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12/13/23 Wednesday

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The Federal Reserve left US interest rates unchanged during its policy meeting, marking the third time in a row for such a decision after 11 prior interest rate hikes to help ease inflation.

The 5.25%-5.5% range, in place since July, is the highest level in lending rates that the United States has practiced since 2001.

It was further indicated that three rate cuts were on the board in 2024, with another four in 2025. Three additional cuts were forecasted for 2026, with the ultimate goal being to cut rates to between 2% and 2.25%.

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Federal Reserve Leaves US Interest Rates Unchanged, Sets Stage for Three Cuts in 2024

WASHINGTON (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve left US interest rates unchanged during its policy meeting, marking the third time in a row for such a decision after 11 prior interest rate hikes to help ease inflation.

“The committee seeks to achieve maximum employment and inflation at the rate of 2 percent over the longer run,” the Fed said in a statement, referring to its policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC). “In support of these goals, the committee decided to maintain the target range for the federal funds rate at 5.25 to 5.5%.”

The 5.25%-5.5% range, in place since July, is the highest level in lending rates that the United States has practiced since 2001.

Policymakers at the Federal Reserve have projected that US inflation will ease to 2.4% by next year from a current 3.1%, bringing interest rates down as well to a maximum of 4.6% from a present 5.5%, the central bank’s Summary of Economic Projections showed.

Officials further indicated that three rate cuts were on the board in 2024, with another four in 2025. Three additional cuts were forecasted for 2026, with the ultimate goal being to cut rates to between 2% and 2.25%.

Reports have suggested that the first batch of rate cuts are expected to begin in June 2024. However, while Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell acknowledged a positive economic outlook, the official underscored that inflation remains elevated even as it has managed to ease somewhat.

“Inflation is still too high. Ongoing progress and bringing it down is not assured. And the path forward is uncertain,” he told reporters. "No one is declaring victory."

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Asked whether the nation is headed into recession territory, Powell reiterated there is "always a real possibility" the economy could act "unusual," as it has done since the COVID-19 pandemic. “There’s little basis for thinking that the economy is in a recession now," he said. "I think there’s always a probability that there will be a recession in the next year. It’s a meaningful probability no matter what the economy is doing. So it’s always a real possibility."
Powell added that while the central bank's policy rate is likely near its peak, he would not entirely rule out another rate hike. "We are prepared to tighten policy further, if appropriate," he said.
In response to the Fed's Wednesday decision markets popped, with the Dow closing more than 500 points in the green - a first for the stock index. The S&P 500 and Nasdaq Composite followed suit, closed out the day's trading with gains of 63.39 and 200.57, respectively.

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House Republicans voted to formally authorize an impeachment inquiry into US President Joe Biden late Wednesday, a step lawmakers believe is needed to enforce subpoenas issued by the House Oversight and Judiciary Committees, which are heading the impeachment effort.

The vote, along partisan lines, saw Democrats overwhelmingly vote against the inquiry and all Republicans in favor of the measure.

The measure cleared the lower congressional chamber 221 to 212.
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FCC Commissioner Brendan Carr slammed his own agency’s decision to deny Starlink a previously awarded $866 million subsidy to bring broadband internet to more than 640,000 homes, alleging that it is a coordinated effort by US President Joe Biden’s administration to target Starlink owner Elon Musk after his purchase of Twitter.

Carr argues that the FCC created an impossible standard for Starlink, requiring it to demonstrate that it is already providing internet at the required speed in the area, though the previous standard only required 40% coverage by December 31, 2025. He says that no other company awarded subsidies in 2020 would meet that standard.

“The Biden Administration is choosing to prioritize its political and ideological goals at the expense of connecting Americans. We can and should reverse course,” Carr wrote.

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Economist: Biden Admin Pushing US Towards 'Economic Suicide'

On Wednesday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky left the United States without securing a significant military aid package for his country, having to instead be satisfied with $200 million worth of old equipment from the Defense Department's stocks.

Speaking to Sputnik's Fault Lines, economist Mark Frost explained how the economic situation in the United States is making further aid to Ukraine untenable politically.

"I'm an economist. I'm not known for analyzing political sentiment but just anecdotally [...] people who used to be hawks are now doing a second take, saying 'wait a minute, what are we getting for this?'" Frost explained. "It seems to me this administration is alienating the very demographics that got them elected in the first place [...] folks are saying "okay, we're citizens, why don't we matter?'"

Frost also told hosts Jamarl Thomas and Melik Abdul that if US President Joe Biden gets the $60 billion or more that he requested from Congress for Ukraine, "it would be the largest transfer of wealth to a country since World War II."

The United States has squandered the opportunity it had to focus on internal issues after the Cold War, Frost added.

"I'm waiting for my peace dividends," Frost explained. "Folks old enough to remember what it was like when the wall came down on the Soviet Union, we all were happy, at least most of us were. [...] 'Finally, this stupid Cold War that wastes so many resources [is over], we can reduce our military expenditures now, we can keep a credible nuclear threat, keep a reasonable Army, Air Force and Navy and now we can concentrate on our internal problems, we don't have the boogie man of the USSR anymore to worry about.' And it never, ever happened."

The money spent on Ukraine and its coming collapse will be a "driving issue" in the 2024 Presidential election, Frost added. He then noted that in addition to hard economic indicators that are pointing downwards, the behaviors of the people on the street are even more troubling.

"I run the local Humane Society here and pet abandonments are at an all-time high. People show up and say 'I can't afford my cats and dogs, can you take them?' and that tells me, combined with all the macroeconomic leading indicators that we're heading into a severe recession, to the point where you might even use the depression word, and if that happens[...] no one is going to care about Iran."

Frost, who said that he has voted for more Democrats in his life than Republicans, explained that what the Biden administration has done since taking office makes no sense from a macroeconomic perspective. "This administration gets an 'F' in macroeconomics. I'm trying to think of anything they've done that has made economic sense with respect to doing what's best for the country. I cannot think of another administration that has been worse," Frost said.

Thomas asked Frost about US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen's comments that the US economy was coming in for a "soft landing" after two years of historic inflation.

"I have no doubt that Janet Yellen's people are going to land soft. I have zero doubt I'm going to land soft," Frost explained. "The problem is, we are going to have 40-50 million Americans that are going to land really hard and probably 10 million of them are just going to splatter on the concrete."

