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12/11/23 Monday

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Astronomers Confirm Heaviest Elements Forged by Colliding Neutron Stars

A group of astronomers have confirmed a theory that the super-heavy elements in the Periodic Table are created not inside the cores of burning stars, as many lighter elements are, but in the ultra-violent collisions between neutron stars, some of the densest objects in the universe.
In the process, officials also accomplished a first for astrophysics: observing natural nuclear fission in space. Their findings are summarized in a paper published in the journal Science on Thursday.
Nuclear fission is the explosive process by which an unstable atom breaks apart, releasing fragments that become smaller elements, as well as highly energized particles or waves collectively called nuclear radiation. It is the force behind nuclear weapons like those that destroyed the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.
The opposite of fission is fusion, when two smaller elements combine to form a larger one. This process emits huge amounts of energy as well, and it is well-documented in nature as the "engine" that keeps stars like our sun shining bright. However, nuclear fission in nature is rare by comparison.
"People have thought fission was happening in the cosmos, but to date, no one has been able to prove it," Matthew Mumpower, a theoretical physicist at Los Alamos National Laboratory and co-author of the paper, said in a news release.
Mumpower and his crew made the discovery by observing 42 neutron stars, which are ultra-dense cores of large stars that collapsed on themselves when the rest of the star exploded into a supernova. Sometimes, neutron stars exist in pairs, which slowly spiral into one another. When they collide, it's exceedingly violent, forcing together huge amounts of highly compact matter that's contained under massive amounts of pressure and heat - the perfect place for atoms to fuse together.
In this environment, it's really easy for atoms to vacuum up a lot of spare neutrons, or neutral particles from inside of atomic cores. In fact, it's so easy that they will form elements so big that they become unstable and undergo nuclear fission, becoming several smaller and more stable atoms.
Mumpower's team did the math in 2020 on how all of this might go down: how big of an atom could be formed by this vacuuming-up process? How would they break apart into smaller atoms? What atoms would those be?
Officials found that this process could produce atoms much larger than uranium, the largest naturally-occurring element here on Earth, and potentially even more massive than the biggest artificial atoms humans have created in labs.
The team found it would eventually result in the creation of large amounts of light precision metals such as ruthenium, rhodium, palladium and silver - as well as rare earth nuclei, like

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europium, gadolinium, dysprosium and holmium. When they looked at dozens of stars near to where neutron stars had collided, they found high quantities of those same heavy elements.
"The only plausible way this can arise among different stars is if there is a consistent process operating during the formation of the heavy elements," Mumpower said. "This is incredibly profound and is the first evidence of fission operating in the cosmos, confirming a theory we proposed several years ago."
"As we've acquired more observations, the cosmos is saying, 'hey, there's a signature here, and it can only come from fission.'"
The lighter elements in the periodic table, those lighter than iron (atomic number 26), are already known to be produced by nuclear fusion in burning stellar cores, so the team's discovery confirms where the remainder of the Periodic Table comes from after decades of mystery.

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Global Gold Stockpiling Continues as Prices Hit Record-Highs - Report

For years, governments have slowly retreated from investing in the US dollar, shifting their assets into other currencies, penning agreements to use local currencies instead of dollars for trade, or buying up stable liquid assets like gold - a trend labeled "de-dollarization" by observers. Nations around the world are continuing to buy up large quantities of gold amid a monthslong conflict in the Middle East, although the trend dates to before the beginning of the crisis. The scramble has driven bullion pricesto their highest ever recorded.
The latest numbers from the World Gold Council have revealed that nations purchased a net weight of 42 tons of gold bullion in October, which is not the largest monthly amount ever, but well above the average. The month prior, nations bought up nearly twice that volume - 72 tons. Continuing a monthslong trend, the single largest gold buyer was the People's Bank of China, which bought 23 tons of gold in October, its 12th consecutive month of swelling its reserves. Turkiye was another major buyer, with its central bank buying up 19 tons of gold bullion. The other nations that purchased gold did so in modest amounts by comparison, just one or two tons each.
The news comes days after gold prices spiked to their highest since the early 1980s.
On December 4, the price of a Troy ounce of gold bullion hit $2,110, the culmination of a two-month-long increase in gold prices triggered by a sudden rise in global instability. Early October saw not only the devastating war between Israel and Hamas break out, but it was also the first time the US Congress had ever removed a Speaker of the House from that position - an event that set in motion a three-week-long period of chaos in which the American legislature handled no other business, including passing the essential budget bills put on hold in the advent of the crisis.
While the US House of Representatives has since selected a new Speaker, the central budget issues have yet to be resolved, and the war in Gaza has continued to rage, triggering global condemnations of Israel and an international movement to boycott companies based in Israel or

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that do business there. One boycott target, Starbucks, has suffered a $12 billion loss in value since early October.

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Pentagon Recruitment Struggling as Iraq, Afghan War Vets Warn Youth Against Service

The US military has struggled to fill its ranks in recent years amid a series of cultural shifts in American society, including “anything goes” social attitudes and fewer children growing up with veteran parents, a former Pentagon analyst told Sputnik. In addition, the military’s image has suffered major damage.

The Pentagon’s recruitment chiefs told federal lawmakers recently that the US military is struggling to meet its recruiting goals, warning the news is part of an ongoing trend in US society from young adults being “disconnected with the military to mostly disinterested with it.”

Of the military’s five service branches, only the US Marine Corps and US Space Force, the two smallest branches, met their recruiting goals in the previous fiscal year that ended in September - the Army, Navy, and Air Force all failed to do so.

"This recruiting crisis certainly did not appear overnight and cannot be repaired overnight," Army Maj. Gen. Johnny K. Davis, commanding general of the Army Recruiting Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

According to Davis, the US Army was short by 55,000 active-duty soldiers and 60,000 reservists during fiscal year 2024. However, the recruiting chief said, "We will not lower standards, we will not sacrifice quality for the sake of quantity.”

For the US Air Force, it was the first time in 24 years the service had failed to meet its recruiting goals. USAF Brig. Gen. Christopher R. Amrhein, commander of the Air Force Recruiting Service, told lawmakers that fewer young Americans are willing to serve in the armed forces.

"We've seen a steady decline in the military even being an option for our youth as they contemplate the future, with propensity dropping from 13% four years ago to 10%."

Amrhein noted that just 12% of US youth have a parent who served in the military, compared to 40% in 1995, telling lawmakers the “youth market” of potential recruits had "transitioned from being disconnected with the military to mostly disinterested with it.”

"Reconnecting with our youth and breaking down unnecessary barriers to serve in our Air Force and Space Force is our priority over the next several years,” Amrhein said.

Karen Kwiatkowski, a retired US Air Force Lt. Col. and former analyst for the US Department of Defense, told Sputnik on Monday that the Pentagon recruitment chiefs “left out the existence of ‘negative’ influencers – those who have served in the various theaters of US war and who are recommending against it to the younger generation.”

Noting that the size of American families has not changed in half a century, she noted the death rate for younger Americans has shifted “mainly due to drug overdose and suicide. There just are not enough ‘extra’ people motivated to volunteer. Obviously, employment rates are a factor, and people will serve the military if they cannot find any work, but our social welfare evolution in the US tends to buffer the need and desire for a military job.”

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"Lastly, the military requires physical activity, taking orders, operating on a strict schedule, and going places that may not be fun. These factors, along with the idea of serving your country, are not as attractive to young people inundated with entertainment and fun," she added.
"Our 'anything goes' narcissistic culture, DEI and wokeness, glorifying the overweight and coddling our addicts – none of this reflects well on our military image."
Kwiatkowski explained that the Pentagon's response to the youth recruitment crisis - turning to social media campaigns and pressuring politicians to "talk it up" to their constituents - is wasting the military's best resource: recruiters.
"The best PR is going to be honest PR, and that's a long road back for both active duty and Guard/Reserve because so many people, especially Guard and Reserve, were told they would serve their communities, and then got shipped off to the Middle East for up to a year. It is true that 'what a recruiter tells you and what actually happens when you enlist' has been a running joke throughout history."
"Iraq, Afghanistan, the growth of drone warfare, and the general decay of the US military and its major older weapons systems – all of these things make serving in the military viewed more as a chore than an opportunity. Our target recruits do not remember 9/11."
"If you look at where recruitment is not a problem it is in the Marines, and also special forces have little problem finding people who want to join them. The selling point of a volunteer military is that you are joining a team and going to be part of something special. That is missing for the major services. The 'best of the best' is always attractive – and that message is unbelieved by most people in the country, the young and also the older people who remember a prouder time for our country."
"The recruitment problem could be reversed rapidly if a major attack on the US were to occur, or if an economic disaster resulted in Washington moving to a draft or even a martial law kind of situation. Of course, a draft and patriotic young people becoming members of the federal military bring with it its own problems for the existing leadership structure," she observed.
"President Trump several years ago stopped or slowed existing programs to trade citizenship for members and their families for enlistment; Biden has restored the practice with his executive order Executive Order 14012, Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans. Note that the title includes the phrase 'restoring faith.' Immigrants, and citizens alike, have become wary of participating in government programs when policies can change overnight and be reversed."

