monday that he discussed with Israeli officials scaling back their military operation in Gaza and transitioning to more surgical operations.

* Austin said on Monday that he discussed with Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant the urgent need to stabilize the situation in the West Bank and put an end to settlers' violence against Palestinians there.

* Austin reiterated that US support for Israel is "unshakable."

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Turkey is ready to re-activate the Istanbul process on the settlement of the situation in Ukraine, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Monday.

* Ukraine has lost up to 220 soldiers in the Krasnyi Lyman direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* he United States will run out of Ukraine aid funding on December 30 after it completes a transfer of $1.07 billion to replenish US stocks of weapons sent to Ukraine, Pentagon Comptroller Michael McCloud said in a letter obtained by Sputnik.

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Biden Launches National Database to Track Police Misconduct

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced on Monday the launch of the National Law Enforcement Accountability Database (NLEAD), enabling agencies to track law enforcement misconduct records for informed personnel hiring decisions.

"As part of my Administration's executive order on policing, we committed to create a first of its

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kind database to track records of law enforcement misconduct so that agencies are able to hire the best personnel. Today, I am fulfilling that promise by launching the National Law Enforcement Accountability Database," President Joe Biden said in a statement.

According to the Justice Department, the NLEAD is exclusively accessible to authorized users, serving as a tool to assess the suitability and eligibility of candidates for law enforcement positions.

"As required by the Executive Order, on an annual basis, the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) will publish a public report containing aggregated and anonymized data to maintain transparency and accountability," US Department of Justice said in a statement.

Furthermore, the statement said that the NLEAD establishes a unified accountability infrastructure by connecting all federal law enforcement agencies, offering hiring personnel a centralized tool for comprehensive information on candidates' past misconduct.

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Freeland Expresses Intention to Run for Re-Election, Says Liberals Can Win Under Trudeau

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) – Canada's Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland told CTV News on Monday that she was "definitely" running in the next federal elections and is confident the Liberal party can win under the leadership of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

"I'm definitely running in the next election," Freeland said when asked whether she would consider a change after 10 years in politics. "Up to Canadians, up to my neighbors to decide whether I get re-elected."

When asked about a recent Ipsos poll showing that 72% of Canadians think Trudeau should step down and that Freeland has the highest support among Liberals as his successor, the finance minister dismissed the possibility of taking over the premiership.

Freeland said that she does not pay attention to polls investigating the party's popularity among voters, but rather focuses on what she hears eard when traveling across Canada.

"I'm also absolutely supporting our Prime Minister [Trudeau] who is leading our team, doing a really, really great job," Freeland said.

"Absolutely," she said when asked about whether the Liberals had a chance at winning the next elections with Trudeau leading the party.

The next Canadian federal elections are scheduled to take place on or before October 20, 2025.

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State Dept. Refuses to Give Assurances Israel to Leave Gaza After Conflict

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WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) – US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday that the United States will not provide any assurances or guarantees that Israel will leave Gaza after the end of the conflict with Hamas in the enclave.

"What I can give you assurances is what the United States will do and that is to continue to make clear that there cannot be a reoccupation of Gaza," Miller said during a press briefing when asked if Washington stands ready to guarantee Israel will leave the enclave after the end of hostilities.

The Times of Israel reported earlier in the month that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Tel Aviv plans to retain its security control of the Gaza Strip after it eradicates Hamas and that caused frustration in the White House.

On Tuesday, US President Joe Biden said that Israel is starting to lose support around the world amid its indiscriminate bombings of civilians in Gaza in a first-to-date open criticism of the Israeli war cabinet actions since October 7.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip across 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. Over 18,700 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of the conflict, the local authorities said.

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Pentagon Warns Congress US Will Run Out of Ukraine Aid Funding December 30 - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will run out of Ukraine aid funding on December 30 after it completes a transfer of $1.07 billion to replenish US stocks of weapons sent to Ukraine, Pentagon Comptroller Michael McCloud said in a letter obtained by Sputnik on Monday.

"The Department will not execute these transfers until 15 days have passed following submission of this notification. Once these funds are obligated, the Department will have exhausted the funding available to us for security assistance to Ukraine," McCloud said in the letter dated December 15.

McCloud in the letter to Congress urged lawmakers to approve Biden's $106 billion supplemental package to address US national security concerns, which includes some $60 billion for Ukraine.

A Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik that $4.4 billion of "restored " presidential drawdown authority currently remains available for Ukraine. This is funding that remains as a sort of credit after the Pentagon realized it mistakenly did not send Ukraine the appropriate amount of military equipment that amounted to the value in several previous aid packages.

