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12/12/23 Tuesday

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Journalist: Biden May Prefer Executive Immunity to Trump Prosecution

Jack Smith, the special counsel who has brought two cases against former US President Donald Trump, asked the Supreme Court to rule on whether Trump can be prosecuted for his alleged attempts to overturn the 2020 Presidential election.
One of Trump's primary defense strategies has been to claim he has executive immunity for actions he took as President.
Sputnik's The Final Countdown hosts Angie Wong and Ted Rall spoke with Redstate.com front page contributor and Iraq War veteran Neil McCabe about Smith's decision and its implications for Trump's case and the executive branch.
"I think what is really going on is Jack Smith is throwing a constitutional Hail Mary, and what he is potentially going to do if the Supreme Court rules with it, is change the very nature of the Presidency [by] separating political acts, which would be subject to criminal sanctions and whatnot and official acts," McCabe explained, adding that the US Presidency is unique because it combines both the head of state and head of government into one office when typically countries have a Prime Minister and a President serve in those roles individually.
"If suddenly the Supreme Court says that when Trump was asking about election irregularities, he was doing that as a self-interested candidate and not as the country's chief law enforcement officer, all of a sudden it opens up a whole range of possible legal jeopardies for the President of the United States," McCabe explained.
However, McCabe questions if such a decision would be welcomed by Smith's ultimate boss, US President Joe Biden.
"I think the Supreme Court is compromised and may decide to give Smith some of what he wants, but Smith's ultimate boss is Joseph R. Biden Jr and maybe he would prefer to have some immunity himself as people unwind his relationship with Hunter [Biden]," McCabe mused. "That is sort of the subtext because whatever is done to Trump can then be done to Biden."
As mentioned in the interview, the Supreme Court said that it plans to decide if it will hear the case by December 20. Trump's trial relating to his actions on January 6 is set for March 4 and it is expected that if the Supreme Court agrees to hear the case, it will rule before that date.

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Report: UK Secretly Sent 500 Troops to Cyprus Base Supplying Weapons to Israel

Cyprus is an island that sits in the East Mediterranean Sea, about 230 miles from the Gaza Strip. Not unlike Palestine, its territory is disputed by two peoples, the Turkish Cypriots in the north and the Greek Cypriots to the south, where UK and US troops are stationed.

The UK has sent at least 500 additional troops to a base in Cyprus, about 200 miles from Tel Aviv, after Israel began its bombing campaign of Gaza, according to UK media.

Previously, the UK admitted to sending 1,000 troops to the East Mediterranean to support Israel but did not provide details on where the troops were deployed. But James Heappey, who serves as the minister for the UK's armed forces, confirmed in a letter to a British MP that some 500 troops had been dispatched to Cyprus.

The UK has two military bases in Cyprus that are considered UK soil, Dhekelia in the eastern part of the island and Akrotiri in the west. Royal Air Force (RAF) Akrotiri is the larger of the two and also includes a base used by the US military. RAF Akrotiri has been used by the UK as a staging area for bombing campaigns in the Middle East.

Heappey's letter also reportedly stated that additional troops were sent to Egypt, Israel and Lebanon, but declined to reveal numbers citing "operational security reasons."

The latest deployment increases the number of UK troops stationed in Cyprus to 2,717, with an additional 273 civil servants. An additional 129 US troops are known to be stationed within UK bases in Cyprus but it is unknown if that number has increased in recent months.

A spokesperson for the Cypriot government denied that the country is being used to provide military aid to Israel, an assertion that was backed by Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides. "There is no such information," Christodoulides told reporters. "Our country cannot be used as a base for war operations."

However, at least 30 RAF military transport flights have flown from RAF Akrotiri to Tel Aviv since the bombing began. In addition, Israeli media reported that at least 40 US Air Force "heavylifter" transport planes landed in RAF Akrotiri, along with a handful of Dutch and German military transports.

The 2,717 British troops now known to be in Cyprus may not be all the UK troops in the country. In October, it was reported by British media that the UK's Special Air Services (SAS), the elite troops of the UK military, were placed on standby in Cyprus, ostensibly to rescue British hostages held by Hamas and other Brits trapped in Gaza.

The day after that report was released, the UK military requested media outlets stop reporting on the SAS in Gaza. The UK government has continued to refuse to confirm or deny the SAS presence in Gaza.

British MP Kenny MacAskill, speaking with UK media, called for transparency in troop deployments in the area.

"We require openness and accountability about what is happening at Britain's bases on Cyprus and the role they are playing in Israel's criminal bombing of Gaza. 500 additional military personnel to Cyprus is a huge deployment given the large contingent already based there. What is their role?" asked MacAskill.

Cyprus has offered to act as a humanitarian aid hub for Gaza after hostilities cease. On Tuesday, Cyprus was one of 153 UN General Assembly members to call for an immediate

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humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. In a previous vote held on October 27, Cyprus was one of 45 countries to abstain from voting for a resolution calling for a humanitarian truce.
In the interim between those two votes, large protests in Cyprus took place in support of a ceasefire and multiple Cypriot MPs criticized the government's stance.

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Biden Announces He's Signed 'Another $200 Million Drawdown' From Pentagon for Ukraine

Biden used the "drawdown" provision in the Foreign Assistance Act that allows him to provide Defense Department stockpiles to countries without congressional approval. The $200 million package is the 53rd such drawdown package provided to Ukraine since March 2022, in addition to billions of dollars in aid authorized by Congress.
US President Joe Biden announced during a Tuesday joint meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that he has "just signed another $200 million drawdown" from the Pentagon for Ukraine.
The announcement comes as Congress remains deadlocked on authorizing more aid to Ukraine. Biden has asked Congress to provide $60 billion in aid to Ukraine in a funding package that also includes aid for Israel and money to secure the southern US border.
However, some Republicans have asked for more concessions on the border, including changes to the asylum system, a non-starter for many Democrats, in exchange for increased funding in Ukraine. The House of Representatives also passed a standalone aid bill for Israel, which the Senate has refused to consider.
Zelensky visited Washington in what has been described by US media as a "last-ditch effort" to convince Congress to authorize more aid to his country. Part of that visit included separate meetings with House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY).
Both Johnson and Schumer said their meetings with Zelensky went well but had different opinions on the details of their meetings.
Johnson criticized the Biden administration for not articulating how Ukraine can win against Russia. "The Biden administration appears to be asking for billions of dollars without specifics, without a clear strategy for winning, and without the answers I think the American people deserve," he said at a news conference following his meeting with Zelensky.
Meanwhile, Schumer, who has been extremely hawkish on Ukraine since the start of the special military operation, claimed that Zelensky explained Ukraine's path to victory to him.
"He [Zelensky] described in detail what kind of help was needed and how it would help win. Even many of our Republican politicians were saying that we were winning this war," Schumer claimed.
Schumer said he called Johnson and asked him to keep the House open after this week so the $61 billion aid package can be approved.
"Last night, I spoke with Speaker Johnson and urged him to keep the House in session a little longer to give the supplemental a chance to come together," Schumer said at a briefing.

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The much smaller aid package announced by Biden on Tuesday uses an authorization provided in the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) which allows the president to provide foreign aid using stocks the Defense Department has on hand without congressional approval.
This latest drawdown is at least the 53rd drawdown ordered by the Biden administration since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.
The last drawdown, costing $175 million, was ordered by the Biden White House last week.
According to US media, the latest package includes High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), anti-armor systems, artillery rounds, demolition munitions, small arms ammunition, high-speed anti-radiation missiles, generators and spare parts, among other equipment.
US media also reported the Defense Department has about $4.4 billion in weapons remaining that it can use through drawdown authorizations.
According to a 2004 Department of Defense Security Cooperation handbook on the drawdown procedure, all equipment sent using drawdown authorization must be replaced with operations and maintenance funds already part of the Defense Department budget.
During the meeting with Biden, Zelensky told reporters that he wants to use the $300 billion in frozen Russian assets to fight the conflict if Congress will not provide more aid. When asked if his country could win against Russia without aid from Congress, Zelensky reportedly did not answer verbally, shrugging his shoulders instead.

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Mooching and Schmoozing - Cartoon

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited Washington again this week, imploring Congress to approve another $60 billion in taxpayer aid.
Biden did pledge an additional $200 million in military aid to Ukraine using the authority granted to him under the Foreign Assistance Act which allows him to supply Defense Department stockpiles to countries without congressional approval but that crumb pales in comparison to the feast Zelensky was seeking.
After a top general was killed in a supposed grenade accident while celebrating his birthday and the wife of Ukraine's top spy was poisoned, mumblings of a coup in Ukraine have started.
Combined with the mayor of Kiev, former Boxer Vitali Klitschko, alleging that Zelensky is turning more authoritarian and a growing and long-running feud with the head of Ukrainian Armed Forces Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, Biden may be wondering if Zelensky ever plans to leave.

Ex-CIA Officer: Ceasefire Veto and White Phosphorus Shells for Israel Show 'US Isolation'

The US' decision to continue arming Israel and Ukraine with weapons banned by international law only shows how isolated and desperate its international position has become, a former senior CIA officer told Sputnik.

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Israel has been accused of using white phosphorus munitions several times since the conflict with Hamas began on October 7 - as well as in previous conflicts with the Palestinians and other groups in the region.

These accusations have come from locals who witnessed the strikes as well as NGOs like Human Rights Watch. One recent report in particular from a prominent US newspaper shed light that one attack in southern Lebanon in late October included white phosphorus artillery shells supplied to Israel by the United States.

While legal to use in warfare for purposes of target illumination or marking, the use of white phosphorus rounds against "soft" targets such as buildings or soldiers, and especially against civilian targets, is considered a war crime and banned under the Chemical Weapons Convention, an international treaty either ratified or acceded to by all but a handful of countries.

The day before the report dropped, the US used its veto power to block a United Nations Security Council resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, where more than 18,000 Palestinians have been killed since October 7. It was the only country to vote against the resolution, and hours after the vote, US Congress used a special emergency power to circumvent normal approval processes and rush $106 million worth of weapons to Israel.

Ray McGovern, a former CIA officer who prepared the president's daily brief during the Ronald Reagan administration, told Sputnik that Washington's willingness to arm its partners with internationally-banned weapons showed the level of desperation and isolation it has on the geopolitical stage.