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Watch Iran Show Off Newest Karrar Combat Drone With Anti-Air Missiles

Iran has unveiled a new air-to-air capability for its Karrar combat drone, an ironic twist for an unmanned aerial vehicle derived from a target drone for anti-air missiles.
The new version of the Karrar drone was shown off on Sunday at a ceremony at Khatam Al-Anbia Air Defense Academy in Tehran attended by several senior figures in the Iranian government and military.

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The 13-foot-long drone, powered by a single turbojet engine, is capable of approaching Mach 1 and has a range of roughly 620 miles. Now, it can carry a short-range air-to-air missile called the Majid, which reportedly has an 8-mile range. It was previously upgraded to carry ground strike missiles as well.

Maj. Gen. Abdolrahim Mousavi, chief commander of the Iranian Army, said that the development demonstrated "another stage [in the process] of upgrading the power of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Defense Force."

"Today, the Army meets its own needs through the cooperation of its scientists with the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade, and knowledge-based cores. This is because strengthening the defense power across land, sea and air borders is an inseparable principle of the Army," he added during the ceremony.

The Karrar drone was derived from the Beechcraft MQM-107 Streaker, a target drone built by the United States for testing out anti-air missiles. After Iran adapted the drone to be built domestically, it used the Karrar for the same purpose for many years until deciding to add missile hardpoints in 2010.

The small drone can be loaded four-at-a-time onto flatbed trucks, from which they can also be launched.

The Karrar isn't alone as a drone that can carry air-to-air missiles, as the US Air Force's MQ-9 Reaper can carry Sidewinder missiles, but the configuration remains rare as most drones are used for reconnaissance or for ground strikes.

The Karrar offers Iran a cheaper alternative to manned interceptors as the large Southwest Asian country patrols its skies. Israel, which has claimed Iran secretly revived its long-abandoned nuclear weapons program, has also pledged to bomb Iranian nuclear facilities.

Since the Palestine-Israel conflict entered its newest stage in early October, Israel and the US have widely been perceived as looking for reasons to bomb Iran, which they claim support Hamas and groups like Hezbollah and Ansarallah, which have also recently engaged Israeli forces.

Iran has pioneered the development of numerous drones in recent years, using them as force multipliers and deterrents against attacks by other nations.

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US Must Win Space to Win Wars, Says US General

Space has been almost completely devoid of weapons since humans started exploring the cosmos with the launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957. However, growing international tensions have led some to consider the militarization of space.

The United States must dominate space and technologies related to it if it wants to have an advantage in future wars, Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Matthew Glavy said on Monday.

Speaking at the Association of Old Crows conference, Glavy said that space is a domain the US military needs to win if it wants to compete in future wars.

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“Space is the most resilient capability we have,” Glavy said. “I’m telling you right now: We don’t win the space domain? Don’t even bother.”
Glavy is the deputy commandant for information for the US Marine Corps and previously led the Marine Corps Forces Space Command.
Spaced-based military technologies currently include spy satellites, communication relays and navigation aids used by the military in every other domain. The US Space Force was created by the Trump administration in 2019, a sign that the US military is taking the space domain more seriously.
The United States’ dominance over space has been challenged in recent years, with several countries, including China, Russia, India and others, all launching scientifically significant missions in 2023, including in August, when India became the first country to land a spacecraft near the Moon’s south pole.
In 2007, China destroyed its own weather satellite in a direct-ascent anti-satellite test, only the third country to do so. Both the United States and the Soviet Union performed similar tests in the 1980s.
The 1967 UN Outer Space Treaty declares that “the exploration and use of outer space shall be carried out for the benefit and in the interests of all countries and shall be the province of all mankind,” and states that nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction cannot be stationed in outer space.

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US Air Force Punishes 15 Individuals For ‘Discord Leak’

The "Discord Leak" caused embarrassment for the US intelligence community. It showed that US internal evaluations of Ukrainian military capabilities were much lower than what was stated publicly, including that its much-hyped spring/summer counteroffensive would fall well short of its goals.
Former Massachusetts Air National Guardsman Jack Teixeira acted alone while allegedly leaking classified Pentagon information, according to an investigation by the US Air Force, but 15 members of his unit, including leaders, were punished due to the alleged leaks.
Background: Teixeira is accused of leaking Pentagon documents on a Discord server he ran. The documents allegedly leaked by Teixeira included the US’ internal evaluations of Ukraine’s military capabilities, China’s development of spy drones, conflicts in the Middle East and North Korea’s nuclear weapons development programs.
He was arrested in April and faces six felony charges for the willful retention and transmission of classified information related to national defense. Each charge carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison.
Five Important Points:
The investigation found that there was no evidence that Teixeira’s unit leadership was aware of the alleged leaks.

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It listed several "indirect factors" that allowed the leak to happen: failure to inspect areas under command, inconsistent guidance for reporting security incidents, inconsistent definitions of the "need-to-know" concept and a lack of supervision on oversight and night shift operations.
The investigation further found that the unit's leadership was not "vigilant" in overseeing the actions of the soldiers under their command and did not prioritize mission security and "failed to take proper action after becoming aware of his intelligence-seeking activities."
The military punished 15 personnel in relation to the leak, with actions ranging from relieving personnel from their positions, including command positions, to non-judicial punishment under Article 15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.
Teixeira's former unit, the 102nd Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Group was taken off its mission in the wake of the alleged leak. It remains active in other organizations within the US Air Force.
The US Air Force has updated its policies related to classified access and need-to-know policies. No trial date has been set yet for Teixeira, who has pleaded not guilty.

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Relentless US Support for Ukraine and Israel Deepens Gunpowder Shortage

Last week, a major US firearms company warned it would be increasing prices of ammunition and gunpowder across the board in 2024. The company blamed "world events" but did not specify which world events are directly affecting prices.
A gunpowder shortage in the US is the result of the country's support of ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Israel, as well as the American elite living in a "fantasy land" of unlimited funding, Karen Kwiatkowski, a retired US Air Force Lt. Col., former analyst for the Defense Department and activist told Sputnik.
"The production capacities, which were focused on the production of gunpowder for small arms, including civilian and hunting powders, are now being converted to the production of gunpowder for artillery," Kwiatkowski told Sputnik, noting that US manufacturing of gunpowder has been largely shipped overseas.
"Occupational Health and Safety (OSHA), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) seem to be the big reason that most US gunpowder manufacturing has been shut down, or has moved overseas," Kwiatkowski added.
The remaining gunpowder manufacturers, like General Dynamics, as well as their subcontractors, are the ones who benefit the most from the increased price, along with governments who want to limit gun ownership among their citizens. And because both gunpowder and fertilizers use the same precursor ingredients, that also limits the food supply.
"Curiously, governments creating and promoting wars are doing far more damage to both the environment and food supplies," Kwiatkowski said, "while ensuring increased profits for their heavily subsidized defense industries."

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While much of the American political class insists US support of Ukraine will not wane, and that NATO's proxy war is not already lost, Kwiatkowski noted American entrepreneurs are not so naive.

"The US government lives in a fantasy world of unlimited funding, and of course, selling the idea of a better Ukraine in 2024 fits in with the Biden reelection campaign," Kwiatkowski explained, adding that the major capital and asset management firms in the US hold no such delusions, saying they "are aware of funding limitations and they do track the actual productivity and futures of everything from weapons and ammo to food and medicine on a global level."

In May, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced the creation of an "investment fund" by BlackRock to support the Ukraine Development Fund, a program still in the planning stages and not expected to fully launch until the end of hostilities.