The United States will only be able to provide Ukraine with one more additional aid package before the end of the year absent approval for new funding, according to McCloud.

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Magnitude 4.3 Earthquake Strikes Off Salvadoran Coast - Sputnik Correspondent

SAN SALVADOR, December 18 (Sputnik) - A 4.3 magnitude earthquake was registered 40 kilometers off the coast of the Department of La Libertad in the southwest of El Salvador, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Monday.

Light tremors were felt during the earthquake, the correspondent reported.

The earthquake happened at 12:21 p.m. (UTC), the Salvadoran Ministry of Environment said via X, adding that it was registered 40 kilometers off the coast and at a depth of 5.2 kilometers.

The Ministry of the Environment further noted that due to the nature of the earthquake, a tsunami alert was not issued.

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UN Says Fighting in Gaza Continues to Hinder Full Scale Distribution of Aid

UNITED NATIONS, December 18 (Sputnik) - Humanitarian aid has arrived into Gaza via both Rafah and Kerem Shalom crossings but it still does not meet the needs of the people because of continued fighting, UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"Humanitarian supplies have entered Gaza from both the Rafah and Kerem Shalom crossings. While this is indeed a positive development, the conditions to deliver humanitarian aid at scale that respond to the people's needs still do not exist as the fighting continues," Dujarric told a briefing.

The UN colleagues of the World Food Program distributed more than 9,000 hot meals to internally displaced people, 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, about 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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UN Sees Great Ecological Risks of Attacks on Oil Tankers in Red Sea - Spokesperson

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UNITED NATIONS, December 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is warning about the risk of a potential ecological disaster as a result of attacks on oil tankers in the Red Sea, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"There is a great potential risk of ecological disaster," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Dujarric expressed concern abut the situation in the Red Sea and called for an immediate cessation of attacks on transport ships.

"We have spoken out quite a few times condemning these attacks on commercial ships," he said.

In addition, Dujarric re-emphasized the critical importance of freedom of navigation for the global economy.

"It is also part of the international law that ships be allowed to navigate freely in international waters," he said.

The Ansar Allah movement, whose members are also known as Houthis, has conducted multiple missile and drone attacks on ships that are owned by or transporting goods to Israel. The Houthis said they act in support of the embattled Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank amid Israel's military operations there.

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US Judge Halts Removal of Confederate Monument From Arlington Cemetery - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - A US judge issued an order on Monday temporarily blocking the removal of a Confederate monument from Arlington National Cemetery (ANC), which was set to be torn down starting this week.

“Plaintiffs have alleged that, in addition to the removal of the Memorial, Defendants have failed to take care of the gravesites surrounding the Memorial as the process of removal is underway. Plaintiffs have further alleged that the removal of the Memorial is currently underway and that, if the Court fails to take action, this case will be rendered moot,” the order said.

The order temporarily enjoins the US Defense Department from removing the monument from ANC. US District Judge Rossie Alston, Jr. of the US District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia issued the order.

Alston also scheduled a hearing in the case for Wednesday, December 20 at 10:00 a.m. (15:00 GMT) and set the temporary injunction to expire at 5:00 p.m. that same day, the order said.

In 2020, the US Congress approved a measure requiring the Pentagon to remove monuments and other displays that honor or commemorate the Confederate States of America.

Earlier this month, a group of US lawmakers sent a letter to US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to demand the monument remain intact. The monument is a symbol of reconciliation and national unity, neither honoring nor commemorating the Confederacy, the letter said.

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UN Condemns N. Korea's Latest Long-Range Ballistic Missile Launch - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, December 18 (Sputnik) - The UN condemns North Korea's latest ballistic missile launch, the Secretary-General Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"We of course strongly condemned the launch of the long-range ballistic missile by the DPRK that took place yesterday, I believe. I think it's the fifth such launch this year," Dujarric told a briefing.

The UN calls on DPRK to fully follow its international obligations and relevant UN Security Council resolutions, he added.

Last month, the UN Assistant Secretary-General for the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific Khaled Khiar said that the United Nations believes that communication with North Korea on military levels should be re-established given the increased tensions.

In November, the South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol ordered a firm military readiness in the wake of further fallout in relations with North Korea.