"That vote on Friday was shameful," he said. "You had 13 countries, of the 15 on the Security Council, voting for a ceasefire. You had one veto, one 'no' vote, that was the United States, and then the US vassal called the United Kingdom abstained."

"Now, I expect that the [UN] General Assembly to take this up in another day or two, that's a little different. The General Assembly has less teeth in it, less enforcement, less directive power. But it will be very interesting, because I would expect that if some 185 people vote for a ceasefire, and you have the United States and Great Britain and Fiji and the Marianas Islands and maybe Albania voting against the ceasefire - what more need I say about how isolated the United States has become?"

He said that there would not be accountability for the use of weapons like white phosphorus "unless Israel loses."

"It's possible that that might happen. In other words, Hamas is not being defeated, Israel is way out on a limb; its only supporter, the United States, is taking a real black eye for supporting them. And so what's likely to happen now? If the United States has given white phosphorus to the Israelis, well, that's just as bad as giving cluster munitions - again, banned by 110 countries in the world, phosphorus as well - to the Ukrainians. And when they ran out of 155-millimeter shells, they gave them cluster munitions, and then when they ran out of those, they've already given them depleted uranium shells for their tanks. And now what's next?"

McGovern said he "wouldn't put it past" men like US Secretary of State Antony Blinken or White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan to dare to try and give Ukraine "mini-nukes" if the situation became dire enough.

"We'll show how strong we are and we won't lose, at least not until after the election," he said. "That's how bad it is. So when you talk about white phosphorus, it's awful. So when I was in the

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army, you could use that for illumination, but everyone recognized you can't possibly use that if there were human beings beneath that.
"So this is really bad and it shows the lengths to which the Congress will acquiesce in the Zionist-dominated administration - let's be very clear about that, self-proclaimed Zionists, going from Joe Biden to Blinken to Sullivan, to [Under Secretary of State Victoria] Nuland - what they're prepared to do to help their friend [Israeli Prime Minister] Bibi Netanyahu."

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GOP Activist: 'Stupid' US Leaders Will 'Throw Money' at Ukraine Unless Stopped by House

While Republican lawmakers are making overtures about accountability for Ukraine aid, one Republican leader told Sputnik that most were simply posturing for their constituents and would nonetheless approve the money sought by Kiev.
With Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky back in Washington to pressure Congress and the Biden administration for more funding, House Republicans are preparing to make a stand against what they have characterized as a "blank check" to Kiev.
House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA), an opponent of unconditional Ukraine aid, has in the past made comments about wanting to have accountability practices in place before more money is given to Kiev. However, in the present battle over some $61 billion in Ukraine aid being currently held up in Congress, Johnson's condition for approving the legislation is for it to include funding for US border security efforts.
During a joint press conference with Zelensky on Tuesday, US President Joe Biden announced he had "just signed another $200 million drawdown" from the Pentagon for Ukraine.
Ed Martin, president of Phyllis Schlafly Eagles and chairperson of the Missouri Republican Party, told Radio Sputnik's Fault Lines on Tuesday that Zelensky would "face stiff winds" in Washington as pro-war officials are more likely to prefer only funding Israel, a key ally, over both Israel and Ukraine.
"I wouldn't put anything past what we often call 'the uni-party,'" he cautioned.
"In a certain sense, you've got President Joe Biden and all of his influence and power as the head of the Executive Branch; you've got Chuck Schumer and Mitch McConnell both running the Senate together in some sense, and they're in lock-step with Biden; and so the wall of defense for pouring more money into Ukraine without any transparency is the House. I just don't know what to make of it. I think down to a one-person majority, maybe two, so it's really tight and a lot of the Republicans that are in office for more than a term or two are not sort of 'MAGA' populists, they're old-school Republicans and think this kind of spending is what we have to do."
"I also think that the Nikki Haley exposure over the last week or two about how much money she made by being on Boeing's board and all, there's a lot of people that are in that same - you know, their family works in those companies, and that's the dominant force."
"So, I think Zelensky's lost his shine, but I think the institutional forces are strong, so we'll see what happens, but his presence to me is a sign of some desperation. I mean, he's trying now to change the dynamic that is sliding away from him. And the truth is that, and I hate to be this

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crass, even the power brokers that want to get money off of this, they don't want two wars, so they're going to spend their money in Israel and in Gaza and pouring money into that war, that's good enough, so I think Zelensky's not the new guy in town right now and he's going to face some stiff winds, But I wouldn't bet against it honestly, I just think our leaders are stupid and they will throw money at stuff like this whenever they can."

"What they're doing now is for Republicans to have a way to tell their voters that 'I didn't give a blank check' so there'll be some sort of strings attached and transparency, which won't be real, it won't be significant," he said.

"I think they're underestimating the base in the Republican Party and I think Nikki Haley is showing - she is supposed to be on a boomlet in opposition to Trump - she's losing ground," he said, adding, "I hope that there will be some drama on this in the House that can change the dynamic, but really it's a political fight now to give cover to some Republicans who want to give away the ranch."

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Analysts: Tusk's Poland to be 'Same' as Kaczyński's 'Only Without the Shouting'

Despite a change in leadership in the Sejm from Eurosceptic to pro-Brussels leaders, Poland will largely continue on the course laid out for it by the Western powers, political experts told Sputnik. The Eastern European nation has been a member of NATO since 1999 and the European Union since 2004.

Donald Tusk returned to heading the Polish Council of Ministers on Monday, following a no-confidence vote in the Sejm that ousted then-Prime Minister Mateusz Morawieski of the right-wing Law and Justice Party.

Tusk previously served as prime minister from 2007 until 2014, when he became president of the European Council. He heads the center-right Civic Platform party.

On Tuesday, Tusk doubled down on Warsaw's international commitments, saying he would defend Poland's national interests even as his government continues to support the Ukrainian cause, for which Poland has paid a deep economic price.

The announcement came as the outgoing defense minister, Mariusz Blaszczak, said that Poland would object to an attempt by the European Parliament to consolidate "national defense competencies" in Brussels. Unlike Law and Justice, the Sejm coalition led by Tusk is much more pro-EU.

However, Konrad Rekas, a Polish politician and independent commentator, told Sputnik that the change in Warsaw would be almost purely superficial.

"Let's emphasize: we are facing a change in phraseology and propaganda, not a real political/geopolitical change," Rekas said on Tuesday.

"Contrary to its Eurosceptic declarations, the Law and Justice government unconditionally accepted the main directions of the European Commission's actions, including the energy transformation, extremely unfavorable for Poland, and the privileges given to Ukrainian carriers on the European market. [Law and Justice leader and former Deputy Prime Minister] Jarosław

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Kaczyński shouted a lot but did absolutely nothing to make the Polish economy independent from the German one. So under Tusk's government it will be the same, only without the shouting."

Indeed, Rekas noted that Warsaw's enthusiastic support for Kiev, even to the detriment of its own military and its own population, would continue under Tusk as it had under Morawiecki.

"Both the previous and the current government stand unconditionally on the side of the Kiev regime, and until Tusk receives other instructions from Washington and Berlin, this support will continue in money, in weapons, in equipment, in favoring Ukrainian imports on the Polish market," he said.

"It is true that the Polish government buys masses of weapons, but only to send them for free further, to Kiev. Just in recent days, the Ukrainian 44th Independent Mechanized Brigade has confirmed the supply of modern M120K (SMK120) Rak self-propelled automatic mortars from the Poles, which were taken straight from the Polish army storages. Only when there is no longer anyone in Ukraine to use this weapon will it perhaps remain in Polish hands. Unfortunately, however, only to continue the NATO-Russia war with direct Polish involvement," he said.

Mateusz Piskorski, a political observer and columnist for the Myśl Polska (Polish Thought) newspaper, told Sputnik that Tusk's premiership would lead to "more stable" relations between Warsaw and Brussels, although there would still be conflicts, as there are between the EU and every European capital.

"For Poland, well, let's wait. It's too early to talk about what measures the new government will take regarding strategic decisions and strategic problems, because after all, it will be officially formed only tomorrow, and we don't even know yet what program this government has," he noted.

"The appointment of Radosław Sikorski to the post of foreign minister will mean that the Polish Foreign Ministry is returning as a certain player in Polish foreign policy. Because over the past eight years of the Law and Justice Party government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has actually been completely removed from foreign policy issues, oddly enough."

"Foreign policy was handled exclusively by the president and President Andrzej Duda's entourage," he explained. "The prime minister and the ministry of foreign affairs were marginal structures from the point of view of the model of governing the country, and now Sikorski's rather strong, bright personality guarantees that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will once again play an important role in shaping the foundations of foreign policy."

However, Piskorski noted that Tusk's foreign policy course would ultimately depend on the general course of Western geopolitical interests, which might soon deviate from their course under Morawiecki.

"I think that over the coming months, the entire collective West will refuse any support for Ukraine. Poland will do the same, naturally. I think that Tusk and the new government in general will clearly understand and feel the trends which are now appearing in the politics of the collective West. Therefore, now in words, of course, we have already listened to Tusk's first statement that he intends to unconditionally support both [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky and Ukraine, but, nevertheless, I personally believe that this is all temporary, and his position will depend on the general trend," he said.

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However, unlike Rekas, Piskorski predicted that Tusk's government will have to bow to its financial reality and "slow down" its arms purchases from other partners, such as South Korea. However, he cautioned it would "not be completely suspended."

"This is to be expected, if only because the outgoing Law and Justice government increased defense spending many times over, even above this 2% of GDP that the Western allies, represented by Washington in particular, have demanded. Therefore, I still think that the increase in the level of militarization and the purchase of new weapons will be slightly slowed down."

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US Inflation Saw Slight November Ease as Bankers Anticipate Fed Rate Cuts by June 2024

The latest consumer price index (CPI) report by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) found that inflation had declined slightly from October to November, even as the prices for some commodities continued to rise.

According to the report, the aggregate price of commodities rose by 3.1% from November 2022 to November 2023, marking a slight decline in the overall inflation rate from October, which saw a 3.2% increase over the prior year.

While still among the smallest inflation in years, November was still slightly higher than in June, when prices increased just 3% from a year prior.