The disconnect between reality and the American elite and political class is typical of an empire in decline, Kwiatkowski said.

"The US elite today is not the elite of the Industrial Age – they study influence, propaganda and control, they know little about innovation, production and solid investment. Increasingly they are as disconnected from reality as any other elite class experiencing late stage empire – they cannot evaluate how they got where they are, and they cannot see what is coming."

US President Joe Biden has requested an additional $61.4 billion in aid for Ukraine as part of a package that also includes military aid for Israel and Taiwan. The bill stalled in Congress after Republican opposition.

A recent poll taken this month revealed that 48% of voters believe the US has already sent too much aid to Ukraine, compared to 27% who said Washington has sent the "right amount" and 11% who say it has not sent enough.

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SpaceX to Launch US Military's Secret 'Space Plane' Monday After Delay

Little is known about the largely classified mission, USSF-52, or its X-37B space plane, also known as the Orbital Test Vehicle (OTV). Similar in shape and design to NASA's iconic Space Shuttle, the X-37B is tiny in comparison, with a wingspan of 15 feet and a length of 29 feet. NASA's space shuttle was 122 feet long and had a wingspan of 78 feet.

SpaceX's Falcon Heavy rocket is scheduled to launch the Boeing manufactured X-37B space plane for the US Space Force on Monday after a 24-hour delay due to inclement weather prevented a Sunday launch.

"Now targeting Monday, December 11 for Falcon Heavy's launch of the USSF-52 mission, with weather conditions forecasted to improve to 70% favorable for liftoff on Monday night," the company wrote on X. "The team will use the time to complete additional pre-launch check outs."

SpaceX is expected to livestream the launch, which is planned for a 10-minute window that opens at 8:14 pm EST (01:14 am GMT). The X-37B will be launched with SpaceX's Falcon Heavy rocket system.

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This is the seventh OTV mission, OTV-1 through OTV-6 used either the United Launch Atlas V rockets or SpaceX's Falcon 9 rockets for liftoff.
The Falcon Heavy rockets utilizes three Falcon 9 rockets during its first stage. The Falcon Heavy outperforms both systems used in previous OTV missions.
While much of the mission remains classified, a release from Space Force revealed that the mission's objectives include "operating in new orbital regimes" presumably referring to higher orbits further from Earth. That could account for why the OTV-7 launch requires more powerful rockets than its predecessors.
Another stated goal is "experimenting with space domain awareness technologies" and when combined with the X-37B's cargo bay, could indicate that sophisticated, possibly heavy, equipment is on board, requiring the extra lift.
One unclassified project known to be a part of the USSF-52 mission is NASA's Seed-2 project, which will look at the effects of space radiation and long-term space travel on plant seeds.
The previous OTV launch, the OTV-6, concluded in November 2022, successfully landing after spending 908 days in orbit. Like OTV-7, one of its experiments also tested the effects of space travel on plant seeds.
The USSF-52 mission is scheduled to launch at NASA's Kennedy Space Center's Launch Complex-39A, roughly 15 miles north of Cape Canaveral.

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US House Committee Calls for Hardening US Economic Posture Toward China

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) – The US House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party released a new report on Tuesday that included dozens of recommendations to harden America's economic posture toward China.
The report's strategy consists of three pillars that would "level the economic playing field, reduce the PRC's hold on US and allied critical supply chains, and invest in a future of continued economic and technological leadership for the United States and its likeminded allies and partners," the report said.
The first pillar involves resetting the terms of the US-China economic relationship, arguing that the US government and private sector can no longer "allow companies' pursuit of profit in the PRC to come at the expense of US national security and economic resilience." It accused China of failing to live up to its trade promises, tightly controlling access to its markets, and stealing hundreds of billions of dollars annually in technology and intellectual property, amounting to a long-term strategy to achieve global dominance (and US subservience) in critical technology and products.
The second pillar called for immediately stemming the "flow of American technology and capital that is fueling the PRC's military modernization and human rights abuses," while the third involves investing in domestic technological development in order to build America's economic resilience.
The report sounded the alarm on critical goods that the US is increasingly depending on China

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to source, including rare earth minerals, certain components used in US weapons systems, and pharmaceutical products and precursors.

Committee Chairman Representative Mike Gallagher said in an interview with The New York Times that he hoped that Congress would collaborate on a major bill on China before the presidential election, warning that Wall Street and the broader economy would suffer from chaos allegedly created by US executive orders.

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Sullivan Says 2024 Will be 'Very Difficult Year' if Congress Fails to Approve Ukraine Aid

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The year of 2024 will be very difficult if the US Congress fails to approve new military assistance for Ukraine, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Tuesday.

"I think 2024 will be a very difficult year if we are not able to get the assistance to Ukraine," Sullivan told the WSJ CEO Council.

The failure by Congress to approve President Joe Biden's national security supplemental request "will have a significant effect on Ukraine's capacity to hold territory, let alone to take territory back from Russians," Sullivan warned.

If the US fails to provide the necessary amount of ammunition and weapons systems, it will be impossible for Ukraine to "have the battlefield progress that we have seen over the course of the past 18 months," he stated.

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Trump's Edge Over RFK Jr. Bigger Than Biden's - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump has a bigger edge over independent hopeful Robert F. Kennedy Jr. than incumbent President Joe Biden does in a potential race between the three candidates, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll released on Tuesday.

About 16% of respondents chose Robert F. Kennedy Jr. when given the option, leaving Trump with 36% of the vote and Biden with 31%.

In a hypothetical two-candidate match, Trump's lead narrows to 38% against Biden's 36%. Just over a quarter, 26%, of respondents said they were not sure of their choice.

About 60% of respondents said they were not satisfied with either Biden or Trump and wanted a third candidate.

The poll of 4,411 US adults was conducted from December 5-11.

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US Inflation Barometer CPI Up 3.1% in Year to November, in Line With Wall Street Forecast

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices rose 3.1% during the year to November, according to data on Tuesday from the Labor Department that came in line with forecasts by Wall Street economists who predicted a mild moderation in inflation ahead of a Federal Reserve decision on interest rates in the next 24 hours.

The so-called Consumer Price Index, or CPI, gained 3.1% in the previous 12 months to November. If the Fed leaves rates unchanged at its policy meeting on Wednesday — as predicted by Wall Street — it would be the third time in a row that the central bank had held off on rate hikes after 11 increases between March 2022 and July 2023.

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US Speaker Doubles Down on Border Issue in Ukraine Funding Stalemate Amid Zelenskyy Visit

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) – Amid Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to Washington, US House Speaker Mike Johnson has doubled down on his stance that any funding package that includes aid to Ukraine also has to include strict US border security measures.

"My message to [Zelenskyy] will be the same as it's been to the president," Johnson said at The Wall Street Journal CEO Summit on Monday. "This is an important battle for all the reasons we know, but I don't think it's a radical proposition to say that if we're going to have a national security supplemental package, it ought to begin with our own national security."

Johnson is scheduled to meet on Tuesday with Zelenskyy, who is in town to lobby for extended US aid for his country. The speaker argued at the summit that the Biden administration had failed to address the concerns of Republicans in order to gain their support for the national security spending package.

The White House's Office of Management and Budget warned in a letter to Congress last week that it would run out of money for military aid to Ukraine by the end of the year unless Congress passed its supplemental funding request.

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Blinken, Israel's Gantz Discuss Hostage Situation, Containing Gaza Conflict - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Israeli War Cabinet member Benny Gantz in a recent telephone call discussed ongoing efforts to secure the

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release of hostages in the Gaza conflict and to prevent the war from expanding in the region, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a press release.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Israeli War Cabinet member Minister Benny Gantz," the release said on Monday. "Secretary Blinken and Minister Gantz discussed ongoing efforts to facilitate the safe return of all remaining hostages, further increase levels of humanitarian assistance, and prevent the conflict from expanding."

Blinken stressed the urgent need for affirmative steps to de-escalate tensions in the West Bank and reiterated that Israel must take all possible measures to avoid civilian harm, Miller added.

Moreover, Miller said Blinken emphasized that the United States remains committed to advancing tangible steps towards the realization of a Palestinian state.