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US to Use Remaining Ukraine Aid Funding to Restock Supplies - White House

(Updates with more details in paras 5, 6)

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will use the remaining funding available for Ukraine to replenish weapons and to provide one more security assistance package, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"We have allocated the remaining funding that's available to restock US supplies and to replace what we're sending to Ukraine," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby also said the United States is planning to announce one more aid package to Ukraine later this month.

On Thursday, Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder said the United States had $4.4 billion available in presidential drawdown authority.

"We believe we've got enough in terms of replenishment authority for one more aid package before the end of this month," Kirby said.

Kirby added that he does not have details on what the security package would include.

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White House Says Active Discussions Took Place Over Weekend to Unblock Ukraine, Israel Aid

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WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The White House has been engaged in active discussions over the weekend to unblock the requested multi-billion aid packages for Ukraine and Israel amid the impasse in Congress, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"There were active discussions over the weekend and we here at the White House are involved in those discussions," Kirby said when asked to provide an update on negotiations for funding of US border security and unblocking the requested aid for Ukraine and Israel.

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US to Use Remaining Ukraine Aid Funding to Restock Supplies - Kirby

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will use remaining funding available for Ukraine to replenish weapons and for one more security assistance package, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"We have allocated the remaining funding that's available to restock US supplies and to replace what we're sending to Ukraine," Kirby told reporters.

Kirby added that the United States is planning to announce one more aid package to Ukraine later this month.

On Thursday, Pentagon spokesperson Maj. Gen. Patrick Ryder said the United States had $4.4 billion available in presidential drawdown authority.

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Food, Agriculture Highlighted 'For First Time' During COP28 Climate Conference - Fowler

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The mention of food and agriculture during the UN Climate Change Conference (COP28) in Dubai marked the first time they were highlighted in a United Nations meeting, US Special Envoy for Global Food Security Cary Fowler said on Monday.

"In terms of the framing of the discussion, it was, obviously, the first time that food and agriculture was highlighted in a UN meeting and that's really important," Fowler said during a webinar discussion.

Fowler's remarks were in response to a moderator's question about the framing of the discussion on agriculture in food systems during the COP28 deliberations.

Leading up to the COP28, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) presidency pledged to prioritize agriculture and food security in Dubai, raising hopes for conference outcomes that focus on climate finance, adaptation, resilience among producers and reducing greenhouse gas emissions in food systems, according to the reports.

COP28 was held from November 30 to December 12 in Dubai, hosting representatives from

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nearly 200 countries participating in the conference.

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Russia Wants Withdrawal of Non-Libyan Forces Out of Libya Without Exception - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 18 (Sputnik) - Russia favors a gradual, step-by-step withdrawal of all foreign armed groups from Libya without exception, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said during a meeting of the UN Security Council on Friday.

"[T]he work of the 5 + 5 joint military commission is of key importance for deepening coordination among the parties on the military track and forming a single security architecture, including the issue of ending the foreign military presence," Polyanskiy said. "We are in favor of the synchronized, balanced, gradual and step-by-step withdrawal of all non-Libyan armed groups and military units without exception," Polyanskiy said.

The Russian diplomat emphasized that Libya risks repeating the history of the previous decade if a political consensus is not reached.

Libya has been in turmoil since NATO member states invaded the country and then toppled and assisted in the killing of its leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. A systematic destruction of Libya as a functioning state followed, coupled by a decade-long rivalry between the United Nations-backed administration in Tripoli and the parliament in Tobruk. A United Nations-brokered reconciliation process put a caretaker Government of National Unity in charge in 2021, but it failed to hold elections in December as scheduled.

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Biden's Approval Hits All-Time Low Amid Dissatisfaction With Immigration, Inflation - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's approval rating hit an all-time low amid dissatisfaction with his handling of immigration and inflation, according to a Monmouth University Poll released Monday.

Thirty-four percent (34%) of adults in the United States approve of Biden's job performance, the poll report said. The figure marks the lowest approval of Biden since he took office, the poll report added.

More than two-thirds of US adults, 69%, disapprove of Biden's immigration policies, the poll report said. Similarly, 68% of US adults disapprove of Biden's handling of inflation, the poll report said.

Moreover, public approval of the US Congress is at its lowest mark in more than a year, the poll report said. Just 17% of US adults approve of the US Congress, the poll report said.

The poll surveyed 803 US adults from November 30 to December 4, the poll report said. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus 4.8 percentage points with a 95% confidence

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level.

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US Administration To Continue Working With Congress On Supplemental, Ukraine Aid – Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration will continue cooperating with US Congress on adopting supplemental budget request, which includes aid for Ukraine, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday.