The BLS noted that overall, commodity prices increased by 0.1% in the one month from October 2023 to November 2023, driven upward by higher housing costs, which offset a decline in fuel prices. Energy and shelter have been among the leading drivers of inflation since the summer, when the Federal Reserve last raised interest rates. The central bank has said it expects the inflation increase to be temporary, and indeed, the rate of inflation has lessened since September.

A survey of top US bankers and financiers also published on Tuesday found that a majority expect the Federal Reserve to maintain its historically high interest rates for another six months. The results, published by business news outlet CNBC, said a majority of respondents said they expected a rate cut by June, with 69% agreeing it would happen by July. The survey found that big rate cuts aren't anticipated, averaging to about 25 basis points per quarter next year, or the smallest rate cut the Fed is likely to make at a given meeting.

"The Fed needs to begin laying out a road map to rate cuts that may represent tighter policy since cuts will be lagging the decline in inflation and real rates will be rising," John Ryding, chief economic adviser to Brean Capital, told the outlet in response to the survey.

Last month, Fed Chair Jerome Powell cautioned economic prognosticators not to base their expectations for the US economy on prior experiences, essentially saying that after the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns, the US is in uncharted waters.

"Regular forecasting also demands a systematic approach and a high degree of intellectual rigor," Powell said, urging that this "has to be combined with flexibility and agility … But our

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economy is flexible and dynamic, and subject at times to unpredictable shocks, such as a global financial crisis or a pandemic … At those times, forecasters have to think outside the models."
The Fed has maintained its stated goal of bringing inflation down to 2%, meaning prices would increase by an average of 2% per year. However, its primary tool for slowing inflation - increasing interest rates - is well-known for its tendency to trigger economic recessions.
That said, the CNBC survey found that 47% of respondents anticipate a "soft landing" in the struggle against inflation, a number that had increased by 5 points since October. Correspondingly, the amount who expected a recession in 2024 had declined by 8 points since October, to 41%.
Jamie Dimon, the CEO of JPMorgan Chase, the nation's largest bank, told reporters last month the Fed should persist in its efforts to quash inflation, albeit with a careful and cautious approach. The banker previously anticipated that interest rates would need to rise much higher than they are presently in order to stop the inflationary trend.
1: The latest Consumer Price Index (CPI) report found inflation decreased slightly in November, to 3.1%, among the lowest it's been in years. It marks the second straight month of slowing inflation from the spike seen in August and September.

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"The Fed needs to begin laying out a road map to rate cuts that may represent tighter policy since cuts will be lagging the decline in inflation and real rates will be rising," John Ryding, chief economic advisor to Brean Capital, told the outlet in response to the survey.

Also on Tuesday, a CNBC survey of leading bankers and financiers found a majority expect the Federal Reserve to begin cutting interest rates by June 2024. Almost half now expect a "soft landing," meaning that inflation will decline to 2% without triggering a recession, and only 41% expect a recession next year.

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The wall of defense for pouring more money into Ukraine without any transparency is the House," Ed Martin, president of Phyllis Schlafly Eagles and chairperson of the Missouri Republican Party, told Sputnik.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is in Washington again to beg for money, but a majority of House Republicans are likely to demand accountability processes instead of writing Kiev a "blank check."

"I wouldn't put anything past what we often call 'the uni-party,'" Martin warned.

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"What they're doing now is for Republicans to have a way to tell their voters that 'I didn't give a blank check' so there'll be some sort of strings attached and transparency, which won't be real, it won't be significant."

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At least 500 UK troops were sent to Cyprus in secret, a report from British media has revealed.

The UK government had previously announced that 1,000 troops were being deployed to support Israel in the wake of the October 7 attack by Hamas, but their locations remained unknown.

A letter by British Foreign Minister James Heappey to a member of parliament revealed that 500 of those troops were sent to UK bases in Cyprus, about 230 miles from the Gaza Strip. The letter also stated that troops have been sent to Egypt, Israel and Lebanon, but troop numbers were not provided.

Cyprus has served as a staging area for UK bombing campaigns in the Middle East. Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides denied that his country was being used to provide military aid to Israel.

"There is no such information," Christodoulides said, "our country cannot be used as a base for war operations."

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US Looking Into Reports of Israeli Use of US-Made White Phosphorus Shells in Lebanon - NSC

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – The United States is looking into reports confirmed by The Washington Post and two human rights groups that Israel attacked southern Lebanon with US-made white phosphorus shells, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We don't have full transparency and visibility on what exactly happened up in Lebanon with these reported uses of white phosphorus. We're looking into that…We're asking more questions of our Israeli counterparts about those reports to see if they're accurate and how if white phosphorus was used, how it was used," Kirby told CNN.

On Monday, The Washington Post reported that Israeli forces fired white phosphorus munitions manufactured in the US during an attack on the southern Lebanese village of Dheira on October 16, citing its own analysis and the investigations of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty

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International.

The Post found remnants of three 155-mm artillery shells in Dheira with lot production codes using US military terms for munitions produced domestically in Louisiana in 1989 and Arkansas in 1992. Other features, such as their color and markings, also indicate the shells contained white phosphorus. The same codes also appeared on white phosphorus shells next to Israeli artillery photographed by the Gaza border on October 9. Photos and videos reviewed by the Post and Amnesty International also show smoke ribbons characteristic of white phosphorus falling over Dheira.

The attack incinerated at least four homes and injured at least nine civilians, at least three of whom were hospitalized.

Kirby added that white phosphorous had a "legitimate purpose for illumination and for smoke cover for concealing the movement of your troops." However, Israel has not sent troops into Lebanon during its current war on Gaza. Moreover, the Dheira attack occurred under the cover of night. Residents said that Israel shelled their village with the munitions for hours overnight, leaving them trapped until the next morning. They believe the phosphorus was intended to force them to evacuate their village to make way for future Israeli military incursions.

Kirby said the US has "not provided any white phosphorus shells to Israel since October 7," without commenting on the US production codes found on the remnants of the shells used in Dheira.

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, Israel has fired white phosphorus munitions more than 60 times into Lebanon's border areas since the October 7 Hamas attack.

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US Warship Shoots Down Suspected Houthi Drone in Red Sea - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – A US warship shot down a drone in the Red Sea as it was responding to reports that the Houthis were attacking a commercial vessel by using skiffs and firing missiles, ABC News reported on Wednesday, citing US officials.

The officials confirmed that that two missiles were fired from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen toward a commercial tanker vessel in the Red Sea. The projectiles missed the ship, the report said.

The attempted attack happened as the tanker was sailing into the Red Sea on its way toward the Suez Canal.

The drone was believed to be heading directly at the USS Mason, which is the warship that shot down the unmanned aircraft, officials told ABC News.

The US navy reportedly has not yet been able to assess whether the USS Mason was the drone's target.

The rise in attacks on commercial vessels in the region comes amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas war.

On Tuesday, the US Central Command confirmed media reports that a tanker was attacked in

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the Red Sea by what is believed to be an anti-ship cruise missile launched from a Houthi-controlled area in Yemen with no casualties.

Geir Belsnes, the CEO of J. Ludwig Mowinckels Rederi, the Norwegian company that owns the Strinda tanker, said later in the day that the crew of the vessel was not injured, and the ship was on its way to a safe port.

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Sullivan to Visit Israel Dec. 14-15 for Talks on Israel-Gaza Conflict – White House

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan will visit Israel on December 14-15 for talks with senior Israeli officials on the latest developments in the Gaza war, White House National Security Council Spokesperson Adrienne Watson said in statement on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, Sullivan said that he planned on discussing with Israeli officials the timetables for the war in the Gaza Strip during his upcoming trip to the region.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will travel to Israel on Thursday, December 14 and Friday, December 15 to meet with Prime Minister Netanyahu, his War Cabinet, and President Herzog to discuss the latest developments in Israel and Gaza," Watson said.

On October 7, the Palestinian Hamas movement attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip. Israel declared war on Hamas and initiated massive strikes on Gaza while also imposing a complete blockade on the Palestinian enclave. The blockade has cut off water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel supplies. Israel then launched a ground invasion into Gaza on October 27.

Nearly 1.9 million Palestinians out of 2.3 million residing in Gaza have been displaced, more than 18,000 killed and more than 50,000 wounded during Israel's bombardments and invasion of Gaza. Some 1,200 Israelis, military and civilians, were killed in the Hamas attack.

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White House Does Not Plan to Condition Israel Military Aid - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – The White House does not have plans to condition its military aid to Israel, despite the growing domestic and international outcry over the tens of thousands of Palestinians killed or injured in Gaza, CNN reported on Wednesday, citing US officials.

The officials said that the White House already expects allies to use American-made equipment in line with international humanitarian law and the Israel Defense Forces has military lawyers informing its decisions to launch strikes.

One official added that the White House will not assess strikes in real-time and will not conduct independent assessments of a strike it finds concerning, but rather, expects Israel to provide

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legal justification that it had a legitimate military target and was proportional. The US also does not consider civilian deaths resulting from a military operation to be a legal violation.

Biden ultimately believes quiet pressure on Israel is more effective than threats to withdraw military aid, an official said.

The death toll from Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip has topped 18,000 since October 7, with more than 50,000 people injured, according to the enclave's Health Ministry.

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US, UK Impose New Sanctions on Hamas Financial Officials – Treasury

(Adds details in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury imposed a new round of sanctions on Wednesday in conjunction with the United Kingdom on Hamas finance officials and affiliated financiers, according to a release.

"Hamas continues to rely heavily on networks of well-placed officials and affiliates, exploiting seemingly permissive jurisdictions to direct fundraising campaigns for the group's benefit and funnelling those illicit proceeds to support its military activities in Gaza," Brian Nelson, US treasury under secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, was quoted as saying in the release.

The targets include eight individuals, mostly Hamas officials based outside of Gaza.

Within Gaza, Ismail Musa Ahmad is a member of the Gaza Strip Political Bureau and regional finance department head who worked with sanctioned Hamas Finance Minister Zaher Jabarin to aggregate money from global fundraising into official Finance Ministry accounts. Nizar Mohammed Awadallah is a Gaza-based Hamas board member and part of Hamas' Political Bureau.