On October 7, the Palestinian Hamas movement launched a surprise large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing and abducting people. Israel launched retaliatory strikes and ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, cutting off supplies of water, food and fuel. On October 27, Israel launched a large-scale ground incursion into the Gaza Strip.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the prisoners and hostages, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The truce was extended several times and expired on December 1.

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US Senator Says Will Not Take Orders From Zelenskyy Amid Leader's Trip to Washington

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - US Senator Mike Lee said in a statement that he will not take orders from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as the leader visits Washington in an effort to rally support for further Ukraine aid.

"So no one could possibly have a legitimate reason to disagree with Zelenskyy? I can think of plenty of legitimate reasons," Lee said on Monday, amid a trip by the Ukrainian president to the United States. "It isn't Zelenskyy's job to worry about America's interests. But it is ours — and we won't be taking orders from him."

Lee's statement came in response to a speech by Zelenskyy earlier on Monday, in which he claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is "inspired" by the US Congress delaying the passage of more aid for Ukraine.

US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene also used Zelenskyy's visit to highlight the US' lack of willingness to support a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine.

"With Zelenskyy in town and Ukraine money running dry, why doesn't anyone in Washington talk about a peace treaty with Russia??... Answer: Washington wants war, not peace," Greene said in a statement via social media platform X.

Zelenskyy's trip comes as US lawmakers consider a multi-billion supplemental funding request from the Biden administration, which includes aid for Ukraine and Israel. However, Republican lawmakers have insisted on the inclusion of border security measures in the bill, delaying its passage.

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The Biden administration has warned that the US may run out of resources to support Ukraine if Congress does not approve further assistance.

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Trump Team Says US Federal Prosecutor Wants to Bypass Appellate Process by Going to SCOTUS

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - US Special Counsel Jack Smith is trying to bypass the appellate process in former President Donald Trump's federal election meddling case by going to the Supreme Court, a Trump spokesperson said in a press release on Monday.

Earlier in the day, Special Counsel Jack Smith requested the US Supreme Court to rule whether former President Donald Trump is immune from prosecution in the Capitol riot case.

"Crooked Joe Biden's henchman, Deranged Jack Smith is so obsessed with interfering in the 2024 Presidential Election with the goal of preventing President Trump from retaking the Oval Office, as the President is poised to do, that Smith is willing to try for a Hail Mary by racing to the Supreme Court and attempting to bypass the appellate process," the spokesperson said on Monday.

Trump believes this prosecution is completely politically motivated and there is no reason to rush this "sham" to trial except to injure Trump through "authoritarian tactics," the spokesperson added.

Trump was indicted by a grand jury in August on four charges connected to the January riot at the US Capitol. The former US president has pleaded not guilty.

Trump's trial is set to begin on March 4, 2024.

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US House Setting up Vote to Formalize Biden Impeachment Inquiry for Wednesday - Source

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives is aiming to hold a vote to formalize an impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden on Wednesday, a source familiar with the matter told Sputnik.

House Republicans are setting up a vote for Wednesday on a resolution to direct lawmakers to continue investigating Biden for alleged criminal activity, the source said on Monday.

House Speaker Mike Johnson has said that the impeachment inquiry, launched earlier this year, is intended to gather evidence to help lawmakers decide whether to pursue impeachment against Biden.

The resolution directs the House Ways and Means, Judiciary and Oversight committees to continue their probes into Biden. Lawmakers are investigating alleged criminal activity linked to Biden and his family, including foreign bribery and influence peddling.

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House Democrats are whipping up opposition to the resolution, the source said.

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Biden, Zelenskyy to Hold Joint Press Conference Tuesday - White House

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy will hold a joint press conference Tuesday afternoon, the White House revealed in its schedule.

The press conference is set to be held at 4:15 p.m. EST (9:00 p.m. GMT), according to the schedule released on Monday.

Zelenskyy will also speak to senators on Tuesday, in another attempt to make them pass a new multi-billion-dollar tranche to Kiev amid its conflict with Russia.

Last week, the Senate blocked legislation to advance Biden's $110 billion supplemental bill that includes $61 billion in aid to Ukraine over concerns it does not include "credible" measures to address the crisis on the US southern border.

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Online Video Platform Rumble Says Under Attack in Suspected Political Censorship Effort

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - Online video platform Rumble is under cyberattack in a suspected political effort to censor content, Rumble CEO Chris Pavlovski said in a statement via social media platform X.

“I can confirm that this attack has been unprecedented and has been happening since this weekend. I also suspect it is political, coming from activists and/or organizations who want to censor our creators, and related to [January 6] videos being posted on Rumble,” the statement said on Monday.

Pavlovski’s statement came in response to a content creator who claimed they were prevented from live streaming as a result of the cyberattack.

Rumble strives to be “immune to cancel culture,” according to the platform’s website. Rumble was restricted in France due to the platform’s refusal to ban Russian media accounts.

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Northrop Grumman, Boeing Achieve Successful Missile Defense Intercept Tests - Statements

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WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman and Boeing have both carried out successful tests of their ground-based interceptor systems, the two defense contractors announced in separate press releases.

"Northrop Grumman supported the Missile Defense Agency's (MDA) test of the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system," the first release said on Monday. "The FTG-12 test used a stage selectable Ground-Based Interceptor (GBI) missile system against the company's own air-launched Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) target vehicle, managed by the GMD Ground System and Fire Control to demonstrate enhanced capabilities for the warfighter".

During the test, the GMD system processed data from multiple sensors to identify and characterize the inbound IRBM threat, devised a defensive solution and launched the intercepting GMD GBI to negate the threat, the release said.

In another test, the US Missile Defense Agency and a Boeing-led industry team successfully intercepted an intermediate-range ballistic missile in space during the latest test of the Ground-based Midcourse Defense, or GMD, system, Boeing said in a separate release.

"The test validated GMD's Capability Increment 6B configuration, which gives the Missile Defense Operators more time, space, and flexibility to intercept ballistic missile threats to the US homeland," the release said.

During the test, a GMD interceptor released a kinetic-force exoatmospheric kill vehicle during the rocket booster's second stage of its normally three-stage sequence of flight, the release added.

The threat-representative target was air launched from the Broad Ocean Area and the interceptor was deployed from Vandenberg Space Force Base, California, according to the release.

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US Army Special Operations Orders 6 More Chinook Heavy-Lift Helicopters - Boeing

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - US Army Special Operations Aviation Command has ordered six modernized large Chinook heavy-lift helicopters to augment its deployment and projection capabilities, Boeing announced.

"The US Army Special Operations Aviation Command (USASOAC) has awarded Boeing a contract to produce six remanufactured MH-47G Block II aircraft as a part of the Army's modernization efforts," Boeing said in a press release on Monday.

The contract will cost $271 million and it will increase the number of the Chinooks that Boeing is building for USASOAC to 42, the release said.

"The Chinook has been a key player in the special operations domain for many years. USASOAC and international allies have used the unique capabilities of the Chinook to complete the most daring missions around the globe," the release said.

The modernized MH-47G has been adapted to meet rapidly evolving operational demands, the release added.

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Hunter Biden Moves to Dismiss Delaware Criminal Case Due to Special Counsel - Filings

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden's legal team is moving to dismiss a criminal indictment against the president's son in Delaware due to the alleged unlawful appointment of a special counsel for the case, according to court filings.

"This prosecution is not legally authorized because David Weiss was unlawfully appointed as Special Counsel and Congress has not appropriated funds for the Special Counsel's investigation or this prosecution," Biden's lawyers said in a motion to dismiss the indictment, filed on Monday.

Weiss filed the indictment against Biden, which charged him with making false statements to purchase a firearm, as an improperly appointed and funded special counsel, the filing said.

Biden's lawyers also filed three other motions to dismiss the indictment. One of the filings alleges that prosecutors lack a constitutional reason to charge Biden due to a recent federal court ruling that struck down laws that restrict drug users from owning firearms.

Another filing contends that the United States is engaging in a "selective and vindictive" prosecution of Biden. The last filing argues that the indictment ought to be dismissed per a previous diversion agreement.

Earlier this month, prosecutors also indicted Biden on nine criminal counts linked to an alleged tax evasion scheme. The criminal cases against Biden come alongside US House probes into alleged criminal activity by the Biden family, including foreign influence peddling and bribery.