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“What are they trying to do, what is the endgame here?” Frost asked. “I cannot understand it because everything we are doing, to me, is economic suicide.” He added that he does not believe the official rate of inflation, which has fallen to 3%. “Remember when the government is measuring this, they use economic tricks, and they weigh certain variables,” Frost explained. “If they determine something is ‘volatile’ then they weigh that lower in the averaging process than they do something that they say is stable, but if you look at regular people’s expenditures on bacon, eggs, stuff like that, the prices are still going up.”
Frost said that negative inflation, or deflation, would “make macroeconomic sense right now.”

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FCC Commissioner: Biden 'Gave Federal Agencies Green Light' to Target Elon Musk

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced on Tuesday that it denied the Elon Musk-owned Starlink’s appeal and will not award the company a $866 million subsidy from the Universal Service Fund meant to expand broadband access to rural areas.
Writing in fiery dissent, FCC Commissioner Brendan Carr accused the agency of targeting Elon Musk and his businesses at the behest of the Biden administration.
Carr began his dissent by pointing out that US President Joe Biden told reporters in early November that Musk “is worth being looked at” after his purchase of Twitter, since renamed X. It notes that when Biden was pressed by a reporter on what ways the government would look into at Musk, the president responded “there’s a lot of ways.”
"President Biden gave federal agencies a green light to go after him [Musk]," Carr wrote.
Carr then notes that the Department of Justice, the Federal Aviation Administration, the Federal Trade Commission, the National Labor Relation Board, the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York and the US Fish and Wildlife Service have all opened investigations into Musk or his businesses since Biden made those comments.
The subsidy was planned to fund Starlink and help bring broadband internet to 640,000 rural homes in 38 states.
In his dissent, Carr stated the FCC applied a novel new standard specifically for Starlink, ostensibly over concerns about how its low-Earth-orbit satellites (LEOs) made it impossible to pass and then applied that standard only to Starlink. He contends the decision by the FCC “cannot be explained by any objective application of laws, facts, or policy.”
According to Carr, the FCC required that Starlink show it is currently providing the required 100 megabits per second (Mbps) download and 20 Mbps upload speed to the 640,000 homes, rather than the previous standard of providing that service to at least 40% of those homes by December 31, 2025.
The commissioner noted that none of the other companies awarded contracts by the FCC in 2020 are required to meet that standard and that if they were, none of them would pass it. He further argued that looking at what Starlink is currently providing in those areas “would be like watching the pace lap of a NASCAR race and then predicting that the cars will never exceed 50 MPH.”

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Had the FCC looked at more relevant data sets, Carr argued, it would have seen that Starlink is certainly capable of meeting the speed benchmark by 2025, noting Starlink now has a median download speed greater than 100 Mbps in 14 European countries. That, along with the number of new satellites in orbit and Starlink's "detailed descriptions of its plan" would provide a "much richer and probative set of data" that would "confirm that Starlink is on track to meet its FCC obligations."

The decision to deny Starlink, Carr argued, will hurt the rural communities it planned to serve. "By reversing course, the FCC has chosen to vaporize that commitment and replace it with . . . nothing," Carr wrote [ellipsis in original]. "That's a decision to leave families waiting on the wrong side of the digital divide when we have the technology to get them high-speed service today."

Carr also argued that if the government ever decides to provide those areas with high-speed internet access, it will cost taxpayers significantly more. "[I]t will cost us orders of magnitude more money to do so [...] extending high-speed fiber lines to these same areas will likely cost somewhere in the neighborhood of $3 billion based on past bidding patterns and analysis – more once you start accounting for inflation."

As further evidence that the federal government does not have real concerns about Starlink's LEOs, Carr highlighted the Pentagon recently awarded a "multi-million-dollar agreement" with Elon Musk's SpaceX for a military adaptation of Starlink known as Starshield, "but the government continues to take regulatory action against his businesses, nonetheless."

"The Biden Administration is choosing to prioritize its political and ideological goals at the expense of connecting Americans. We can and should reverse course," Carr concluded.

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US House Votes to Authorize Formal Impeachment Inquiry Against Biden

The inquiry focuses on the business dealings of the Biden family, including Hunter Biden and the US president's brother, James Biden. Of particular interest are transfers to US President Joe Biden's bank account. The president has consistently claimed that he had no involvement in the dealings of his son or other family members.

House Republicans voted to formally authorize an impeachment inquiry into US President Joe Biden on Wednesday, a step lawmakers believe is needed to enforce subpoenas issued by the House Oversight and Judiciary Committees, which are heading the impeachment effort.

The vote, along partisan lines, saw Democrats overwhelmingly vote against the inquiry and all Republicans in favor of the measure. It cleared the lower congressional chamber 221 to 212.

Biden's son, Hunter Biden, has so far defied a House subpoena to testify behind closed doors. He has offered to testify publicly, arguing that Republicans do not want transparency in the proceedings.

After the younger Biden no-showed his deposition earlier Wednesday, Reps. Jim Jordan (R-OH) and James Comer (R-KY) said in a statement that Hunter "defied lawful subpoenas and we will now initiate contempt of Congress proceedings."

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The president's son did appear in Washington, DC, but not behind closed doors as Republicans demanded. Instead, he held a news conference in front of the Capitol, where he again offered to testify in public and called the investigation "illegitimate."

"I'm here today to make sure that the House committee's illegitimate investigations of my family did not proceed on distortions, manipulated evidence, and lies," Hunter Biden said, reading from a prepared statement.

The inquiry vote was made more difficult for House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) because of the recent expulsion of former Rep. George Santos (R-NY), which sharply narrowed the Republican hold on the US House.

The White House has defied Republican subpoenas and requests for more information, including transcribed interviews with White House staff and Biden family members and their associates. The White House argues the impeachment probe is illegitimate because it was not ratified with a formal vote in the House; Wednesday's vote invalidates that argument.

Previously, several moderate Republicans expressed hesitancy in voting for a formal impeachment inquiry, especially those in swing states where an on-the-record vote for an impeachment may hurt them politically.

However, several moderate Republicans came out in favor of the inquiry as it became more apparent that the White House planned to do what it could to block the investigation.