Based in Turkey, Haroun Mansour Yaqoub Nasser Al-Din is the head of Hamas' Jerusalem office and one of Hamas' key financial operatives in Turkey, working in coordination with Jabarin and another senior sanctioned official, Salih Al-Aruri, according to the release,

Jihad Muhammad Shaker Yaghmour is a Hamas official representative to Turkey. He was sentenced to life in prison by Israel for his alleged involvement in the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier, but was exiled to Turkey as a part of the Gilad Shalit deal in 2011. Turkey-based Mehmet Kaya has been involved in multiple money transfers on behalf of Hamas over several years, involving tens of millions of dollars, the release said.

Hassan Al-Wardian is a senior Hamas official and a key figure in Bethlehem representing Hamas. He previously served as a political and field commander in Bethlehem and has spent time in Israeli prisons.

In Lebanon, Ali Abed Al Rahman Baraka is the head of Hamas' National Relations Abroad. Maher Rebhi Obeid is also a Lebanon-based senior Hamas political leader and has been part of Hamas' Political Bureau since 2010. Obeid is believed to have previously been the militant commander of Hamas in the West Bank.

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US, UK Impose New Sanctions on Hamas Finance Officials – Treasury

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Tucker Carlson Says Does Not Think He Would Be Good Pick for Trump's Vice President

MOSCOW, December 13 (Sputnik) - US media personality Tucker Carlson said Tuesday that he does not think he would be a good pick as the next US vice president if former US President Donald Trump wins the 2024 election.

"I know I can give good speeches. But there is much more to that. Would I be good at that? Probably not," Carlson said in a live broadcast on X Spaces, adding that he has never "done anything like that before."

As a main guest of the X Spaces conversation, Carlson also said he was concerned about the US judicial system, as it is trying to convict Trump to get rid of him from the presidential race.

In mid-November, Trump said in an interview that he would consider picking Carlson as his running mate in the 2024 US presidential election because "he's got great common sense."

The US presidential election is scheduled for November 5, 2024. In a number of polls, Trump, who dominates the Republican primary race, maintains a narrow lead over incumbent US President Joe Biden.

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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Canada Backed UN Ceasefire Resolution on Gaza Because There Needs to Be Limits - Envoy

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WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Canada supported a UN resolution demanding a ceasefire in the Gaza conflict because it believes limitations need to be placed on the suffering of the civilians caught in middle of the crisis, Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations Bob Rae said in an interview.

Earlier in the day, Canada was among 153 nations that voted in favor of adopting a non-binding resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. The United States, Israel, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Austria, the Czech Republic, Guatemala, Liberia, Micronesia and Nauru voted against the measure.

"The important thing is for us to be clear about the fact that there are limits to how far people can be pushed, and there's a responsibility that Canada has to uphold international law and to uphold the needs of people who are suffering," Rae told CTV News on Tuesday.

The resolution "demands an immediate humanitarian ceasefire" and urges all parties to "comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law."

Rae said the international community needs to find creative ways to deal with the immediate situation in the Gaza conflict and then begin looking at a long-term political solution instead of just military responses.

Marco Mendicino, a Liberal Party member of Canada's parliament, said he disagrees with Canada's vote at the United Nations today because he claims the resolution calls for an unconditional ceasefire that would only place in further jeopardy the safety and security of Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza.

Mendicino said any Gaza ceasefire should ensure Hamas first release all hostages, agrees to surrender its control of Gaza, participates in any international investigation into sexual violence involving women and children, and must agree to stop using human shields and civilian infrastructure to protect itself.

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New Problems Add $44Bln to Soaring F-35 Costs - US Government Watchdog

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - After 18 years of development and deployment, costs of the US armed forces' Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint Strike Fighter continue to soar out of control by at least $44 billion with new delays still emerging and no resolution in sight, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) documented in a new report and top officials overseeing the program confirmed to Congress.

"[Unanticipated] extra heat is increasing the wear on the engine, reducing the engine's life, and adding a projected $38 billion in maintenance costs over the life of the aircraft," the GAO report said on Tuesday.

Also, the ambitious $10 billion Block 4 program to modernize the aircraft to enable it meet challenges from major peer competitor nations led by Russia and China over the coming decade has been further delayed and will cost 60% more than its original expensive price tag, the GAO said.

Also, Department of Defense F-35 Joint Program Office (JPO) Director US Air Force Lieutenant

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General Michael Schmidt told a House Armed services subcommittee hearing on Tuesday that he still could not predict when problems with the $1.6 billion Technology Refresh-3 (TR-3) cockpit electronics software upgrade for the F-35 that has halted new aircraft deliveries since July will be corrected.

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Musk Says Ukraine Risks Losing More Territory to Russia Without Peace Deal Soon

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Ukraine risks losing more territory to Russia unless it negotiates a peace deal soon, billionaire businessman Elon Musk said in a statement on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter).

Ukraine could lose Kharkov, Odessa and more territory around Kherson unless it negotiates a peace deal with Russia, entrepreneur David Sacks said in a statement on X Tuesday.

Proponents of further military aid to Ukraine are actually aiding in its dismemberment, the statement said.

"Your assessment is accurate imo [in my opinion]," Musk said in response to Sacks' statement.

The statement also contended that Ukraine has lost forever Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia as well as most of Kherson.

The statement comes amid a trip by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the United States in an effort to bolster support for additional aid to Ukraine among US lawmakers and officials.

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Nebenzia Says Gaza Situation Reminiscent of Leningrad Siege

UNITED NATIONS, December 13 (Sputnik) - The humanitarian situation in Gaza is reminiscent of the Siege of Leningrad by Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War, Permanent Representative of Russia to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said during a UN General Assembly meeting.

"What comes to my mind is the blockade of Leningrad by the Nazis during World War Two," Nebenzia said on Tuesday. "Is Gaza awaiting the same fate?"

The Siege of Leningrad lasted more than 900 days and resulted in more than one million deaths.

Nebenzia recently participated in a trip by UN Security Council members to the Rafah crossing on the Gaza border to examine the situation on the ground.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is "disastrous" and worsening by the day, Nebenzia said.

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US Senate Advances 2024 National Defense Authorization Act

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The US Senate advanced the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), moving the annual legislation closer to a floor vote.

Senators agreed to end debate on an NDAA conference report on Tuesday in a vote of 85-15, with 60 votes required to invoke cloture.

The legislation authorizes more than $874 billion in national defense spending, including $300 million for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative in 2024, and another $300 million for the program in 2025.

The bill also includes an extension of Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Section 702 authorities without reforms to the surveillance power.

The US House Freedom Caucus said last week that it opposes the legislation due to the clean FISA authority extension.

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Biden Reinforces US Support for Ukraine, Announces Security Aid Package - White House

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and announced a new security aid package for Ukraine while emphasizing the urgent need for Congress to approve more funding for Kiev, the White House said.

"President Biden announced a new package of security assistance for Ukraine and reiterated the critical need for immediate Congressional action to ensure we can continue to support Ukraine’s defense," the White House said in a statement on Tuesday.

Biden underscored the strong and abiding US support for Ukraine’s "fight for freedom," the statement said.

In addition, Biden pointed out the increasing collaboration between the US and Ukrainian defense industries, highlighting its enhancement during the US-Ukraine Defense Industrial Base Conference last week, the statement said.

During the meeting, Zelenskyy appraised Biden of Ukraine's utilization of the Black Sea corridor to export grain and other products, the statement also said.

Zelenskyy said the exports not only address global food security concerns but also enhance Ukraine's tax base, the statement added.

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

IMF Says Welcomes Measures Argentina Took to Stabilize Economy

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) -The International Monetary Fund (IMF) welcomes Argentina's decision to stabilize its economy by devaluing its currency, Director of Communications Julie Kozack said in a statement.

Argentine Finance Minister Luis Caputo said Tuesday that the country will halve the exchange rate of the national currency against the US dollar to tackle the economic crisis in the country.

"IMF staff welcome the measures announced earlier today by Argentina's new Economy Minister, Luis Caputo," Kozack said. "These bold initial actions aim to significantly improve public finances in a manner that protects the most vulnerable in society and strengthen the foreign exchange regime. Their decisive implementation will help stabilize the economy and set the basis for more sustainable and private-sector led growth."

IMF staff and the new Argentine authorities will work expeditiously in the coming period, Kozack said.

"Following serious policy setbacks over the past few months, this new package provides a good foundation for further discussions to bring the existing Fund-supported program back on track," the IMF spokesperson added.

According to the data of Argentine state bank Banco Nacion, the exchange rate of which is the benchmark for the market, the US dollar is worth 400.5 pesos when sold by the bank and 365.5 when bought.

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US Army Orders More Than $442Mln in New Sikorsky Black Hawk Helicopters - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Sikorsky has received a more than $442 million contract to build more Black Hawk helicopters for the US Army, the Defense Department announced.

"Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin Company [of] Stratford, Connecticut, was awarded a $442,956,422 modification ...contract for the Black Hawk helicopter program," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

Work on the program will be carried out in Stratford over the next three-and-a-half years with an estimated completion date of June 30, 2027, the release said.

The project will be supervised by the US Army Contracting Command based at the Redstone Arsenal in the state of Alabama, the release added.

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Biden Says New Aid Package for Ukraine Includes Air Defense Interceptors, Artillery

(Updates with additional, background info in paras 3-8)
WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced that the next US military aid package for Ukraine will include additional air defense interceptors, artillery and ammunition.
"We'll continue to supply Ukraine with critical weapons and equipment as long as we can include the $200 million I just approved today in critically needed equipment; additional air defense interceptors; artillery; and ammunition," Biden said during a joint press conference with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Tuesday evening.
US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Tuesday night that the latest aid provision is under previously directed drawdowns for Ukraine.
"Capabilities provided in today's package include air defense munitions, air defense system components, additional munitions for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, artillery ammunition (including 155mm and 105mm), High-speed Anti-Radiation Missile missiles, anti-armor munitions, small arms ammunition, a demolitions package, HESCO barriers, and spare parts, ancillary equipment, services, training, and transportation," Blinken said.
Blinken also warned in a statement that this package may become one of the last ones unless the US Congress approves the supplemental funding request.
"We continue to urge Congress to advance our national security interests by helping Ukraine defend itself and secure its future – a future in which its people rebuild and live safely in a resilient and thriving democracy," he added.
Zelenskyy is visiting the US in an effort to bolster support for Ukraine aid. Zelenskyy met with US lawmakers earlier on Tuesday, as the US Congress considers a supplemental funding request from the Biden administration, which includes aid for Ukraine.
However, congressional Republicans have insisted on the inclusion of border security measures in the legislation, delaying its passage. The Biden administration has warned that the US will soon run out of resources to support Ukraine unless lawmakers take action.