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IMF Says Neutral on Frozen Russian Assets, Mindful of Risks to Global Monetary System

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is neutral on the issue of using frozen Russian assets for Ukraine reconstruction but mindful of the impact it could have on the international monetary system, IMF Mission Chief for Ukraine Gavin Gray said during a press briefing.

"We are closely following the debate on the possible usage of Russian frozen assets," Gray said on Monday. "We understand the rationale. The IMF is neutral across members and also mindful of the risks to the international monetary system of any such initiatives.

If any revenues from frozen Russian assets were to be made available to Ukraine, the IMF would assess their impact on the budget and Ukraine's program, Gray added.

After the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Western countries have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, including the freezing of nearly half of the country's foreign currency reserves, worth close to $300 billion.

In August, Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov said that the Russian government and the

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central bank had prepared a draft decree on exchanging frozen assets, and its first stage will affect 100 billion rubles ($1.02 billion). The minister recalled that assets of over 3 million Russian citizens worth 1.5 trillion rubles were immobilized abroad.

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US Official Will Visit India to Discuss Russia Sanctions, Oil Price Cap - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson will visit India this week to discuss sanctions imposed on Russia and the price cap on Russian oil, the Treasury Department said in a statement.

Nelson is scheduled to visit New Delhi and Mumbai from December 11-15, the statement said on Monday.

“In Mumbai, Under Secretary Nelson will meet with the private sector to discuss Treasury’s continued work to enforce sanctions on Russia for its brutal war against Ukraine as well as the price cap on Russian oil,” the statement said.

In New Delhi, Nelson will meet with government officials to discuss cooperation on securing the international financial system from abuse by illicit actors, the statement said.

Nelson will also chair a meeting of the United States-India anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism working group, the statement added.

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US Army Gets First Precision Strike Missiles After White Sands Test - Lockheed Martin

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The US Army has received its first Precision Strike Missiles following a successful test in New Mexico, Lockheed Martin announced in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin has delivered the first Precision Strike Missiles (PrSM) to the US Army providing long-range precision fires capability and achieving a major modernization milestone," the release said on Monday.

The deliveries were made after a successful qualification test of the weapon was carried out at the White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico in November, Lockheed Martin said.

“Thanks to the close collaboration between Army and Lockheed Martin teams, we accelerated PrSM’s development program on an aggressive schedule to deliver this next-generation missile faster than ever before,” Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control Precision Fires Control Vice President Jay Price said in the release.

To meet the Army’s PrSM Early Operational Capability (EOC), Lockheed Martin is using digital tools including ARISE advanced modeling and simulation, data analytics, and software factory to advance development and improve producibility, quality and performance, the company said..

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IMF's Georgieva, Zelenskyy Discuss Cooperation on Support Program - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said she discussed during the meeting with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy bilateral cooperation on fund's support program.

"We reaffirmed our close collaboration on the authorities' economic program supported under the IMF's US$15.6 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF), which is part of a US$122 billion international support package," Georgieva said in a statement on Monday.

She called this program "vital" to maintain macroeconomic and financial stability and support the ongoing recovery.

Georgieva said Ukraine authorities continue demonstrating their commitment to improving governance and fighting issues.

IMF chief also stressed the importance of timely and predictable external financing.

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US Kill Vehicle Destroys Intermediate Range Missile Outside Atmosphere - Raytheon

'WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - A US anti-missile kill vehicle successfully destroyed an intermediate range missile outside the Earth's atmosphere in a test over the Pacific Ocean, RTX, the parent corporation of Raytheon, announced in a press release on Monday.

"An Exoatmospheric Kill Vehicle (EKV), developed by Raytheon successfully destroyed an Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile during a recent test of the Ground-based Midcourse Defense System," the release said.

The test was conducted earlier on Monday in the Pacific region by the US Missile Defense Agency and US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), RTX said.

"This test demonstrates that the US ballistic missile defense system is operational, reliable and ready to protect the country. Raytheon kill vehicles have now successfully completed nearly 50 space intercepts, which underscores our expertise and ability to design and develop these systems to defeat the evolving threat," Raytheon President Wes Kremer said in the release.

The test marked the 13th intercept for the program, which protects the US. by destroying incoming ballistic missiles, RTX said.

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Reports US Sending Troops to Israel-Lebanon Border 'False,' Not Preparing Such Move - NSC

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - Reports that the United States is deploying troops to the Israel-Lebanon border is false and Washington is not preparing to take such action, a White House National Security Council spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

"This is false. The US is not preparing to deploy troops to the Israel-Lebanon border," the spokesperson said.

The Al-Hadath TV channel reported, citing sources, that US troops will be deployed on the Israeli side of Israel's border with Lebanon.

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Senator Schumer Says Zelenskyy's Upcoming Visit to US Congress 'Most Important' Yet

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will meet with US lawmakers on Tuesday in his most important visit to Congress yet, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said during remarks on the Senate floor.

"Tomorrow morning, [Minority] Leader [Mitch] McConnell and I will welcome Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the Senate. This will be the third time President Zelenskyy meets with senators since the start of the war and it will be his most important visit of all," Schumer said on Monday.

Zelenskyy's visit to the United States for meetings with US officials comes as lawmakers are considering providing additional aid for Ukraine.

Republican lawmakers have demanded the inclusion of border security measures in the Biden administration's $106 billion supplemental funding request, which includes $61 billion in aid for Ukraine.

The Biden administration has warned that the United States risks soon running out of resources to help Ukraine unless lawmakers take action.

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US House Passes Bill to Prohibit Importation of Russian-Produced Uranium Through 2040

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation to prohibit the import of certain Russian-produced uranium to the United States, which would remain in effect through 2040.

US House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Prohibiting Russian Uranium Imports Act, on Monday by voice vote.

"America is dangerously reliant upon Russia's supply of nuclear fuels for our existing nuclear power plant fleet," US House Energy Committee Chairwoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers said

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earlier this year in a statement on the bill, which she introduced.

The legislation bans the importation of unirradiated, low-enriched uranium produced in the Russian Federation or by a Russian entity.

However, the bill also authorizes the US Energy Secretary — in consultation with the Secretary of State and Commerce Secretary — to issue a waiver to the ban if no other sources of such uranium are available or if importation is in the US' national interest.

The legislation imposes caps on possible uranium imports from Russia through 2027 and terminates any waivers on January 1, 2028. The import ban is set to expire on December 31, 2040.

The bill does not cover imports by the US Energy Department for national security or non-proliferation purposes, or of non-uranium isotopes.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) –

ZELENSKYY'S US VISIT

* US President Joe Biden will get an update on the battlefield situation from his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy during their bilateral meeting on Tuesday, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

* Biden will stress to Zelenskyy, who is currently in Washington, that the Administration stands by the supplemental request to the Congress, Kirby said.

* The United States is determined to continue supporting Ukraine and help it consolidate its battlefield gains as well as build a future force against any future "Russian aggression" in years ahead, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said.

POLITICAL SITUATION IN POLAND

* The lower house of Poland's parliament, the Sejm, on Monday passed a vote of no confidence in the government of Mateusz Morawiecki.

* Donald Tusk will be the only candidate for the post of Polish prime minister who will be considered by the Sejm, the lower house of the parliament, speaker Szymon Holownia said.

* The lower house of Poland's parliament, the Sejm, nominated former President of the European Council Donald Tusk for the post of prime minister.

ISRAELI INVASION IN GAZA

* Palestinian movement Hamas is on the verge of collapse in the Gaza Strip, while the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is taking under control last strongholds of the movement in north of the enclave, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said on Monday.

* The death toll from the Israeli bombing of the Gaza Strip has increased to 18,205 people since October 7, and another 49,645 people have been injured, the Palestinian Health Ministry said.

* The military wing of the Palestinian movement Hamas, Al Qassam Brigades, said on Monday that it is shelling Tel Aviv.

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CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Monday after the foreign affairs council that the funding for military assistance to Ukraine remains blocked, and the decision is expected to be made during the upcoming summit on December 14-15.

* The Biden Administration will unveil a new military package for Ukraine before the end of December, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.

* The Security Service of Ukraine could use chemical weapons due to the failure of its counteroffensive, Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the head of the radiation, chemical and biological defense troops of the Russian armed forces, said.