"If [Joe Biden is] not providing the information because he says there's no formal impeachment inquiry, that means we need a formal impeachment inquiry to get the information," Rep. Don Bacon (R-NE) said. "I think we have to go down that route. That doesn't mean we have high crimes or misdemeanors — we may not ever. But let's get the facts, and we'll go from there."

Democrats have repeatedly called the inquiry politically motivated.

"If they press onwards with this baseless fishing expedition, it only proves how divorced from reality this sham investigation is," White House spokesperson Ian Sams said in a statement, "and will come at the expense of meaningful work to actually address the issues the American people care about, like lowering costs, creating jobs, and strengthening our health care."

Johnson, meanwhile, argues the inquiry is a legal - not political - investigation. "We're not going to prejudge the outcome of this," he said. "We can't, because, again, it's not a political calculation. We're following the law."

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Biden Renews Call for Gun Control Measures on Anniversary of Sandy Hook School Shooting

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden on Thursday renewed his call for implementing gun control measures as the country marks the 11th anniversary of the 2012 Sandy Hook school massacre.

"We will not be able to protect Americans from the threat of gun violence until Congress does its part and takes commonsense and proven measures like passing universal background checks, banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, and more," Biden said in a statement.

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He emphasized that his administration has taken "dozens" of executive actions and other measures in an attempt to improve the situation, including creating the White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention. Biden also called it a "national tragedy" that the US still has not resolved the gun violence epidemic.

On December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza, 20, shot and killed 20 children and six adult staff members at Sandy Hook school in Newtown, Connecticut. The tragedy became the deadliest shooting at an elementary school in the US history.

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US Terrorist Watchlist Grows to 2Mln Suspects – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) – The US government's terrorist watchlist has nearly doubled in six years to include around two million people, including thousands of Americans, CBS reported on Thursday, citing court records, government documents, and interviews with current and former intelligence officials.

The watchlist, known as the Terrorist Screening Dataset, was last publicly confirmed to have 1.16 million suspects in 2017.

Monte Hawkins, who helps oversee watchlisting policy in the White House, told CBS that the "vast majority" of the two million people are not US citizens or permanent residents.

There is also a second watchlist, the Transnational Organized Crime Actor Detection Program, which targets US gangs with international ties. It contains the names of another 40,000 people, CBS found.

Government policy states that there must be "reasonable suspicion" to place someone on the watchlist, but their identities and the reasons for suspecting them are not disclosed.

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US Treasury Secretary to Take Second Trip to China Next Year

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) – Janet Yellen will confirm Thursday that she plans to take a second trip to China in her role as US treasury secretary next year.

"Next year…I plan to take my second trip to China as Treasury Secretary, where a significant portion of the agenda will focus on discussing difficult areas of concern with my counterpart," Yellen will say at a US-China Business Council event, according to advance remarks provided to the press.

Yellen will also outline the US's three main priorities next year in terms of responsibly managing its economic relationship with China: establishing resilient communications to avoid escalating disagreements and shocks; pressing for clarity on China's economic policies to better inform the US's own decisions; and facilitating exchanges between financial regulators to better respond to

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financial stressors.
Yellen took her first trip as US treasury secretary to China in July to help ease growing tensions between the world's two largest economies.

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US's Sullivan, Saudi Crown Prince Discuss Cooperation, Regional Issues - White House

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has held talks with Saudi Prime Minister and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh to discuss cooperation between their countries and regional issues, including efforts to settle the conflict between Israel and Palestinian movement Hamas, the White House said.
"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met today [on Wednesday] with Prime Minister and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. They discussed a number of bilateral and regional matters, including ongoing efforts to create new conditions for an enduring and sustainable peace between Israelis and Palestinians," the White House said in a statement released on Wednesday.
The two officials also discussed the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip, including efforts to boost the flow of critical assistance, the statement read.
As for bilateral cooperation between the United States and Saudi Arabia, the talks focused on security, commerce, space and technology, the White House added.
On October 7, Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing over 1,200 people and abducting some 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 18,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of the conflict, according to local authorities.

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US Senate Passes 2024 National Defense Authorization Act

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US Senate passed a reconciled version of the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which will now go to the House of Representatives for consideration.
As the vote count continued as of Wednesday evening, at least 81 members of the 100-member Senate had voted for the bill.
The legislation authorizes more than $886 billion in total national defense spending, including hundreds of millions of dollars in Ukraine aid. The bill also includes an extension of Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Section 702 authorities without reforms to the surveillance

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power.
Earlier on Wednesday, Senate Majority Leader Schumer urged the House of Representatives to swiftly pass the legislation as well. However, the House Freedom Caucus said that it opposes the bill due to the clean FISA extension.

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Ex-Serbian Troop Pleads Guilty to Hiding War Crime Charge to Enter US - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Former Serbian army officer Jugoslav Vidic admitted he received an American green card by failing to disclose he was accused of a war crime in Croatia during the 1990s, the Justice Department said in a press release.
"An Ohio man pleaded guilty today to possessing a green card he illegally obtained by concealing that he had been charged with a war crime in Croatia prior to emigrating to the United States," the release said on Wednesday.
Vidic was charged with a war crime in Croatia in 1994 and convicted in absentia in 1998, the release said.
"The Croatian court found that during an attack by ethnic Serb forces in Petrinja, Croatia, on Sept. 16, 1991, Vidic cut off the arm of civilian Stjepan Komes, who died afterward," the release said.
Vidic immigrated to the United States as a refugee in 1999 and was interviewed by US immigration officials and received his green card in 2005, the release added.

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US Senate Passes $886Bln Defense Bill, Sends to House for Consideration

(Updates with modified headline; final vote count in para 2; background in para 5)
WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US Senate passed a reconciled version of the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which will now go to the House of Representatives for consideration.
The Senate approved the legislation in a 87-13 vote on Wednesday.
The legislation authorizes more than $886 billion in total national defense spending, including hundreds of millions of dollars in Ukraine aid. The bill also includes an extension of Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Section 702 authorities without reforms to the surveillance power.
Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer urged the House of Representatives to swiftly pass the legislation as well. However, the House Freedom Caucus said that it opposes the bill due to the clean FISA extension.
Earlier this week, the Biden administration said it supports swift passage of the defense bill by

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Congress.

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IMF's Georgieva Says Crypto Industry Has Not Built Good Reputation

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said the cryptocurrency industry has not created a credible reputation in the 15 years of its existence.