"We will continue to work with Congress to pass President Biden's supplemental budget request," Blinken said at the signing of the Defense Cooperation Agreement with Finland.

Blinken pointed out that American assistance, including this package of support, is vital for Kiev.

"American assistance is critical to Ukraine's capacity to stand on its own feet militarily, economically, democratically, and insuring that President Putin's war of aggression remains a strategic failure," he added.

Legislation to approve more funding for Ukraine is stuck in negotiations as Republicans refuse to support Biden's $106 billion supplemental request, which includes $61 billion for Ukraine, until they see "credible" border policy changes added in the bill.

White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby urged Congress last week to immediately adopt the supplemental package, including aid for Ukraine, without delay for the holiday recess. However, a congressional source told Sputnik that there is no chance the House of Representatives will reconvene early during the holiday break to work on the national security supplemental package,

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Austin Says Will Convene Ministerial Meeting on Situation in Red Sea on Tuesday

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Monday that he will convene a virtual ministerial meeting the following day to discuss attacks on vessels in the Red Sea by Houthi militants in Yemen.

"I'm convening a meeting tomorrow… to address this threat," Austin said during a press conference, when asked about the situation in the Red Sea. "I look forward to working together with members of that group to address the threat in a meaningful way in the future."

Austin said the Houthi attacks on vessels in the Red Sea are reckless, dangerous and in violation of international law.

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Austin Says US Not Seeking Expansion of Israel Conflict, Urges Hezbollah Not to Escalate

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The United States does not seek an expansion of the conflict in Israel and calls on Hezbollah to avoid provocations, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Monday.

"On Lebanon: we've been clear that we don't want to see this conflict widen into a larger war or a regional war, and we call upon Hezbollah to make sure that they don't do things that would provoke a wider conflict," Austin said during a press conference with his Israeli counterpart Yoav Gallant in Tel Aviv.

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US Defense Chief Says Discussed With Israel Scaling Back Military Operations in Gaza

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Monday that he discussed with Israeli officials scaling back their military operation in Gaza and transitioning to more surgical operations.

"We can offer some insight based upon our own experience in fighting terrorist groups and certainly that enabled us to have great discussions, and we also have some great thoughts about how to transition from high intensity operations to lower intensity and more surgical operations, so we had great news on those issues," Austin said during a joint press conference with his Israeli counterpart.

Austin said the two sides also discussed the status of the Israeli military operation, its goals and objectives, about how to reduce harm to civilians in the battlespace, and the need to ensure a sustained flow of humanitarian assistance into Gaza.

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Austin Says Discussed With Gallant Need to Stabilize West Bank, Stop Settlers' Violence

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Monday that he discussed with Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant the urgent need to stabilize the situation in the West Bank and put an end to settlers' violence against Palestinians there.

"I also discussed the need to take urgent action to stabilize the West Bank. Attacks by extreme settlers against the Palestinians in the West Bank must stop and those committing the violence must be held accountable," Austin said during a joint press briefing with Gallant in Tel Aviv.

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US Does Not Seek War, Calls on Iran to Take Steps to Deescalate – Austin

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) – The United States does not seek a war with Iran and calls on the Islamic Republic to de-escalate the situation in the Middle East following nearly 100 attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Monday.
"As we are driving to stabilize a region, Iran is raising tensions by continuing to support terrorist groups, and malicious attacks by these Iranian proxies threaten the region citizens and risk of broader conflict. Of course, the United States does not seek war, and we urgently call on Iran to take steps to deescalate," Austin said during a joint press briefing with Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant in Tel Aviv.

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Pentagon Chief Says US Support for Israel 'Unshakeable'

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin reiterated on Monday that US support for Israel is "unshakeable."
"I'm here with a clear message. American support for Israel security is unshakable," Austin said at a press briefing during his second visit to Israel since October 7.

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Blue Origin Says Scrubbed First New Shepard Launch in Over Year Due to Ground System Issue

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - Blue Origin on Monday said it called off its first New Shepard mission in over a year due to ground system issue that its engineers are working to resolve.
"We're scrubbing #NS24 today due to a ground system issue the team is troubleshooting. We'll provide a new launch target for this week soon," Blue Origin said in a post on X.
The launch was set to be the company's first since a failed launch in September 2022, when a New Shepard rocket failed after takeoff and crashed back to the ground.