* Ukraine has lost up to 200 soldiers both killed and injured in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

BLASTS ON US MILITARY BASES IN IRAQ, SYRIA

* Explosions occurred on Monday on the territory of Ain al-Asad military base in western Iraq which hosts American troops, Al Arabiya reported, citing sources.

* Several explosions have taken place at a US base near Ash Shaddadi in northeast Syria, Al Mayadeen broadcaster reported on Monday, citing sources.

* The territory of Ain al-Asad military base in western Iraq, which hosts American troops, came under attack for the second time on Monday, a source in the Iraqi armed forces told Sputnik.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The EU permanent representatives have made progress in agreeing on the 12th package of sanctions against Russia, but the date of their approval is not yet known, a high-ranking source in Brussels said on Monday.

* The European Commission will adopt a proposal to immobilize revenues from assets of the Russian Central Bank at a meeting on December 12, EU Commission spokesman Eric Mamer said.

* The European Commission on Tuesday will propose a package of measures on the use of extraordinary profits from the immobilized assets of the Bank of Russia, the country's central bank, a source in the commission told Ria Novosti.

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IMF Approves $900Mln Disbursement for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund said on Monday it has approved the second review of Ukraine's loan program, allowing for a $900 million disbursement.

"The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) today concluded the 2023 Article IV Consultation and completed the Second Review of the EFF arrangement for Ukraine. The completion of the second review enables the authorities to immediately draw an amount of about US$900 million (SDR 663.9 million)," the IMF said in a statement.

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Russian Man Charged in US for Stowing Away on Aircraft - Court Document

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - Russian national Sergey Ochigava has been indicted in the United States for stowing away on a flight from Copenhagen to Los Angeles in the beginning of November, according to documents filed with the US District Court for the Central District of California.

"The Grand Jury charges: On or about November 4, 2023, in Los Angeles County, within the Central District of California, and elsewhere, defendant SERGEY VLADIMIROVICH OCHIGAVA, with intent to obtain transportation and without the consent of the owner and person in command of the aircraft, having boarded, entered, or secreted himself aboard an aircraft, namely, Scandinavian Airlines Flight No. 931... and was on the aircraft when the aircraft landed within the jurisdiction of the United States, namely, at Los Angeles International Airport," the court said.

According to the court documents, on November 4, the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers at the Los Angeles Airport checkpoint discovered that Ochigava was not a listed passenger on either the SK 931 flight or any other incoming international flight, and moreover, the man did not have a passport or a visa to enter the country.

Initially, Ochigava, who has a PhD in economics and marketing, told CBP officers that he left his passport on the plane. However, but a document was never found aboard the aircraft, the filing said.

Ochivaga said he had not slept in three days, did not remember how he got past security without a ticket in Copenhagen, and would not explain how he got to Denmark's capital city, according to the document.

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State Dept. Denies Reports of US Barring Palestinian Minister From Speaking to Press

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) – US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday that media reports about Washington allegedly forbidding Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyadh al-Maliki to speak to the media while in the United States were "not accurate."

"That's not accurate," Miller said during a press briefing when asked to confirm media reports about barring al-Maliki from speaking publicly in Washington DC.

Miller denied that the US restricted the minister's communication with the media as a precondition for issuing his visa, adding that no law in the United States would require this.

On Friday, several media outlets reported that al-Maliki was allegedly censored by the US government in order to obtain a US visa. The reports cited Saudi foreign minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, who reportedly pointed out that Washington had banned al-Maliki from speaking to

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the press, threatening sanctions if he failed to comply.

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Zelenskyy Asks US to Expand Ukraine's Military Air Capabilities to Fight Russia

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) – Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Monday asked the Biden administration to expand Ukraine's military capabilities in the sky, including by sending more air defense systems and drones, to deprive Russia of its advantage in the air.

"Expanding our capabilities in the sky, especially air defense on the front, will remove Russia's air," Zelenskyy said in his remarks at the National Defense University in Washington D.C. "Patriots, and electronic warfare, and drones, and jets. Of course, all this will help our forces move on the ground as needed.

Zelenskyy also called on Congress urging US lawmakers to abandon the existing contradictions, since they allegedly play only into the hands of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and approve President Joe Biden's supplemental request.

He added that in his meetings with Biden and Congress on Tuesday, he will talk about the results Kiev can achieve next year based on its alleged achievements this year.

Zelenskyy is now in Washington D.C., where he arrived from Argentina after taking part in the inauguration of the country's new president, Javier Milei. On Tuesday, he is scheduled to meet with Biden, as well as speak to senators, which is another attempt to make them pass a new multi-billion-dollar tranche to Kiev amid its conflict with Russia.

On Wednesday, the Senate blocked legislation to advance US President Joe Biden's $110 billion supplemental bill that includes $61 billion in aid to Ukraine over concerns it does not include "credible" measures to address the crisis on the US southern border.

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US Seeks More Information on 'Disturbing' Leaked Images From Gaza Strip - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The US is seeking more information on disturbing images showing Gazan men stripped and bound after being arrested by Israeli forces, State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

Last week, images from the Gaza Strip emerged on social media showing Palestinian men stripped to their underwear and bound. The treatment of the fighters, who allegedly surrendered, has sparked concerns about Israel's arrest procedures.

"We found those images deeply disturbing, and we are seeking more information, both about the nature of the images and, of course, why they're public in the first place," Miller said during the press briefing.

Israel said Hamas fighters are surrendering in high numbers and the procedures are necessary

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to ensure the arrestees are not carrying weapons.

On October 7, the Palestinian Hamas movement launched a surprise large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing and abducting people. Israel launched retaliatory strikes and ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, cutting off supplies of water, food and fuel. On October 27, Israel launched a large-scale ground incursion into the Gaza Strip.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the prisoners and hostages, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The truce was extended several times and expired on December 1.

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US State Dept. Says Communicated to Russia Concerns Over Navalny's Disappearance

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has communicated to Russia that it is responsible for whatever happens to opposition politician Alexey Navalny amid reports of his removal from a prison where he is serving his sentence, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, Navalny's spokesperson Kira Yarmysh posted on the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter) that she does not know Navalny's whereabouts after the prison authorities informed his lawyers that he was no longer in the prison where he was serving his sentence.

"After his lawyers have stated that they have not been able to contact him for almost a week now, and after he did not appear at a scheduled court appearance today, we have communicated to the Russian government that they are responsible for what happens to Mr. Navalny while he's in their custody and they will be held accountable by the international community," Miller said during a press briefing.

In January 2021, Navalny was arrested in Moscow upon arriving from Germany, where he had received medical treatment for being allegedly poisoned in Russia. In February, the court rescinded his suspended sentence in the 2014 Yves Rocher fraud case over multiple breaches of probation and sentenced him to 2.5 years in prison.

In August, Navalny was sentenced to 19 years in prison on extremism charges. By that time, the 47-year-old Navalny had already been serving a nine-year term for fraud, embezzlement, contempt of court and violation of probation charges.

Navalny pleaded not guilty to all charges and said he considers his prosecution to have been politically motivated.

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State Dept Says More Predictability Needed Regarding Humanitarian Pauses in Gaza

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The United States believes more predictability is needed with regard to the timing and locations of humanitarian pauses in Gaza, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"There needs to be more predictability in terms of when there are pauses, where there are pauses. So civilians can get to safe areas, and so that humanitarian access can be delivered," Miller said during a press briefing.

The US is engaged in ongoing conversations, "sometimes nearly hourly conversations" with the Israeli government and UN agencies about how exactly to implement humanitarian pauses, Miller added.

On October 7, the Palestinian Hamas movement mounted a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing and abducting people. Israel launched retaliatory strikes and ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, cutting off supplies of water, food and fuel. On October 27, Israel began a large-scale ground incursion into the Gaza Strip.

In November, Israel and Hamas agreed on a temporary truce to exchange some of the hostages and prisoners. The week-long truce expired on December 1.

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Chevron CEO Says No Real Threat to US Dollar as World Reserve Currency 'Anytime Soon'

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - There is no real threat anytime soon to the US dollar as the world reserve currency, Chevron CEO Mike Wirth said on Monday.

"I don't think there's any real threat to the US dollar as a reserve currency that we see anytime soon," Wirth said during a discussion with the Council on Foreign Relations.

However, Wirth noted that certain bilateral trading relationships are opening up between energy producers and energy importers in which transactions are being denominated in other currencies.