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US Military Orders $174Mln Worth More Hi-Tech Helmet Displays for F-35 Jet - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has received a more than $174 million extension order on its existing contract to manufacture helmet displays for pilots operating the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter in its three different versions for the US military, the Defense Department announced.
"Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Company [of] Fort Worth, Texas, is awarded a $174,635,020 ... modification contract [for] Lot 17 helmet mounted display requirements in support of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.
The displays will be made for aircraft operated by the US Air Force, Marine Corps and Navy as well as for the F-35 cooperative program partners and foreign military sales customers, the

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release said.
Work on the contract will be performed in Fort Worth, Texas, over the next four years and is expected to be completed in February 2028, the release added.

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White House Told Congress It's Willing to Back Hardline Immigration Policy Changes-Reports

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The White House has notified lawmakers it is willing to back hardline immigration policy changes if it means getting new Ukraine funding through Congress, CBS News reported citing four people familiar with the matter.
Republicans in Congress have blocked the approval of additional funding for Ukraine as it is on track to run out by the end of the year.
The report said on Tuesday that the White House would support a Title 42-like authority to immediately expel undocumented migrants on the US southern border without asylum screenings.
Moreover, the White House is reportedly willing to support a nationwide expansion of expedited deportations and mandatory detentions of migrants who arrive on the southern border.
Earlier in the day, House Speaker Johnson emphasized that the southern border is an "absolute catastrophe" due to the Biden administration's immigration policies. He also pointed out that it's almost 7 million undocumented migrants who have been encountered at the southern border since Biden took office, an issue that must be addressed with a transformative change at the border.

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US Army Orders $8.8Bln in Extra Ammunition in New BAE Systems Contract - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The US Army has ordered an additional $8.8 billion worth of ammunition from BAE Systems in a new contract, the Defense Department announced.
"BAE Systems Ordnance Systems [of] Kingsport, Tennessee, was awarded an $8,823,564,140 ... contract for production of explosives," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.
The contract will also finance BAE Systems' continued operation and maintenance of the Holston Army Ammunition Plant, the release said.
The contract will run for a decade from January 1, 2024 through December 31, 2033, the release added.

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Biden Says Does Not Know if Any Hostages Left in Gaza as Israel Readies to Flood Tunnels

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said that he does not know for a fact whether there are any hostages left in the underground tunnels in Gaza ahead of Israel's plan to flood the facilities.

"With regard to the flooding of the tunnels, well, there are assertions being made that there is quite sure there are no hostages in any of these tunnels, but I don't know that for a fact," Biden said during a joint press conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Tuesday.

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Biden Says 'No Question' NATO Will Be in Ukraine's Future

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced that there is no doubt that NATO will be a part of Ukraine's future.

"NATO will be in Ukraine's future, no question about that," Biden said during a joint press conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Tuesday evening.

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Biden Says History Will 'Judge Harshly' Lawmakers Who Oppose Further Ukraine Aid

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - History will look back poorly upon lawmakers in the United States who oppose continued support for the conflict in Ukraine, US President Joe Biden said during remarks alongside Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

"History will judge harshly those who turn their back on freedom's cause," Biden said on Tuesday, in reference to Republican members of the US Congress who question further Ukraine aid.

Ukraine's success against Russia and ability to deter future aggression are vital to world security, Biden said.

Zelenskyy is visiting the US in an effort to bolster support for Ukraine aid. Zelenskyy met with US lawmakers earlier on Tuesday, as the US Congress considers a supplemental funding request from the Biden administration, which includes aid for Ukraine.

However, congressional Republicans have insisted on the inclusion of border security measures in the legislation, delaying its passage. The Biden administration has warned that the US will soon run out of resources to support Ukraine unless lawmakers take action.

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Oil Price Plunge Continues With Another 4% Drop Amid Stubborn US Inflation

NEW YORK, December 13 (Sputnik) - The late 2023 plunge in oil markets continued on Tuesday as crude prices took another 4% swoon on demand concerns, extending a seven-week drop that has already been the longest in five years.

The latest slide came as US consumer prices registered a higher growth than expected in November, stoking anxiety among oil traders that the Federal Reserve may not be ready yet to ease up on interest rates.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude for January delivery settled below the key $70 per barrel mark, closing at $68.61 after losing $2.71, or 3.8%, on the day. WTI has lost nearly $20 a barrel, or 23%, in the seven weeks since mid-October.

UK-origin Brent crude's most-active January contract settled down $2.79, or 3.7%, at $73.24 per barrel. Like WTI, Brent has lost almost $20, or about 20% in the past seven weeks.

Oil prices have not been in such an extended correction phase since 2018.

"Worries about weak demand for oil have led to a relentless selloff in crude as 2023 nears its end," John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said. "Today's unsettling inflation data hasn't helped market psychology either."

US consumer prices rose 3.1% during the year to November, according to Labor Department data on Tuesday that came in line with forecasts by economists predicting no change again in interest rates for this month as the Federal Reserve awaits a sharper inflation decline.

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) gained 3.2% in the previous 12 months to October. If the Fed leaves rates unchanged during its meeting on Wednesday - as predicted by Wall Street - it would be the third time in a row that the US central bank had held off on rate hikes after 11 increases totaling 525 basis points, or 5.25%, between March 2022 and July 2023.

Traders are worried that the Fed does not have inflation under control and will have to keep the foot on the accelerator when it comes to interest rates, said Phil Flynn, who heads energy analyst for Chicago-based broker Price Futures Group.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell said earlier this month it would be premature to discuss reducing interest rates when inflation was still well above the central bank's preferred target of 2% per year. Powell indicated that he might be prepared to raise rates again if necessary.

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Журналиста Sputnik не допустили в зал пресс-конференции Байдена и Зеленского

ВАШИНГТОН, 13 дек - РИА Новости. Представители администрации США под предлогом "отсутствия мест" отказали корреспонденту информационного агентства Sputnik Павлу Заковоротному в допуске в зал совместной пресс-конференцию президента США Джо

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Байдена и Владимира Зеленского, которая проходит на территории Белого дома, несмотря на то, что изначально включили его в список аккредитованных на это мероприятие.

Представитель Белого дома сообщила журналисту, что, хотя его имя и значится в списке зарегистрированных журналистов, он не может быть допущен в аудиторию, где состоится пресс-конференция, ввиду якобы отсутствия свободных мест.

При этом корреспондент Sputnik оказался единственным, которого не пустили на мероприятие из десятков ожидавших на входе представителей СМИ, хотя он зарегистрировался на него за сутки до намеченной пресс-конференции.

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Biden Says New Aid Package for Ukraine Includes Air Defense Interceptors, Artillery

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced that the next US military aid package for Ukraine will include additional air defense interceptors, artillery and ammunition.

"We'll continue to supply Ukraine with critical weapons and equipment as long as we can include the $200 million I just approved today in critically needed equipment; additional air defense interceptors; artillery; and ammunition," Biden said during a joint press conference with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Tuesday evening.

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UNGA Adopts Resolution Demanding Immediate Humanitarian Ceasefire in Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, December 12 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly on Tuesday adopted a resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

A total of 153 members voted in favor of the resolution was proposed by Egypt and Mauritania, while 10 countries voted against the measure and 23 abstained.

The resolution "demands an immediate humanitarian ceasefire" and urges all parties to "comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law."

The resolution resembles a UAE-drafted UN Security Council resolution that was vetoed by the United States last week.

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UNGA Refuses to Include Condemnation of Hamas in Gaza Resolution

UNITED NATIONS, December 12 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly on Tuesday rejected a US amendment to a Gaza resolution that would have condemned the Hamas October 7 attacks.
The US amendment had sought to condemn "the heinous terrorist attacks by Hamas."
Pakistan's UN envoy ahead of the vote said that if the assembly adopted the US amendment, it would seek to amend the draft resolution to restore balance and name Israel as a perpetrator of mass crimes taking place in Gaza.
The UNGA meeting was called by Egypt and Mauritania after the US blocked last week a UN Security Council resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza.
The draft UNGA resolution closely follows the language of Friday's vetoed resolution.

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US Hopes to Increase Direct Flights to China to 100 Each Week By Early 2024 - Envoy

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes to increase the number of direct flights to China per week to 100 by early next year, US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns said during a discussion with the Council on Foreign Relations.
"Hopefully getting to 100 direct flights [each week] by sometime early in 2024 if that's possible," Burns said on Tuesday about US-China flights.
There are currently about 70 direct flights between the United States and China to date, Burns noted.
Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were 345 direct flights between the two nations, Burns added.
The United States and China began to increase the number of direct flights between the countries in May, which were at the time increased to 12 direct flights each week.

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US House Rules Committee Advances Resolution to Formalize Biden Impeachment Inquiry

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The US House Rules Committee advanced a resolution to formalize the impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden, setting it up for a floor vote later this week.
The panel passed the resolution on Tuesday in a vote of 9-4, which fell along partisan lines.
The resolution directs the House Ways and Means, Oversight and Judiciary committees to continue their probes into Biden to determine whether impeachment is warranted. House lawmakers have been investigating Biden and his family for alleged financial crimes and corruption.

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"By formalizing the impeachment inquiry, the three investigating committees will gain stronger subpoena enforcement power necessary to uncover all of the facts and ensure the House has the best possible legal standing as we move forward in our mission to deliver answers to the American people," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the resolution.
House Republicans are setting up a floor vote on the resolution for Wednesday, a source familiar with the matter told Sputnik on Monday.

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China Not Interested in Cooperating With US on Lunar Exploration - Burns

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - China is not interested in working with the United States on lunar exploration, such as the Artemis program, US Ambassador in Beijing Nicholas Burns said.
"I don't believe the Chinese have shown much of an interest in working with the United States," Burns said during a discussion hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations on Tuesday.
Burns noted that space is in a way a contested area between the United States and China.
Thirty-three countries have signed accords to participate in the US-led Artemis program to return humans to the Moon.
NASA is likely to delay the first US manned Artemis mission to the Moon at least until 2025 and probably 2027 because of unresolved problems with space suits and the new lunar lander, according to the US Government Accountability Office.