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UN Mediation Efforts in Libya Not Rejected But Some Parties Set Conditions - Official

UNITED NATIONS, December 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations invitation to mediate the Libyan dialogue has not been rejected, but some parties put conditions to the participation in the talks, UN Special Representative for Libya Abdoulaye Bathily said on Monday.

"I am pleased to report that none of the institutional players outrightly rejected my invitation. However, some have set out conditions for their participation," Bathily said during a UN Security Council meeting.

Bathily explained that the Libyan House of Representatives Speaker Agila Saleh conditioned his participation in talks under the agenda to focus on forming a new government for elections and rejected the participation of the Government of National Unity and it Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah.

Bathily also said that some of the parties conditioned their participation by seeking to elect representatives to individual meetings and preparatory bodies.

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US, Finland Sign Defense Cooperation Agreement

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The United States and Finland signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement on Monday in an effort to bolster security ties between the two NATO allies.

"Today, we will further strengthen our security bonds by signing a Defense Cooperation Agreement," Blinken said during remarks before signing the deal. "When it goes into effect, our militaries will be able to collaborate more efficiently and more effectively."

Blinken signed the agreement alongside Finnish Defense Minister Antti Hakkanen.

The deal bolsters NATO interoperability and builds on three decades of security cooperation between the US and Finland, Blinken said.

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Majority of US Voters Believe Media Bias Worsening - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - A majority of likely voters in the United States believe that bias in the media is getting worse, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll released Monday.

Sixty percent of likely US voters believe that bias in news media is worsening, the poll report said. The figure is up from 56% in March, the poll report added.

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Just 6% of respondents believe that the media bias problem is improving and 30% believe it is remaining the same, the poll report said.

The poll surveyed 1,080 likely US voters from December 11-13. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Wilmington Police Say Collision With Biden's Motorcade 'Accidental,' Driver Faces Charges

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The collision of a car with one of President Joe Biden's motorcade vehicles over the weekend was "accidental" in nature and the driver of the car faces charges following the mishap, the Wilmington Police Department said in a statement obtained by CBS on Monday.

Late on Sunday, a car hit one of the trucks shielding Biden's motorcade at the entrance of his campaign headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware. The White House press pool said there was a loud bang as Biden was standing outside by a vehicle with a surprised expression on his face.

US Secret Service agents reportedly cornered the car and pulled their weapons on the driver who held his hands up.

The statement said that the police have determined that this was an accidental collision and charged the driver with driving under the Influence of alcohol and with inattentive driving.

The driver has reportedly being identified as 46-year-old James Cooper from Wilmington.

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Arlington Cemetery To Remove Confederate Monument - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) – A monument dedicated to soldiers of the Confederate Army during the Civil War in the US will be removed from the Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) near Washington, the cemetery's administration said on Monday.

"All bronze elements of the memorial will be relocated. The granite base and foundation will remain in place to avoid disturbing surrounding graves," the statement said.

A process to prepare for the memorial's careful removal and relocation from Section 16 of the cemetery has been completed, as required by US Congress, it added.

Army National Military Cemeteries completed all processes required by laws on Dec. 16, 2023. Specialists will now move forward to complete the removal according to the Congressional requirements, the statement added.

"After fact gathering and analysis of potential impacts, the Army has published an Environmental Assessment (EA) addressing the discretionary elements of the proposed action, including how to disassemble the Confederate Memorial. The EA determined that the removal will not have significant environmental impacts," the statement said.

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The monument, designed by sculptor Moses Ezekiel and erected in 1914 with congressional approval, is scheduled to be removed by the end of this week, according to the media reports.

A wave of removal of monuments dedicated to Confederate forces began across the US after the incident in the city of Charlottesville in Virginia in 2017 when a white supremacist drove his car into a crowd of peaceful protesters, killing one person and injuring 35.

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Biden Frustrated Over Approval Ratings, Election Polling – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden has been frustrated for months by his low approval ratings and poll results that indicate Donald Trump is the frontrunner in the 2024 presidential election, The Washington Post reported Monday, citing unnamed sources.

In recent weeks, Biden and the first lady have also expressed they are upset over the lack of progress, with the president speaking sternly to his closest aides on November 20 before departing the White House for Nantucket to celebrate Thanksgiving, the report said. At the meeting, Biden complained that despite economic growth and falling unemployment, his poll numbers remained unacceptably low, the report said.

Most polls over the past month continue to show Biden behind Trump, both nationally and in key states. The Post averaged 17 polls taken in November and December and found Biden's approval rating has tied with his record low of 38%.

A White House spokesperson declined to comment about the meeting to the Post.

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