Wirth added that he does not think there will be a global commodity market shift but also said he expects that some bilateral trading relationships and a mix in currencies may evolve over time.

Several countries, such as China and Russia among others, have started to trade commodities like oil in currencies other than the dollar.

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UN Concerned Over Use of White Phosphorus Munitions in Conflicts - Spokesman

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UNITED NATIONS, December 11 (Sputnik) - The United Nations stands against any use of white phosphorus in conflicts, the UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"We're obviously very concerned about any use of these types of incendiary munitions, especially in populated areas," Dujarric told a briefing.

But we have no reports on Israeli fighters using them in the conflict, he added.

Earlier today, the Washington Post, citing its own analysis and that of two human rights groups, reported that Israeli forces fired white phosphorus munitions manufactured in the US in an attack on a southern Lebanese village in October.

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 18,000 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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Chevron Hasn't Put New Capital in Venezuela, Needs More Certainty of Nation's Future - CEO

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - Chevron has not invested new capital in Venezuela, mostly because there is still uncertainty about the stability of the country in the future, Chevron CEO Mike Wirth said on Monday.

"We haven't put much new capital into Venezuela yet," Wirth said during a discussion with the Council of Foreign Relations. "To allocate long-term capital to anything that would grow would require much more certainty, stability and a clear line of sight on a long term future."

Chevron is currently recovering unpaid debts from Venezuela's PDVSA, Wirth added.

The United States recently extended the license for limited transactions with Venezuela's PDVSA through May 16, 2024.

In October, the US Department of Treasury announced it issued a six-month waiver easing US sanctions on Venezuela's oil and gas industry, which will be renewed only if Venezuela meets its commitments under the electoral roadmap as well as other commitments with respect to those who are wrongfully detained.

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US Imposes Visa Restrictions on 300 Guatemalans for Undermining Democracy - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed visa restrictions on 300 Guatemalan nationals for undermining democracy and the rule of law in Guatemala, US

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State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"Under Section 212(a)(3)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, we are taking steps to impose visa restrictions on nearly 300 Guatemalan nationals, including over 100 members of the Guatemalan congress, as well as private sector representatives and their family members for undermining democracy and the rule of law," Miller said in a statement said.

The US government condemns the anti-democratic actions undertaken by Guatemela's Public Ministry and other "malign actors" that undermine the rule of law by issuing arrest warrants for electoral workers and party representatives as well as those who request removing the immunity of the alleged winner of Guatamala's presidential election, Bernardo Arevalo.

Miller said that the newly introduced measures were meant to reinforce previous measures aimed at promoting accountability for corrupt and undemocratic actors in Guatemala.

In late August, Guatemala's Supreme Electoral Tribunal declared Arevalo the winner of the presidential election with 60% of the vote. However, some lawmakers and officials refused to accept the results of the election. An investigation was subsequently opened into alleged irregularities in the first round of the election.

The Guatemalan Prosecutor's Office announced over he weekend that the election results were invalid due to alleged administrative violations by the Supreme Electoral Court. Arevalo said he considers the move an attempted coup.

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Special Counsel Asks Supreme Court to Rule Whether Trump Immune From Prosecution - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - Special Counsel Jack Smith is asking the US Supreme Court to rule whether former President Donald Trump is immune from prosecution, court documents revealed on Monday.

Trump was indicted by a grand jury in August on four charges connected to the January 2021 riot at the US Capitol. The former US president has pleaded not guilty.

"QUESTION PRESENTED: Whether a former President is absolutely immune from federal prosecution for crimes committed while in office or is constitutionally protected from federal prosecution when he has been impeached but not convicted before the criminal proceedings begin," the court document said.

Smith further said it is of imperative public importance that Trump's claims of immunity be resolved by the Supreme Court and that his trial proceeds as quickly as possible if his claim of immunity is rejected.

Trump's trial is set to begin on March 4, 2024.

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US Determined to Help Ukraine Consolidate Battlefield Gains – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) – The United States is determined to continue supporting Ukraine and help it consolidate its battlefield gains as well as build a future force against any future “Russian aggression” in years ahead, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Monday.

“Together with our allies and partners, we are determined to help Ukraine consolidate and extend its battlefield gains, and to build a future force that can ward off Russian aggression in the years ahead,” Austin said during a joint press conference with Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

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Biden to Tell Zelenskyy That He Stands By Supplemental Request To Congress-Kirby

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will stress to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is currently in Washington, that the Administration stands by the supplemental request to the Congress, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"I can assure you that he [Biden] will make it clear to President Zelenskyy that we are standing firm on the supplemental request," Kirby told reporters.

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Global Economy May Lose Up to 7% of GDP Due to Fragmentation Over Ukraine Conflict - IMF

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The losses in the global economy as a result of the fragmentation into two blocs from the conflict in Ukraine are estimated to be up to 7% of GDP, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Monday.

"If the global economy were to fragment into two blocs based on UN voting on the 2022 Ukraine Resolution and trade between the two blocs were eliminated, global losses are estimated to be about 2.5 percent of GDP. But depending on economies’ ability to adjust, the losses could reach as high as 7 percent of GDP," IMF First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath said.

Gopinath pointed out that the losses may be extremely pronounced in lower-income countries and emerging markets.

"Foreign direct investment (FDI) fragmentation in a world divided into two blocs centered around the United States and China - with some countries remaining non-aligned - could result in long-term global losses of around 2% of GDP," she said.

Gopinath noted that there are "clear signs" global FDI is segmenting along geopolitical lines.

"Announced FDI projects between blocs declined more than those within blocs after the onset

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of the war in Ukraine, while FDI to non-aligned countries sharply increased," Gopinath added.

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White House to Announce New Military Aid for Ukraine By End Of Month - Kirby

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) -The Biden Administration will unveil a new military package for Ukraine before the end of December, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"We don't have too many more weeks left in this year to be able to provide security assistance, so I would fully expect that you're going to see us announce additional security assistance before the end of the month," Kirby said during a press briefing aboard Air Force One.

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Raskin Tries to Persuade Republicans to Abandon Biden Impeachment Inquiry Stance - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Jamie Raskin has talked to Republicans in the House of Representatives urging them to reconsider their stance on the impeachment proceedings of President Joe Biden, Fox News reported on Monday.

Raskin, a Democrat from Maryland, aims to counter the Republicans' arguments and provide insights into investigative procedures and evidence during the ongoing inquiry into Biden's activities, the report said.

The House of Representatives will consider a resolution this week to formalize an impeachment inquiry.

House Republicans have been investigating the president and his family for engaging in alleged widespread criminal activities, including foreign influence peddling and bribery.

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Zelenskyy to Update Biden on Battlefront Situation During Meeting in Washington – Kirby

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden will get an update on the battlefield situation from his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy during their bilateral meeting on Tuesday, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

“It's a chance for the President [Biden] to get an update from President Zelenskyy about how

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things are going on the battlefront, but also to make it very clear to President Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian people that we are going to continue to support them, particularly at this very difficult time as winter approaches.," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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US Defense Department Strategy, Policy Official Departing Role at End of Month - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - Leading US Defense Department strategy and policy official Mara Karlin will be leaving her roles at the Pentagon at the end of the month to instead work in academia, Politico reported on Monday.

Karlin serves as Assistant US Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities. Karlin also serves as acting Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

Karlin will leave her positions at the Pentagon at the end of the month to begin a teaching role, the report said, citing acting Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Sasha Baker.

"I deeply appreciate Dr. Karlin's dedication, strategic acumen, and her profound commitment to public service," Baker reportedly said.

Assistant US Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and Hemispheric Affairs Melissa Dalton will take over as the Pentagon's acting policy deputy, Baker said.

Karlin's impending departure from the Pentagon leaves the United States without confirmed officials in either its top or deputy policy positions, as well as its top strategy position. Confirmation of officials by the US Senate has been stalled by Senator Tommy Tuberville in protest of the Pentagon's abortion policies.

Karlin is leaving public service to participate in a "semester-at-sea" and teach a cohort of students using her national security experience, the report said, citing a US Defense Department spokesperson.

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US Mulls Exchanging Missile Launch Notifications With China - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) – The United States is considering a proposal to exchange missile launch notifications with China with a view toward preventing any miscalculation amid tensions between the two powers, the Nikkei Asia newspaper reported on Monday citing a US State Department official.