"In the past 15 years, the crypto industry has not built a glorious reputation. Nor is it out of the woods.," Georgieva said at a conference in Seoul.

She characterized most crypto assets on the financial markets as "unbacked" or "poorly backed," adding that many of them have no intrinsic value and remain subject to price volatility.

Georgieva pointed out that cryptocurrency projects were "really risky assets." She also warned that some of them collapsed because of reliance on shaky reserves.

"Many households have the scars to prove it. They lost real money," she added.

IMF chief reminded that Changpeng Zhao, the founder of Binance, the world's largest cryptocurrency exchange, pleaded guilty in November to charges of money laundering. She pointed out that that happened soon after Sam Bankman-Fried, the founder of another major crypto exchange, FTX, was convicted of several crimes.

Georgieva said that the IMF has recently offered guidance on rules for crypto assets. She urged the community to clarify and apply relevant laws and regulations, establish clear tax rules, and provide a solid legal foundation with a clear classification of crypto assets. IMF chief also called on countries to coordinate their efforts in the crypto industry.

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Crypto Assets Adoption Could Undermine Macro-Financial Stability - IMF Managing Director

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The adoption of crypto assets could undermine macro-financial stability and fiscal sustainability, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said.

"The challenge is that high crypto asset adoption could undermine macro-financial stability," Georgieva said at the International Conference on Digital Money in Seoul.

Georgieva warned that using cryptocurrencies instead of national fiat currencies could harm monetary policy transmission and affect capital flow management measures, such as limits on foreign currency holdings.

The IMF chief said that that cryptocurrencies could undermine fiscal sustainability if tax collections became volatile or more difficult to enforce.

Georgieva pointed out that emerging economies like India, Nigeria and Vietnam are more open to using crypto assets.

"In Brazil, for every 100 real spent on foreign securities 25 go into crypto assets," Georgieva said, citing ongoing IMF research.

Georgieva called on the public to consider all the possible effects of adopting cryptocurrencies in order to prevent potential disruptions in the global economy if such assets spread worldwide.

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Yeezy Welcomes Russian Fashion Designer Gosha Rubchinskiy as Head of Design

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Yeezy has appointed Russian designer and photographer Gosha Rubchinskiy as its new head of design, Ye, formerly known as Kanye West, said.

"Yeezy welcomes Gosha Rubchinskiy as its new Head of Design today. The arrival of this legendary Russian designer at YEEZY, the pre-eminent global brand in music and fashion, is a milestone in design history," Ye said on Wednesday.

In 2018, reports emerged accusing Rubchinskiy of sending messages to a 16-year old boy through social media. Allegedly, he had asked the minor to send photos of himself.

Adidas spokesperson responded to the situation, stating that they take any allegation of this nature seriously and are actively investigating the claim, the report said.

In October, Adidas said that it had terminated its partnership with Ye due to anti-Semitic statements and actions that violate the company's values, while also halting production of Yeezy products, as well as stopping all payments to Ye and his companies.

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Ye had been designing footwear and apparel for Adidas under the Yeezy brand since 2015. The contract was valid until 2026. Adidas previously described this partnership as the most successful collaboration in the industry's history.

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US House Passes Resolution to Formalize Biden Impeachment Inquiry

(Updates with more details in paras 5-7)
WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a resolution to formalize an impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden, as lawmakers continue to gather evidence about the Biden family's alleged criminal activities.
House lawmakers passed the resolution along partisan lines in a vote of 221-212 on Wednesday.
The resolution directs the House Ways and Means, Judiciary and Oversight committees to continue their investigations into alleged foreign influence peddling and bribery by the Biden family.
Formalizing the inquiry grants the panels stronger subpoena enforcement power, House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the resolution earlier this week.
The US House of Representatives takes its impeachment responsibility seriously and will not prejudge the outcome of its investigation, House Republican leadership said in a joint statement on Wednesday.
The Biden administration has repeatedly misled the public and stonewalled the House's investigation, the statement said.
The American people deserve answers to questions about the Biden family's alleged criminal activity, the statement added.

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Biden Says US House Impeachment Inquiry 'Baseless Political Stunt'

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives' impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden is a baseless political stunt, Biden said in a statement.
"Instead of doing their job on the urgent work that needs to be done, they are choosing to waste time on this baseless political stunt that even Republicans in Congress admit is not supported by facts," the statement said on Wednesday.
Earlier on Wednesday, the House of Representatives passed a resolution formalizing an impeachment inquiry into Biden and his family's alleged criminal activity, including foreign influence peddling and bribery.

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Group Says 75 Protesters Arrested for Stopping LA Traffic Demanding Gaza Ceasefire

LOS ANGELES, December 14 (Sputnik) - Seventy-five American Jews were arrested for blocking a Los Angeles freeway, urging a ceasefire and an end to US funding for alleged war crimes against Gaza's people, the IfNotNow movement said.

"75 American Jews & allies were just arrested shutting down a Los Angeles freeway to demand a ceasefire, and an end to U.S. funding of war crimes against the people of Gaza," IfNotNow movement said on Wednesday in their social media post.

According to the IfN75 IfNotNow website, the organization identifies itself as a movement comprising American Jews committed to fostering equality and justice for Jews of different ages, with ancestors from various parts of the world and diverse Jewish backgrounds that mirror the varied ways in which they practice their Judaism.

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

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

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US Approves $255Mln Military Equipment Sale to Poland - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has approved a $255-million foreign military sale to Poland for communications equipment and associated logistical and program support, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a statement.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the government of Poland of communications equipment and related elements of logistics and program support for an estimated cost of $255 million," the statement said on Wednesday.

The DSCA delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale, the statement said.

Poland has requested a range of communication equipment, including radios and GPS receivers featuring selective availability anti-spoofing module, the statement said.

The request also includes support equipment; spare parts; new equipment training; US government and contractor technical engineering, logistics, personnel services and other

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associated elements for logistics and program support, the statement said.
The principal contractor will be L3Harris Technologies, Inc. in Melbourne, Florida, the statement added.

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US House Passes Resolution to Formalize Biden Impeachment Inquiry

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a resolution to formalize an impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden, as lawmakers continue to gather evidence about the Biden family's alleged criminal activities.
House lawmakers passed the resolution along partisan lines in a vote of 221-212 on Wednesday.
The resolution directs the House Ways and Means, Judiciary and Oversight Committees to continue their investigations into alleged foreign influence peddling and bribery.
Formalizing the inquiry grants the panels stronger subpoena enforcement power, House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said.