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US Embassy in Riyadh Opens, Underlining Strong Partnership with Saudi Arabia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Deputy Assistant Secretary for Arabian Peninsula Affairs Daniel Benaim and Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister Waleed El-Khereiji joined US Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Michael Ratney in a ceremony for the new US Embassy in Riyadh, highlighting the commitment to strengthening ties.
"Marking a significant milestone in the enduring U.S.-Saudi bilateral partnership and underscoring the commitment of both nations to strengthening ties, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Arabian Peninsula Affairs Daniel Benaim and Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister Waleed El-Khereiji joined US Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Michael Ratney in a groundbreaking ceremony for the new US Embassy Riyadh," the State Department said in a statement on Tuesday.
According to the statement, the new embassy, featuring advanced security and sustainability in its design, will serve as a contemporary workspace, symbolizing the lasting partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia, situated on a 27.5-acre site in Riyadh's Diplomatic Quarter,

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aligning with environmental goals for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification.

"Morphosis of Los Angeles is the design architect and Caddell Construction Co., LLC of Montgomery, Alabama, is the design-build contractor, with Integrus Architecture of Seattle as the architect of record," the statement said.

Additionally, the statement said that the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations' commitment to providing optimal facilities for US diplomacy, having completed 178 new diplomatic facilities since 1999 and currently managing over 50 active projects worldwide.

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Trudeau Says Conservatives 'Playing Into Kremlin's Hands' by Voting Down FTA With Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday that the opposition Conservative Party is "playing right into the Kremlin's hands" by refusing to ratify the updated Canada-Ukraine Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

"That party [Conservatives] has been playing right into the Kremlin's hands by voting against Operation UNIFIER, by voting against funding for military aid to Ukraine, and by voting at every opportunity … against the Canada-Ukraine Free Trade Agreement that Ukrainians have been asking for," Trudeau said during a question period at the House of Commons. "We will never abandon Ukraine, unlike the Conservative leader."

Trudeau's remarks addressed a question by Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, who asked when he would eliminate the carbon tax imposed on farmers. The prime minister said that a "key factor" contributing to high food prices was Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

Poilievre responded to the remarks by saying that Trudeau was desperate to deviate attention from mounting domestic issues such as the housing crisis, high food inflation, and a record number of Canadians using food banks, among others.

"We understand that with this miserable record, he doesn't want to talk about Canada or Canadians, he'd rather spread falsehoods about far away foreign lands," Poilievre said. "Axe the [carbon] tax so that families can eat."

In September, Trudeau and Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed an FTA between Canada and Ukraine.

Although Poilievre has stressed he supports the FTA between the two countries, he and his party have repeatedly voted against the ratification of the treaty because it would include carbon-pricing, something the Conservatives are staunchly opposed to.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

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WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) -

NEW WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The United States sanctioned more than 200 companies, some two dozen people and three vessels in its latest round of Russia-related sanctions, the Treasury Department said on Tuesday.
* The United States designated more than 100 entities and persons for their alleged sanctions evasion and strengthening Russian energy production, the Treasury Department said.
* The United States sanctioned Russian businessman Vladislav Sviblov and associated companies, the Treasury Department said.
* The Canadian government sanctioned 30 Russian nationals who ran as candidates in the September elections held in the Kherson region, Global Affairs Canada said.

ISRAEL INVASION OF GAZA

* The death toll from the Israel's bombing of the Gaza Strip has increased to 18,412 people since October 7 and more than 50,000 people have been injured, the Gaza Health Ministry said on Tuesday.
* Israel has recovered two bodies of hostages taken by Hamas in Gaza, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said.
* The IDF said it destroyed the headquarters of Hamas' elite Nukhba unit.
* The war in Gaza can get out of control and spread to the whole region at any moment, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said.
* The IDF has started pumping seawater into the underground tunnels used by Hamas, the Wall Street Journal reported.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Ukrainian military has lost up to 240 soldiers in the Donetsk direction in past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday.
* The new package of US military aid to Ukraine worth $175 million is a real criminal scheme to siphon off money, but it cannot work indefinitely, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.
* Next year will be very difficult for Ukraine if the US Congress fails to approve new military assistance for that country, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said.

BIDEN-ZELENSKYY MEETING

* US President Joe Biden said at the beginning with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Tuesday that he signed on another $200 million of security assistance for Ukraine.
* The members of Congress are still waiting to see a clear articulation of strategy on Ukraine and so far the White House has not provided any sufficient responses to their questions, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said.
* Russia will carefully monitor information about the Biden-Zelenskyy meeting, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

BIDEN SUPPLEMENTAL FUNDING REQUEST

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* Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday that he has called on House Speaker Mike Johnson to keep the House of Representatives in session past this week in an effort to pass the Biden administration's supplemental funding request.
* It is practically impossible for Congress to pass the supplemental funding package before Christmas, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said.

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Major Differences Between US, China Still Unresolved on Many Issues - Envoy Burns

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - Major differences between the United States and China remain unresolved on many issues, US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns said on Tuesday.
"We haven't resolved our major differences, it's still on many issues," Burns said during a discussion with the Council on Foreign Relations. We have fundamental differences in how we see Taiwan, fundamental differences in what China is doing in the South and East China Sea."
Moreover, Burns added that the United States and China also have not resolved the major disagreement they have on the Ukraine conflict.
"We don't believe that the Chinese state has provided lethal military assistance, but we watch that very carefully," Burns said "We are disappointed in the political support that the Chinese have given the Russians for the war in Ukraine."
Burns added that he would be cautious and it remains to be seen whether US-China relations will improve following the leaders' summit last month, which resulted in a commitment to restore military-to-military communication.

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Biden Says Signed $200Mln Drawdown of Security Aid for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he signed another $200 million package of security assistance for Ukraine amid heated disputes in Congress over a new massive supplemental package for Kiev worth $61 billion.
“I just signed another $200 million drawdown from the Department of Defense for Ukraine and that will be coming quickly,” Biden said at the beginning of his bilateral meeting with Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House.

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Schumer Urges Johnson to Extend House Session to Give Supplemental Chance To Come Together

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday he has called on House Speaker Mike Johnson to keep the House in session past this week in an effort to pass the Biden administration's supplemental request.

"Last night, I spoke with Speaker Johnson and urged him to keep the House in session a little longer to give the supplemental a chance to come together," Schumer said during a press briefing.

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Operations in Red Sea Not Related to NATO – Pentagon on Recent Attacks on Military Ships

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) – Maritime operations conducted by US allies in the Red Sea, including France, should not be considered NATO missions and thus an attack on military ships of a NATO member is not an attack on the block, Pentagon press secretary Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.

"My understanding is operations in the Red Sea, it's not a NATO operation, per se. Clearly, France is a close ally, and should they ask for our support or call on us to support them, we will obviously respond and be there to help, but, again, it's not a NATO mission, as I understand it, going on right now in the Red Sea," Ryder said during a press briefing.

On Monday, Baird Maritime reported that a French Navy warship was attacked by two drones while it was patrolling the Red Sea off the coast of Yemen on Saturday.

After the conflict broke out between Israel and Hamas on October 7, the Houthi rebels in from Yemen have conducted multiple missile and drone attacks threatening civilian infrastructure in Israel and commercial shipping operating in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Last week, a Houthi spokesman said that the movement is ready to allow vessels of all countries to pass through the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea except those ships that are related to Israel.

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Practically Impossible for US Congress to Pass Supplemental Before Christmas - McConnell

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - It is practically impossible that the US Congress will pass a supplemental package before Christmas, US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Tuesday.

"All I've said is it's practically impossible, even though we reached an agreement to craft it, to get it through the Senate, get into the House before Christmas," McConnell said during a press

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conference.
President Joe Biden is asking Congress to approve a $106 billion supplemental package to address US national security matters, which includes providing Ukraine with $61 billion. However, Republican lawmakers have been reluctant to back this request because it lacks a "credible" plan to address the crisis on the US southern border.

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US Senator Says Never Believed in Possibility of Ukrainian Victory Over Russia

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - US Sen. Tommy Tuberville said on Tuesday that he has never believed in the possibility of a Ukrainian victory against Russia, as US lawmakers weigh whether to provide Ukraine with more aid.
“I’ve never thought they could win to begin with,” Tuberville said, when asked whether he believes Ukraine will lose to Russia without further US aid.
Tuberville also said that he does not believe claims that Russia would continue military operations into other European countries if it wins in Ukraine.
Volodymyr Zelenskyy is visiting Washington to meet with US lawmakers and officials in an effort to bolster support for Ukraine. However, congressional Republicans have insisted upon the inclusion of border security measures in any legislation with Ukraine aid.
The Biden administration has warned that the United States risks running out of resources to support Ukraine if Congress does not approve further assistance.

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Pentagon Says US Forces in Iraq, Syria Attacked 89 Times

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - US forces in Iraq and Syria have been attacked approximately 89 times in recent weeks, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.
"We are tracking approximately 89 attacks at this time," Ryder said during a press briefing.
Last week, the Pentagon said that approximately 66 service members suffered non-serious injuries as a result of the attacks. Ryder said he is not aware of any new injuries.
The wave of attacks on US forces come amid heightened tensions in the region, following the outbreak of conflict between Israel and Hamas, as well as attacks on ships in the Red Sea.

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UN 'Very Concerned' About Fate of Al-Araby Reporter Kidnapped by Israeli Army - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 12 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is "very concerned" about the fate of the Al-Araby Al-Jadeed correspondent Diaa Kahlout, who was kidnapped by the Israeli army, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"We are very concerned about the fate of the outcome of your colleague," Dujarric said during a press briefing. "We know our human rights colleagues are also following this. It's been difficult for them to get information from the Israeli authorities."

Dujarric emphasized that it is very important that the Israeli authorities clarify the present uncertainty about Kahlout's whereabouts.

Kahlout is one of dozens of men the Israeli army arrested last week and paraded in their underwear before taking them to an unknown location.

Since his arrest, Kahlout's father was seriously injured in subsequent Israeli strikes and his father-in-law passed away on Monday.