A new launch notifications framework would be a first concrete step building upon the November summit between US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping, who agreed to resolve a host of issues, including arms control and nonproliferation, according to the report.

The Biden administration is already considering the framework proposal and expects to hold a

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first round of talks on arms control with China early next year, the report said.
"The reason launch notification is so important is because we would have a reciprocal obligation to clarify what we're doing," the report quoted the official as saying. "The fact that China has it with Russia demonstrates they appreciated the significance of the stabilizing nature. That's what we are trying to build on."
The Ballistic Missile Launch Notification Agreement signed by the Soviet Union and the United States in 1988 will serve as a model for a possible framework with China, the official said.
The official also believes that such a framework is a necessary condition to create a trusting relationship between Washington and Beijing.

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US Sees 'Sharp Increase' in Violence Against Jews, Muslims Since October 7 - Garland

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - A "sharp increase" in violence against Jews and Muslims in the United States has been noted since the renewal of fighting in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on October 7, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Monday.
"All of us have seen the extremely sharp increase in the volume and frequency of threats against Jewish, Muslim, Arab and Palestinian communities across our country since October 7," Garland said at during a meeting of law enforcement officers in Indianapolis, Indiana.
Garland pointed out that the fear that many in these communities feel is palpable.
"We are closely monitoring the impact of the conflict in the Middle East may have in inspiring foreign terrorist organizations, homegrown violent extremists and domestic violent extremists both, in the United States and abroad," Garland said.
On October 7, the Palestinian movement Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip. Israel declared war on Hamas and implemented a complete blockade of Gaza, cutting off supplies of water, food, medicines, electricity, and fuel. Israel also started an indiscriminate bombing campaign and subsequently a ground invasion of Gaza. Some 1,200 Israelis - military and civilians - were killed in the Hamas attack and some 18,000 Palestinians have been killed in the Israeli military operations since then, with more than 38,000 Palestinians wounded.

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US Air Force Says Disciplining 15 Soldiers in Connection With Classified Document Leaks

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force said on Monday that it is taking disciplinary and administrative actions against 15 soldiers linked to the unauthorized release of classified defense documents, which were allegedly leaked by Massachusetts Air National Guard service member Jack Teixeira.
The FBI arrested Teixeira earlier this year for allegedly leaking classified defense information

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on internet chat service Discord. US Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall ordered the service's inspector general (IG) to investigate the case, separate from the US Justice Department criminal investigation.

"The IG investigation found individuals in Teixeira's unit failed to take proper action after becoming aware of his intelligence-seeking activities. However, the investigation did not find evidence that members of Teixeira's supervisory chain were aware of his alleged unauthorized disclosures," the Air Force said in a statement.

Air National Guard leaders have since taken disciplinary and other administrative actions against 15 service members for dereliction in the performance of duties, the statement said. The actions include relieving service members from their positions and non-judicial punishment under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the statement said.

The IG investigation determined that Teixeira leaked the classified materials, for which he faces six counts of unauthorized disclosure of national defense information, the statement said. Teixeira awaits a trial date in the criminal case against him, the statement added.

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IMF Chief Georgieva to Meet With Zelenskyy in Washington Monday - Spokesperson to Sputnik

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva will meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Washington on Monday, an IMF spokesperson told Sputnik.

"We can indeed confirm this meeting today. We don't have any further details at this point," the spokesperson said.

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IMF Warns World Could Find Itself in New Cold War if Fragmentation Deepens

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) – Deepening geoeconomic fragmentation could lead the world to a new Cold War, International Monetary Fund (IMF) First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath said on Monday.

"While there are no signs of broad-based retreat from globalization, fault lines are emerging as geoeconomic fragmentation is increasingly a reality. If fragmentation deepens, we could find ourselves in a new Cold War," Gopinath said at the 20th World Congress of the International Economic Association in Colombia.

Gopinath warned that the economic costs of a new Cold War II could be large. She admitted that policymakers face difficult tradeoffs between minimizing the costs of fragmentation and maximizing security and resilience.

The IMF official calls for pragmatic approaches that preserve the benefits of free trade and

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safeguard solving global challenges, along with achieving domestic goals of security and resilience.

"Keeping open the lines of communication, as is being done by the US, China, and EU, can help prevent the worst outcomes from occurring. The non-aligned countries, which are mainly emerging and developing countries, can deploy their economic and diplomatic heft to keep the world integrated," Gopinath said.

While the first Cold War was between the Soviet Union and the United States, the second one could break out between the US and China, she warned.

Gopinath pointed out that trade between China and the US has decreased over the past several years because of the significant restrictions imposed by both sides. "The trade restrictions imposed since the onset of the US-China trade war in 2018 have effectively curbed Chinese imports of tariffed products," she said.

She urged countries to cooperate with each other to find common solutions to mitigate negative impacts.

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US aid programs to Ukraine and Israel are behind the gunpowder shortage, says retired US Air Force Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski.

Kwiatkowski, who also served as an analyst for the US Defense Department says that the conflicts have resulted in manufacturers switching their focus to military-grade gunpowder instead of civilian and hunting powders. She also blames American manufacturing moving overseas due to regulations from the Occupational Health and Safety (OSHA) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPS).

The disconnect of the American elite from reality is typical of leaders in a declining empire, she added.

“The US elite today is not the elite of the Industrial Age – they study influence, propaganda and control, they know little about innovation, production and solid investment. Increasingly they are as disconnected from reality as any other elite class experiencing late stage empire – they cannot evaluate how they got where they are, and they cannot see what is coming,” Kwiatkowski explained.

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SpaceX is scheduled to launch the United States Space Force “space plane” X-37B into orbit Monday night, utilizing its Falcon Heavy launch system.

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Little is known about the classified mission, USSF-52. According to a press release, it will test the effects of space travel on seeds, attempt to operate "in new orbital regimes" and experiment with "space domain awareness technologies."

This mission will be the first time the X-37B, part of SpaceX's Orbital Test Vehicle fleet, will be launched with the Falcon Heavy rocket system.

SpaceX is expected to livestream the launch, which will take place during a 10-minute window starting at 8:14 pm EST (1:14 am GMT) at the Kennedy Space Center's Launch Complex-39A.

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🏴 Iran revealed its Karrar jet-powered drone can now carry Majid short-range anti-air missiles, a heat-seeking missile with a range of 8 miles.

Maj. Gen. Abdolrahim Mousavi, chief commander of the Iranian Army, said that the development demonstrated "another stage [in the process] of upgrading the power of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Defense Force."

Iran rolled out the Karrar in 2010, deriving it from the American MQM-107 Streaker, a target drone for testing out anti-air missiles, making its new anti-air capability highly ironic.

The small drone can be loaded four-at-a-time onto flatbed trucks, from which they can also be launched.

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🏴 The Pentagon's recruitment chiefs told Congress that of the five service branches, only the US Marines and Space Force hit recruitment goals last fiscal year. The Army alone was short 55,000 active-duty soldiers.

Karen Kwiatkowski, a retired USAF Lt. Col. said "'negative' influencers – those who have served in the various theaters of US war and who are recommending against it to the younger generation" were one factor in the decline.

"Iraq, Afghanistan, the growth of drone warfare, and the general decay of the US military and its major older weapons systems – all of these things make serving in the military viewed more as a chore than an opportunity. Our target recruits do not remember 9/11."

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“Our ‘anything goes’ narcissistic culture, DEI and wokeness, glorifying the overweight and coddling our addicts – none of this reflects well on our military image,” she added.

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🏴 A six-story building in New York City's Bronx partially collapsed on Monday.

Early reports indicate no injuries were tied to the incident, but that first responders were focusing "on life" and searching for potentially trapped individuals.

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Space is a domain the US military needs to win if it wants to compete in future wars, Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Matthew Glavy said at the Association of Old Crows conference.

“Space is the most resilient capability we have,” Glavy said. “I’m telling you right now: We don’t win the space domain? Don’t even bother.”

Space-based military technologies currently include spy satellites, communication relays and navigation aids used by the military in every other domain. The US Space Force was created by the Trump administration in 2019, a sign that the US military is taking the space domain more seriously.

The United States’ dominance over space has been challenged in recent years, with several countries, including China, Russia, India and others, all launching scientifically significant missions in 2023, including in August, when India became the first country to land a spacecraft near the Moon’s south pole.

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