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Russia Concerned by Boko Haram Terrorist Activities in Africa - Deputy Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 14 (Sputnik) - Moscow is concerned by Boko Haram's activities in the African region and other such entities tied to the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group (banned in Russia), Deputy Ambassador to the UN Anna Evstigneeva said at a Security Council meeting.
"We are concerned by the persistence of Boko Haram destructive activity and the activities in the region of groups affiliated with ISIL [IS]," Evstigneeva said on Wednesday.
In this regard, Russia believes in the effectiveness of the African states' efforts via regional multinational armed forces which should remain predictably funded by the International community, she added.
The United Nation offices in Africa track and sum the terrorist activities of Boko Haram mainly from open sources and internal reports of individual UN missions. Dedicated UN teams then compile graphs and conduct analysis and present it to some of the UN member states.

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US Senior Official Travels to Argentina for Meeting With President Milei - White House

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Deputy US National Security Advisor for International Economics Mike Pyle traveled to Argentina to meet with newly elected President Javier Miley and senior members of his cabinet to discuss the economy and bilateral cooperation, the White House said in a press release.

"On Wednesday, December 13, 2023, Deputy National Security Advisor for International Economics Mike Pyle visited Buenos Aires and met with senior members of President Milei of Argentina's administration," the release said on Wednesday. "Deputy National Security Advisor Pyle discussed President Milei's plans for Argentina's economy… and areas where the United States and Argentina can strengthen their cooperation."

On Sunday, Milei was inaugurated as Argentina's president following victory in the November 19 runoff election against Economy Minister Sergio Massa.

Argentina is currently facing a severe economic crisis, with inflation soaring by 120% since the start of 2023. Milei is a proponent of the dollarization of the economy and a foreign policy oriented towards Israel and the United States. He is also against joining BRICS and cooperating with China, Brazil, and Russia.

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Sullivan Discusses China's Actions With Japanese, Philippine Counterparts - White House

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan had a trilateral phone call with his Japanese and Philippine counterparts, Akiba Takeo and Eduardo Ano, to discuss China's actions in the South China Sea and East China Sea as well as to reaffirm the US commitment to the alliance with these countries, the White House said.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor Akiba Takeo of Japan, and National Security Advisor Eduardo Ano of the Philippines held a trilateral phone call on December 13, 2023, to reaffirm their commitment to freedom of navigation and international law in the South China Sea and East China Sea and the fundamental importance of maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific," the White House said in a press release on Wednesday.

All three officials called China's recent conduct near Second Thomas Shoal and Scarborough Reef "dangerous and unlawful" and urged Beijing to abide by the July 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling, the press release said.

Tensions between the Philippines and China in the disputed waters of the South China Sea have been on the rise since October 4, when Philippine vessels completed a resupply mission in the Second Thomas Shoal despite blocking attempts by the Chinese coast guard.

The territorial affiliation of several islands in the South China Sea has been the subject of disputes between China and several other Asia-Pacific countries for decades. Significant oil and gas reserves have been discovered on the continental shelf of those islands, including the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, Thitu Island and Scarborough Shoal. Vietnam, Brunei,

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Malaysia, Taiwan and the Philippines are part of the disputes.

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Google Says Terminated Thousands of Russian, Chinese YouTube Accounts

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Google has terminated thousands of YouTube accounts linked to Russia and China, the organization's Threat Analysis Group Director Shane Huntley said during a a hearing before Canada's House of Commons ethics panel.

"Since January 2023, we terminated more than 2,400 YouTube channels linked to Russia, and more than 60,000 linked to China," Huntley said on Wednesday.

Huntley also said that Google is focused on disrupting coordinated influence operations on YouTube.

Google shares its findings on cyber activity with industry and government partners, Huntley added.

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Tesla Recalls 2 Mln Vehicles Due to Autopilot Controls Issues - NHTSA

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik)- Tesla is recalling more than 2 million electric vehicles in the United States because of issues with the vehicles' autopilot controls , the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) said.

"Tesla, Inc. (Tesla) is recalling 2012-2023 Model S, 2016-2023 Model X, 2017-2023 Model 3, and 2020-2023 Model Y vehicles equipped with all versions of Autosteer leading up to the version(s) that contains the recall remedy," NHTSA said on Wednesday.

The recall affected more than 2 million electric vehicles, NHTSA said.

NHTSA warned about the increased risk of crashing in certain circumstances when the driver does not operate the vehicle and is unprepared to intervene when necessary or fails to recognize when the autosteer function is canceled or not engaged.

Tesla has committed to releasing the necessary updates free of charge and notifying car owners in February 2024, according to the NHTSA.

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US House Panel Passes Bill to Impose 100% Tax on Frozen Russian, Belarusian Funds

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WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US House Foreign Affairs Committee passed a bill to impose a 100% excise tax on certain Russian and Belarusian assets frozen in connection with the conflict in Ukraine.

The House panel passed the legislation, dubbed the Russian War Crimes in Ukraine Tax Act, in a vote of 41-5 on Wednesday.

The bill also establishes a Ukraine Reconstruction Trust Fund, in which the taxed assets will be held. The funds are designated for use in reconstruction, humanitarian and economic efforts in Ukraine.

The legislation also makes encouraging US allies to transfer Russian assets to Ukraine a diplomatic priority of the United States.

Moreover, the bill requires the US Secretary of State to direct the US Permanent Representative to the UN to use their influence to encourage other countries to develop mechanisms to transfer any capital gains on Russian assets to Ukraine.

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UPDATE - Fed Again Leaves US Rates Unchanged, But Gives No Assurances On 2024

(Changes headline and lead; adds details, comments and context in paragraphs 2-12)

WASHINGTON, December 14(Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve left US interest rates unchanged on Wednesday at its December policy meeting, the third straight time it had made such a decision after 11 prior rate hikes that helped eased inflation from four-decade highs.

Chairman Jerome Powell, however, said he could not give any assurances about inflation or the economy in 2024 and how much the Fed would cut rates by — despite the central bank's Summary of Economic Projections, or SEP, predicting price stability, growth and lower rates in the coming year.

Powell went as far as saying that he could not even guarantee that there would not be a recession in 2024.