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 a massive bombing campaign and 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 48,000 Palestinians wounded. More than 1.9 million Palestinians out of 2.3 million in Gaza have been displaced.

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Biden Says Israeli Government Does Not Want Two-State Solution

(Changes attribution, edits throughout, adds details in para 6)

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden told his campaign donors on Tuesday that the Israeli government is not interested in resolving the long-standing conflict with Palestine through a two-state solution.

"This is the most conservative government in Israel's history," Biden was quoted by the White House press pool as saying.

He added that the Israeli government "doesn't want a two-state solution."

Biden also pointed out that Israel is starting to lose support around the world.

"I think he [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] has to change, and with this government, this government in Israel is making it very difficult for him to move," Biden said.

He also stated that the safety of the Jewish people is "literally at stake" in the ongoing conflict with Hamas.

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Austin to Travel to Bahrain, Qatar, Israel Next Week - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will travel to the Middle East next week to meet with the leaders of Qatar, Bahrain, and Israel as well as with US troops deployed to the region, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.

"Austin will travel to the Middle East region next week to meet with leaders in Bahrain, Qatar, and Israel. He will also have an opportunity to meet with some of our forces deployed to the region to thank them for their service and for all that they and their loved ones do for our nation," Ryder said during a press briefing.

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RFK Jr. Says Ukraine 'Grift' Made Obvious by Zelenskyy Meeting With US Defense Contractors

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The grift of the Ukraine conflict is made obvious by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's meeting with defense contractors in the United States, 2024 US independent presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said on Tuesday.

"Zelenskyy is literally meeting with defense contractors. The grift is right in our faces," Kennedy said in a statement via social media platform X. "No one bothers to conceal who the real stakeholders are in the Ukraine war."

On Monday, Zelenskyy met with defense contractors as part of a trip to the US to bolster support for Ukraine. Zelenskyy also met with the US Congress as lawmakers consider whether to provide further aid to Ukraine.

If the Ukraine conflict were a real "humanitarian defense war," then former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson would not have been sent to Ukraine to derail a tentative peace deal between Russia and Ukraine in April 2022, Kennedy said.

US officials should commit to addressing domestic issues as strongly as they commit to supporting Ukraine, Kennedy also said.

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Johnson Says After Meeting With Zelenskyy US Lawmakers Need Clear Strategy on Ukraine

(Updates with details, background in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The members of Congress are still waiting to see a clear articulation of strategy on Ukraine and so far the White House has not provided any

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sufficient responses to their questions, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Tuesday.

"We need a clear articulation of the strategy to allow Ukraine to win and thus far their responses have been insufficient. They have not provided us the clarity and the detail that we requested over and over since literally 24 hours after I was handed the gavel as the Speaker of the House," Johnson told reporters after meeting with Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Washington.

Johnson in a separate statement about his meeting with Zelenskyy added that the Biden administration seems to be asking for additional billions of dollars with no appropriate oversight.

President Joe Biden is asking Congress to approve a $106 billion supplemental package to address US national security matters, which includes providing Ukraine with $61 billion. However, Republican lawmakers have been reluctant to back this request because it lacks a "credible" plan to address the crisis on the US southern border.

Johnson emphasized that the southern border is an "absolute catastrophe" due to the Biden administration's immigration policies. The House Speaker pointed out that it's almost 7 million undocumented migrants who have been encountered at the southern border since Biden took office, an issue that must be addressed with a transformative change at the border.

"I have told him [Sen. Chuck Schumer] personally, I've told the National Security Adviser, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, that these are our conditions because these are the conditions of the American people, and we are resolute on that. It is not the House's issue right now," Johnson said in the statement. "The issue is with the White House and the Senate, and I implore them to do their job because the time is urgent."

Schumer recently said he is willing to work with Republicans to add an amendment to the Biden supplemental package that will address their border security concerns, but it would need to have 60 votes to be adopted.

The White House expects Ukraine aid funding will run out by the end of this year. A congressional source recently told Sputnik that new Ukraine funding is not expected to be approved before the end of the year.

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Canada, Australia, New Zealand Say Alarmed by Diminishing Safe Space for Civilians in Gaza

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - Canada, Australia and New Zealand on Thursday released a joint statement expressing alarm over the reduction of safe space for civilians in the Gaza Strip amid Israel's invasion of the Palestinian enclave.

"We are alarmed at the diminishing safe space for civilians in Gaza. The price of defeating Hamas cannot be the continuous suffering of all Palestinian civilians," the statement said.

The three countries made clear in the statement that they recognize Israel's right to exist and to defend itself, but emphasized that Israel must respect international humanitarian law in the efforts to defend itself.

"Civilians and civilian infrastructure must be protected," the statement said.

The countries expressed concern in the statement over the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza and said that deliveries of aid to the enclave must be allowed and sustained.

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In addition, they emphasized that they reject any potential forceful displacement of Palestinians out of Gaza, the reoccupation of the enclave by Israel or the reduction of its territory via a siege or blockade.

Palestine also has a right to self-determination and Israeli settlements are illegal under international law, the statement said.

"We recommit ourselves to working with partners toward a just and enduring peace in the form of a two-state solution, where Israelis and Palestinians can live securely within internationally recognized borders, " the statement added.

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 a massive bombing campaign and a ground invasion of Gaza. Some 1,200 Israelis - military and civilians - were killed in the Hamas attack and some 18,000 Palestinians in the Israeli military operations since then, with more than 48,000 Palestinians wounded. More than 1.9 million Palestinians out of 2.3 million in Gaza have been displaced.

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Biden Says Israeli Government Does Not Want Two-State Solution - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden told his campaign donors on Tuesday that the Israeli government is not interested in resolving the long-standing conflict with Palestine through a two-state solution, CNN reported.

"This is the most conservative government in Israel's history," Biden was quoted as saying during a campaign reception. "[The Israeli government] doesn't want a two-state solution."

Biden also pointed out that Israel has lost support around the world and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "has to strengthen and change" his cabinet to find a long-term way out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, according to the report.

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Arab States Expect Strong Support for UN Resolution on Gaza Ceasefire - Palestinian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 12 (Sputnik) - The Arab countries presenting a new UN draft resolution for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza expect it to receive strong support from UN General Assembly member states, Palestinian Ambassador to the United Nations Riyad Mansour said on Tuesday.

On Friday, the United States vetoed a UN Security Council draft resolution for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. More than 120 states had expressed support for the resolution.

"Our expectation is that this time [support] will be higher than that number and we hope that it

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will be higher by a significant number," Mansour said.

The UN General Assembly is set to vote on the new resolution on Tuesday afternoon.

Mansour said he was confident that if the resolution is adopted, it would be binding for all parties.

"It should definitely be looked at as binding if the great majority in the General Assembly demands an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, there is no explanation to that sentence other than it is binding," he said.

Mansour emphasized that the fact a large number of states support the resolution sends a clear message to the United States and its allies.

The Palestinian ambassador reiterated that Israel would have to comply with the resolution.

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US State Dept. Approves Potential $80Mln Sale of Javelin Missiles to Romania - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The US State Department approved a potential $80 million sale of Javelin missiles to Romania, the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Tuesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Romania of Javelin Missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of $80 million," DSCA said in a statement.

Romania requested to buy 263 Javelin FGM-148F Missiles and 26 Javelin Light Weight Command Launch Units, the statement said.

The proposed sale would support US foreign policy and national security objectives by bolstering the security of a NATO ally, the statement said. The sale would not adversely impact US defense readiness, the statement said.

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Johnson Says After Meeting With Zelenskyy US Lawmakers Need Clear Strategy on Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The members of Congress are still waiting to see a clear articulation of strategy on Ukraine and so far the White House has not provided any sufficient responses to their questions, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Tuesday.

"We need a clear articulation of the strategy to allow Ukraine to win and thus far their responses have been insufficient. They have not provided us the clarity and the detail that we requested over and over since literally 24 hours after I was handed the gavel as the Speaker of the House," Johnson told reporters after meeting with Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Washington.

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US Consumer Price Growth Stays Above 3% Per Year - Labor Dept.

(Updates with more details, background in paras 2-12; modifies headline, lede)
WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices rose 3.1% during the year to November, according to Labor Department data on Tuesday.
"Over the last 12 months, the all items index increased 3.1% before seasonal adjustment," the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit of the Labor Department, said.
The Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose 3.2% in the previous 12 months to October.
In such a situation, if the Federal Reserve 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 US central bank had not increased rates after 11 increases totaling 525 basis points, or 5.25%, between March 2022 and July 2023.
"The market isn't too worried about that 0.1 percentage point miss on the headline," economist Adam Button wrote on the ForexLive forum, referring to the difference between the published CPI number for November and the forecast.
Following the near two-year blitz of rate hikes, the Fed is expected to cut rates by as much as 120 basis points in 2024, money market traders said.
The interest rate hikes came after runaway inflation triggered by trillions of dollars of federal spending during the COVID-19 breakout and pandemic measures. In June 2022, the CPI jumped more than 9% on the year, registering a four-decade high. The Fed's preferred rate of inflation is 2% per year or less.
President Joe Biden issued a statement saying, "Despite this progress, I know many Americans still find too many things unaffordable."
Biden noted that inflation remained too high even as he took a victory lap for bringing it down from the pandemic highs with barely any negative impact on the job market - where unemployment stayed at a 50-year low of below 4%.
The US labor market and post-pandemic economic growth has led Biden administration officials to believe that the Fed will eventually cap inflation at 2% per year without sparking a recession.
Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Tuesday that "There's no reason to believe that the last mile will be especially difficult."
The US economy grew by 5.2% in the third quarter of this year, according to a second reading of GDP at the end of November that came in higher than the previously-published 4.9% for the quarter. GDP growth in 2022 was 2.1%.

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US Senator Says Zelenskyy Told Lawmakers 'Nothing New' in Closed-Door Meeting

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WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy provided no new information or arguments to US lawmakers during a closed-door meeting in Washington, US Senator Eric Schmitt said on Tuesday.

"It's the same old stuff. There's nothing new," Schmitt said, adding that the questions appeared to have been scripted ahead of the meeting.

Schmitt also criticized the Biden administration for sending Zelenskyy to meet with lawmakers about Ukraine instead of meeting with them himself about US border security.

However, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer characterized the meeting as impactful. Zelenskyy made clear to lawmakers how Ukraine can continue to conflict with further US aid, Schumer said.

Congressional Republicans have demanded that Democrats pass border security measures alongside aid for Ukraine. The Biden administration has warned that it could run out of resources to prop up Ukraine without further assistance from Congress.

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Harvard Retains President Amid Uproar Over US House Testimony on Anti-Semitism - Board

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - Harvard University announced on Tuesday that it had decided to retain Claudine Gay as president despite calls to oust her for her testimony before the US House of Representatives regarding the university's efforts to combat anti-Semitism.

"As members of the Harvard Corporation, we today reaffirm our support for President Gay's continued leadership of Harvard University. Our extensive deliberations affirm our confidence that President Gay is the right leader to help our community heal and to address the very serious societal issues we are facing," the Harvard Corporation board said in a statement.

The board also addressed accusations against Gay of plagiarism that recently surfaced, saying its "analysis found no violation of Harvard's standards for research misconduct."

Gay was "proactively requesting four corrections in two articles to insert citations and quotation marks that were omitted from the original publications," the statement said.

On December 5, Gay and the presidents of the University of Pennsylvania and Massachusetts Institute of technology (MIT) testified before the US House Committee on Education and the Workforce on combating anti-Semitism on university campuses amid Israel's war on Gaza.

The three presidents were subsequently criticized for what were seen as legalistic answers in response to whether calls for genocide against Jews on campus constitute bullying and harassment.

Amid calls to oust Gay, more than 700 Harvard faculty signed a letter in support of the president ahead of the Harvard board's meeting on Monday.

University of Pennsylvania President Elizabeth Magill resigned her position on Saturday.

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

US House Will Likely Need Court to Enforce Subpoenas in Biden Impeachment Probe - Johnson

(Adds details in paras 3-6, details in paras 7-8)
WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will likely need to go to court to enforce its subpoenas as part of an impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden, House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Tuesday.
"The House will likely need to go to court to enforce its subpoenas, and opening a formal inquiry – backed by a vote of the full body – puts us in the strongest legal position to gather the evidence and provide transparency to the American people," Johnson said in an opinion article for USA Today.
Johnson said that this week the House will vote to take the next step by formalizing its impeachment inquiry into the president.
"The Oversight, Judiciary and Ways and Means committees will continue investigating the role of the president in promoting the alleged influence-peddling schemes of his family and associates, the orchestration of which reaped millions of dollars in payments from America's foreign adversaries," he added.
The committees will also probe Biden's statements regarding his knowledge and involvement in such schemes.
"We will not prejudge this investigation; we will depose witnesses, gather evidence, establish a thorough record and present Articles of Impeachment only if the evidentiary record dictates such action," the House speaker stressed.
In September, then-House Speaker Kevin McCarthy launched an impeachment inquiry into Biden, following probes into alleged criminal activity by the president and his son, Hunter Biden. The Biden family is alleged to have enriched themselves through foreign bribery and influence peddling.
Biden has dismissed the accusations against him, arguing that he has never discussed foreign business deals with his son.

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House Speaker Says US Lawmakers Don't Understand White House Strategy on Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) – US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Tuesday that US lawmakers are having trouble understanding the White House strategy and endgame in Ukraine and this is the main obstacle to the approval of the next tranche of funding for Kiev.
"This is a very serious issue [support for Ukraine]. But you know, the White House is seeking billions in funding on that issue. They haven't given us any clear strategy, no appropriate oversight. They've not explained to us what the endgame is," Johnson said in an interview.
Johnson noted that according to US Ambassador to Ukraine Bridget Brink, the Biden

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administration's endgame in Ukraine is a returning to the 1991 boundaries, including Crimea, but this is not what Secretary of State Antony Blinken claims and that's where all the confusion on the issue comes from.

Johnson argues that many House members have a difficult time meeting with constituents who ask reasonable questions about the situation on the US border with Mexico.

"Why are we securing the border of a foreign country and taking care of their needs when we're not doing it here at home? And that's a tough, tough question to answer. The White House has to help us in that regard, and they haven't," Johnson said.

Despite the 2023 coming to an end and the upcoming congressional recess, the White House refuses to make any concessions to lawmakers on the issue of boosting border security, Johnson added.

Johnson is scheduled to meet on Tuesday with Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is in Washington D.C. to lobby for extended US aid for his country.

Republican lawmakers have insisted on the inclusion of border security measures in the bill, delaying its passage, while 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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State Dept Says to Sanction Over 100 Entities, Persons Engaged in Russia Sanctions Evasion

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has targeted more than 100 entities and persons for their alleged sanctions evasion and strengthening Russian energy production in a new round of anti-Moscow sanctions over Ukraine, the Treasury announced in a release on Tuesday.

"Concurrently, the Department of State is imposing sanctions on over 100 entities and individuals, including those engaged in sanctions evasion in numerous third countries, complicit in furthering Russia's ability to wage its war against Ukraine, and responsible for bolstering Russia's future energy production and export capacity," the release said.

The entities and people from such countries as Turkey, the UAE and China have fallen under the latest sanctions.

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US Sanctions Russian Businessman Vladislav Sviblov, Associated Companies - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The United States on Tuesday targeted Russian businessman Vladislav Sviblov and associated companies with sanctions, according to the Treasury.

The sanctioned companies are Highland Gold Mining, Fortiana Holdings Limited, Stanmix

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Holding Limited, and Joint Stock Company Ozernaya Mining Company.

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Sullivan Says Will Discuss Gaza War Timetable With Israeli Officials

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Tuesday that he plans to discuss with Israeli officials timetables of war in the Gaza Strip during his upcoming trip to the region.

"I will certainly be talking to Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu, the war cabinet and senior national security leadership of Israel about timetables, about how they are thinking about that," Sullivan said at the Wall Street Journal CEO Council Summit.

When asked to comment on media reports that the United States is urging Israel to wrap up its military operation in Gaza in weeks rather than in months, Sullivan said he would not characterize the situation in such a way.

"The subject of how they are seeing the timetable of this war will certainly be on the agenda for my meetings, and I prefer to keep that conversation behind closed doors," Sullivan said.

On October 7, the Palestinian movement Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip. Israel declared war on Hamas and initiated massive strikes on Gaza while also imposing a complete blockade on the Palestinian enclave. The blockade has cut off water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel supplies. Israel then launched a ground invasion into Gaza on October 27.

Nearly 1.9 million Palestinians out of 2.3 million residing in Gaza have been displaced, more than 18,000 killed and more than 48,000 wounded during Israel's bombardments and invasion of Gaza. Some 1,200 Israelis, military and civilians, were killed in the Hamas attack.

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US Targets Over 200 Entities, More Than 20 People With Russia-Related Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted more than 200 companies, some two dozen people and three vessels in its latest round of Russia-related sanctions, the Treasury announced on Tuesday.

Among the sanctioned entities is Russia's Expobank.

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Canada Sanctions 30 Russian Nationals Over Kherson Region Elections - Global Affairs

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(Updates with more details in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has sanctioned 30 Russian nationals who ran in the September elections held in the Kherson region, Global Affairs Canada said (GAC) on Tuesday.

"The Honorable Melanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced that Canada is imposing new sanctions against 30 Russian nationals under the Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations," GAC said in a statement. "These sanctions are being imposed on individuals who ran as candidates in the sham Kremlin-organized 'elections' held on September 8 to 10, 2023, in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine."

The individuals legitimized Russia's special military operation in Ukraine as they enabled the imposition of Russian laws, media, education and currency aimed at "russification" of Ukrainians remaining in territories held now by Moscow, the statement said.

Canada considers Kherson's elections to be a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and independence as well as territorial integrity as per the United Nations Charter, the statement said.

"We continue to condemn in the strongest possible terms Russia's illegal and unjustifiable war of aggression against Ukraine. Russia had absolutely no legitimate basis to hold elections in these territories. Today, we are sending a strong message to the Kremlin to remind them that Canada will never recognize these regions as Russian territory," Joly said in the statement.

The Canadian government began to sanction Russian citizens and entities in 2014, following Crimea's reunification with Russia by means of referendum. The list has surpassed 2,800 names since the onset of Russia's special military operation in February 2022 and includes alleged "enablers" in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova.

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Canada Pledges $49.4Mln in Climate-Related Initiatives at COP28 – Environment Ministry

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government announced C$67 million ($49.4 million) in financial pledges to support climate-related initiatives at COP28, Environment Canada said on Tuesday.

"At COP28, the Honourable Minister Guilbeault, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, announced several initiatives totaling over $67 million to respond to the needs and priorities of developing countries," the ministry said in a statement.

Of these funds, Canada invested C$16 million in addressing loss and damage in climate-vulnerable countries and C$750,000 in the Global Shield Centre of Excellence on Gender-Smart Solutions to support-gender specific approaches in the climate and disaster risk finance and insurance sector, the statement said.

A total of C$44.2 million was pledged for climate adaptation initiatives, including those run by the Special Climate Change Fund and the Least Developed Countries Initiative for Adaptation and Resilience as well as the program to Enhance Resilience to Climate Change and Biodiversity in the Iraqi Marshlands.

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The rest of the funds will support mitigation, climate governance and capacity building, as well as efforts to halt and reverse biodiversity loss.
Most of the projects are funded under Canada's C$5.3 billion climate finance commitment, the statement said.

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US Condemns Terrorist Violence In Burkina Faso – State Department

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) – The United States condemned terrorist violence against civilians, police and military forces in Burkina Faso, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"In this moment of insecurity and transition in the Sahel, the United States condemns the increasing and unacceptable violence committed by terrorist groups against civilians, military and police in Burkina Faso. Violent extremism has taken a significant toll on the people of Burkina Faso, and our condolences go out to the victims, their families, and their communities. The United States remains a committed partner in the fight against terrorism," Miller said in a statement.

He expressed concerns over the actions by Burkina Faso's Transition Authorities, including the growing use of targeted forced conscriptions, shrinking civic space and restrictions on political parties.

"These actions have the cumulative effect of silencing individuals who are working on behalf of their country to promote democratic governance and ensure that the people of Burkina Faso's rights are protected," Miller added.

Miller stressed that the US will work with Burkina Faso authorities and other parties in the country to promote the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

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