"I think you can say that there's little basis for thinking that the economy is in a recession now," Powell told a news conference after the conclusion of the Fed's policy meeting for December. "I think there's always a probability that there will be a recession in the next year, and it's a meaningful probability, no matter what the economy's doing, so it's always a real possibility."

Progress in bringing US inflation continuously lower is not assured and the path forward for price stability is uncertain, Powell said.

"Inflation has eased from its highs, and this has come without a significant increase in unemployment," he said. "That's very good news. But inflation is still too high; ongoing progress in bringing it down is not assured; and the path forward is uncertain."

The Fed's SEP outlook projected that US inflation will ease to 2.4% by next year from a current 3.1% and a June 2022 high of more than 9%.

Interest rates will likely come down to a maximum of 4.6% from the present 5.5%, saud the outlook published after the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC, left rates unchanged for a third time since July.

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Powell said he was gratified with the path of both inflation and the economy, especially since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, but stressed that the unusual results made him queasy as well about the future — hence his fear of a 2024 recession.

"I have always felt, since the beginning, that there was a possibility, because of the unusual situation, that the economy could cool off in a way that enabled inflation to come down without the kind of large job losses that have often been associated with high inflation in tightening cycles," Powell said. "So far, that's what we're seeing; that's what many forecasters on and off the committee are seeing. This result is not guaranteed. It is far too early to declare victory. And there are certainly risks. It's certainly possible that the economy will behave in an unexpected way. It has done that repeatedly in the post-pandemic period."

The economy itself grew by 5.2% in the third quarter of this year, according to a second reading of Gross Domestic Product, or GDP, at the end of November that came in higher than the previously-published 4.9% for the quarter.

GDP growth in 2022 was just 2.1%.

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Hoover Institution Library Starts Digitalizing Russian Diaspora Newspaper Collection

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The Hoover Institution Library and Archives launched a new project to digitalize its collection of Russian diaspora periodicals, Research Services Reference Archivist Daniel Keough told Sputnik.

"We are in the process of selecting a project manager and once they are selected, work will begin on the digitization project," Keough said.

The team expects the digitalization project to begin work in the beginning of next year.

The project, dubbed the Russian Diaspora Initiative (RDI), includes hundreds of copies of newspapers and other periodicals published by Russian immigrants in the United States, France, China, Australia and other countries throughout the past century.

The RDI project was made possible thanks to the help of University of Hawaii professor emeritus of Russian history John Stephan, who is a specialist on the Russian Far East and the Russian émigré community.

"By digitizing Russian vernacular newspapers serving Russian communities in Eurasia, the Americas, and Oceania, the Hoover Institution Library and Archives will offer readily accessible, searchable, comprehensive coverage of diverse and at times discordant voices of millions of former Tsarist subjects and Soviet citizens and their descendants in a global 'Russian abroad' during seventy-four years of Soviet rule," Stephan said.

The entire Russia and Eurasia collection consists of 340,000 of monographs, periodicals and newspapers, as well as many thousands of photos, political posters and pamphlets.

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US, Taiwan Discuss Strengthening Taipei's Role in UN System, Int'l Forums - State Dept

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States and Taiwan have held talks on broadening Taipei's participation in the United Nations system and other international forums, the US Department of State said.

"On December 13, 2023, the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO) convened representatives of the US Department of State and the Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs for consultations in Washington on expanding Taiwan's participation in the United Nations system and in other international forums," the State Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

The talks centered on identifying immediate opportunities to bolster Taiwan's participation in the World Health Assembly and other global public health bodies; the International Civil Aviation Organization; and non-UN international, regional and multilateral organizations, the statement said.

"Participants exchanged views on addressing global challenges, such as global public health, aviation safety, climate change and the environment, transnational crime, and opportunities to jointly enhance technical standards and economic cooperation," the statement said.

The participants of the meeting also stressed the importance of "working closely with like-minded partners who share our concerns regarding attempts to exclude Taiwan from the international community," according to the statement.

China considers Taiwan to be its integral part. Beijing expects the island's participation in the work of international organizations to take place in accordance with the One China principle.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) –

HUNTER BIDEN'S CASE

* US House Oversight Chairman James Comer on Wednesday said his committee expects Hunter Biden to fully cooperate with a subpoena demanding his closed-door testimony as part of their impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden.

* US lawmakers anticipate Hunter Biden will come for a deposition following today's House vote to formalize an impeachment probe into President Joe Biden, House Judiciary Committee chair Jim Jordan said.

* Hunter Biden said on Wednesday that no evidence exists that his father, Joe Biden, has been somehow involved in his business dealings amid a Congress probe.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* It is impossible to compare military potential and economic power of Russia and Ukraine, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said.

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* Ukraine has lost up to 250 soldiers both killed and wounded in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* The United States has understood that Ukraine has fooled them, and there will be no “victory” on the battlefield as Ukrainian forces are losing positions at a high pace, Peskov has said.

ISRAELI INVASION INTO GAZA

* The United States is delaying the sale of M16 assault rifles to Israel due to Israeli settler violence in the West Bank, Axios reported on Wednesday citing two US officials.
* Palestinian Hamas militants may be holding hostages in tunnels flooded by Israel, White House Spokesperson John Kirby said.
* The military wing of the Palestinian movement Hamas, Al Qassam Brigades, said on Wednesday that it is targeting Israel’s Ashdod with missiles.
* The United States continues to support Israel’s war against Palestinian movement Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Lior Ben Dor told the Arab World Press agency.
* Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and Israeli National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi have discussed the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, including the deteriorating situation in the Gaza Strip, over the phone, the Russian Security Council said.

US ECONOMY

* The Federal Reserve left US interest rates unchanged during its policy meeting, marking the third time in a row for such a decision after 11 prior interest rate hikes to help ease inflation.
* Policymakers at the Federal Reserve have projected that US inflation will ease to 2.4% by next year from a current 3.1%, bringing interest rates down as well to a maximum of 4.6% from a present 5.5%, the central bank’s Summary of Economic Projections showed.

HOUTHI ATTACKS IN RED SEA

* Israeli President Isaac Herzog on Wednesday called for strengthening the US-led international activities against the attacks in the Red Sea carried out by Yemen’s Ansar Allah movement, also known as the Houthis.
* 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, citing US officials.

OPEC FORECAST OF GLOBAL OIL MARKETS

* OPEC has kept its forecast for global oil demand for 2023 unchanged and expects an increase by 2.5 million barrels per day to 102.1 million barrels per day, according to its fresh monthly report published on Wednesday.
* OPEC has kept its forecast for the United States' oil and condensate production in 2023 unchanged and expects a rise by 850,000 barrels per day to 12.76 million barrels per day, according to the organization's fresh report.
* OPEC has maintained its forecast for oil production for 2023 outside the organization at 67.6 million barrels per day, according to its fresh monthly report.
* OPEC’s oil production decreased by 57,000 barrels per day in November compared to the October data and amounted to 27.84 million barrels per day, according to the organization's fresh report.

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US Economy Not in Recession Now But Next Year Could Be Different Story - Powell

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The US economy does not appear to be in a recession at present but there is no telling what could happen in the coming year could given the uncertainties over growth and inflation, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Wednesday.

"I think you can say that there's little basis for thinking that the economy is in a recession now," Powell said. "I think there's always a probability that there will be a recession in the next year and it's a meaningful probability, no matter what the economy's doing, so it's always a real possibility. This result is not guaranteed. It is far too early to declare victory. And there are certainly risks. It's certainly possible that the economy will behave in an unexpected way. It has done that repeatedly in the post-pandemic period."

Earlier on Wednesday, the Fed left interest rates unchanged at 5.5% for a third time since July. The US economy grew by 5.2% in the third quarter of 2023, 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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Trump Says Politico Story on North Korea Nukes Stance, Sanctions Relief 'Made Up Story'

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump on Wednesday rebuked as "made up story" a report published by Politico stating he had softened his stance on North Korea's nuclear program.

Earlier on Wednesday, citing three individuals familiar with the matter, Politico published a report in which it alleged that Trump was considering a bargain whereby the United States would allow North Korea to preserve but freeze its nuclear arsenal in exchange for sanctions relief, if he were to win at the presidential race in 2024.

In the same report, Trump's campaign spokesperson denied the change of stance on North Korea and noted that the sources did not know what they were speaking about, nor could they speak for Trump.

"A Fake News article in Politico, through anonymous sources (as usual!), states that my views on Nuclear Weapons in North Korea have softened. This is a made up story, DISINFORMATION, put out by Democrat Operatives in order to mislead and confuse," Trump said via the Truth Social platform. "The only thing accurate in the story is that I do get along well with Kim Jong Un!"

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In 2018, Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un signed a joint agreement to de-escalate relations between the United States and North Korea. The two leaders met the following year in Hanoi to continue the negotiations but failed to reach a deal on the issue of US sanctions against North Korea. The relations between the two countries have since remained tense.

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US Judge Pauses Trump's 2020 Election Case While His Immunity Appeal Pending – Court Order

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – US district judge Tanya Chutkan has granted President Donald Trump's request to pause his 2020 election meddling case pending a decision of the appeals court on his presidential immunity, according to a court order filed on Wednesday.

"The court agrees with both parties that Defendant's appeal automatically stays any further proceedings that would move this case towards trial or impose additional burdens of litigation on Defendant," the order stated. "The court hereby STAYS the deadlines and proceedings scheduled by its Pretrial Order, as amended."

The order clarified though that the deadlines and proceedings in the 2020 election against Trump case are not permanently frozen but are rather "held in abeyance" until the appeals court makes its decision in the immunity case.

Should the appeals court reject Trump's appeal, the US district court in the case will decide whether to keep the trial date as it is on March 4 or to move it further into the future, according to the order.

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Biden Was Familiar With Hunter's Remarks Defying Congress Subpoena - White House

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden was aware what his son Hunter planned to say on Wednesday when he defied a House subpoena to testify behind closed doors about his business dealings, Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said.

"The President was certainly familiar with what his son was going to say," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, Hunter Biden arrived at the US Capitol steps to announce that he will not testify in a closed-door deposition today as scheduled. He said he will only answer questions at a public hearing.

US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer and Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan announced they will hold Hunter Biden in contempt of Congress after defying subpoenas to appear for a deposition.

In September, then-US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy launched an impeachment inquiry

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following probes into alleged criminal activity by President Biden and his son. The Biden family is alleged to have enriched itself through foreign influence peddling and bribery.

Biden dismisses the accusations against him, arguing that he has never discussed foreign business deals with his son.

The House is set to vote to formalize its impeachment probe on Wednesday.

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Progress In Bringing US Inflation Down Not Assured, Path Forward Uncertain - Powell

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Progress in bringing US inflation continuously lower is not assured and the path forward for price stability is uncertain, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said Wednesday.

"Inflation has eased from its highs, and this has come without a significant increase in unemployment," Powell told a news conference after the conclusion of the Fed's policy meeting for December. "That's very good news. But inflation is still too high; ongoing progress in bringing it down is not assured; and the path forward is uncertain."

Policy makers at the Fed have projected that US inflation will ease to 2.4% by next year from a current 3.1%, bringing interest rates down to a maximum of 4.6% from the present 5.5%. The outlook came after the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee left rates unchanged at a maximum of 5.5% for a third time since July.

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Sullivan Traveled to Saudi Arabia, Met Crown Prince to Discuss Gaza Crisis – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan traveled to Saudi Arabia on Wednesday and held talks with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to discuss the Gaza crisis, Axios reported.

Sullivan traveled to Saudi Arabia to meet the crown prince and discuss the diplomatic efforts led by the administration of US President Joe Biden aimed at maintaining regional stability and preventing the Israel-Gaza conflict from expanding, the report said citing two officials with knowledge on the matter.

Among items of discussion, Sullivan reportedly addressed Houthi attacks from Yemen on international commercial vessels in the Red Sea, and efforts to thwart them.

Earlier on Wednesday, White House National Security Council Spokesperson Adrienne Watson informed that Sullivan would visit Israel on December 14-15 for talks with senior Israeli officials on the latest developments in the Gaza war.

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US Senate Democrat Attempting to Prevent Lawmakers' Holiday Break - Reports

(Update: changes headline, edits throughout piece, adds para 3)
WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Democratic US Senator Michael Bennet is attempting to prevent lawmakers from leaving Washington for the holidays without addressing Ukraine aid and border security, Politico reported on Wednesday.
Bennet initially placed a hold on the NDAA to try and keep the Senate in Washington to continue negotiations on border security, which Republicans have tied to a supplemental funding request with Ukraine and Israel aid, the report said, citing a source close to the senator.
However, senators ultimately reached a deal to put the legislation up for votes later on Wednesday, the report said.
Bennet is also eyeing a hold on a Federal Aviation Administration funding extension, which Congress must pass before the end of the year, lest the administration's funding expire, the report said.
The House of Representatives is set to conclude their work on Thursday and head home until the new year. The Senate is set to do the same on Friday.
"Ukraine is fighting a battle for democracy. We cannot abandon them at this crucial moment. There is too much at stake — neither the House nor Senate can leave for the holidays without getting this done," Bennet said in a statement on Wednesday via social media platform X.
Earlier on Wednesday, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that Republicans appear more interested in spending the holiday season with their families than addressing border security or Ukraine aid.

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White House Says Biden Will Not Pardon Son

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will not pardon his son, Hunter Biden, if he is convicted for his alleged criminal activity, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.
"I've been very clear: the president is not going to pardon his son," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing, when asked whether Biden is considering a pardon for his son.
Earlier this month, prosecutors indicted Hunter Biden on nine new criminal counts linked to an alleged tax evasion scheme. The president's son has also been charged with firearms offenses and is under investigation by US House lawmakers as part of an impeachment probe into his father.

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UNRWA Says Israeli Forces Killed 271 Palestinians, Including 69 Kids in West Bank in 2023

UNITED NATIONS, December 13 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) said on Wednesday that 2023 became the "deadliest year" on record for West Bank Palestinians with 271 people, including 69 children, killed by Israeli security forces.

"According to OCHA, 271 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli Security Forces (ISF) in the West Bank, including 69 children. In addition, eight Palestinians have been killed by Israeli settlers and another two either by forces or settlers," UNRWA said in a new report. "This year (2023) is the deadliest year for Palestinians killed in the West Bank since the UN began recording casualties in 2005."

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US Support For Israel Has Not Diminished, But They Are Concerns - White House

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The United States reaffirmed its support for Israel while expressing concerns over the ongoing military campaign, Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"Our support for Israel has not diminished, but we have had concerns," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby added that concerns have been voiced regarding the execution of the military campaign, all while recognizing that Hamas initiated and is sustaining the conflict.

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

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

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US Delaying Sale of M16 Rifles to Israel Over Settler Violence - Reports

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WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is delaying the sale of M16 assault rifles to Israel due to Israeli settler violence in the West Bank, Axios reported on Wednesday citing two US officials.

The report said, citing the officials, that the sale of 20,000 US-made M16 rifles is being sent to the State Department for another review because the Biden administration does not feel confident the Israeli government is doing enough to crack down on extremist Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank.

The United States needs more assurances from the Israeli government that it will do enough to curb the violence in the West Bank, the report added.

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US Says Russian Cyber Actors Targeting JetBrains Servers for Solarwinds-Style Operations

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US intelligence agencies said on Wednesday that alleged Russian cyber actors are actively exploiting a vulnerability in JetBrains TeamCity servers for potential Solarwinds-style operations.

"The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), US Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), US National Security Agency (NSA), Polish Military Counterintelligence Service (SKW), CERT Polska (CERT.PL), and the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) assess Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) cyber actors are exploiting CVE-2023-42793 at a large scale, targeting servers hosting JetBrains TeamCity software since September 2023," CISA said in a statement.

Software developers rely on TeamCity software to efficiently manage and automate tasks, such as software compilation, building, testing, and releasing, according to the statement.

"If compromised, access to a TeamCity server would provide malicious actors with access to that software developer's source code, signing certificates, and the ability to subvert software compilation and deployment processes—access a malicious actor could further use to conduct supply chain operations," the statement said.

CISA claims that the SVR started exploiting internet-connected JetBrains TeamCity servers in late September by leveraging a vulnerability that enables the insecure handling of specific paths allowing for bypassing authorization, resulting in arbitrary code execution on the server.

"The authoring agencies' observations show that the TeamCity exploitation usually resulted in code execution with high privileges granting the SVR an advantageous foothold in the network environment," the statement said.

The agencies stated that they are currently unaware of any alternative method being used by the SVR to exploit JetBrains TeamCity beyond the mentioned vulnerability.

In December 2020, it was discovered that SolarWinds was the subject of a massive cybersecurity attack that affected thousands of enterprises and government agencies worldwide. The White House accused Russian intelligence of being behind the hack. SVR Director Sergei Naryshkin denied responsibility for the attack.

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White House Says Hamas Possibly Holding Hostages in Tunnels Flooded by Israel

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Palestinian Hamas militants may be holding hostages in tunnels flooded by Israel, White House Spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.
"Some of the hostages have come out and said that they were held in tunnels, so it's not beyond possibility that Hamas could be holding at least some of them in tunnels," Kirby said during a press briefing, when asked if hostages could be held in flooded tunnels.

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White House Says US Lawmakers Should Not Leave to Spend Holidays With Families

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US House Republican lawmakers should not leave Washington to spend the holidays with their families due to unfinished legislative business, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.
"House Republicans should not go home for the holidays when there is vital work to do for the security of the United States and the world," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.
The US House of Representatives is set to conclude their business on Thursday and leave town until the new year. The Senate is scheduled to end their work for the year on Friday.
However, US Senator Michael Bennet is reportedly placing a hold on the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act in an effort to keep lawmakers in Washington.
Earlier on Wednesday, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that Republicans appear more interested in spending the holidays at home than addressing US border security or aid for Ukraine.

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US Hopeful Gaza Border Crossing at Kerem Shalom to Open Soon for Cargo Trucks - State Dept

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is hopeful that the Kerem Shalom border crossing between Egypt and Gaza will soon be opened for the transfer of cargo with humanitarian aid, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.
"We hope that Kerem Shalom [crossing] will be open for transit soon… not just for inspections, but for cargo to move in," Miller said during a press briefing.
The spokesperson said the Israeli government is expected to pick up the issue of Kerem

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Shalom reopening for ground traffic later on Wednesday.
Earlier in the week, the Kerem Shalom crossing was opened as an additional location for conducting inspections of cargo being transported into Gaza in a bid to increase the volume of humanitarian aid entering Gaza.
At present, the Rafah crossing on the border between Egypt and Gaza remains the only point of entry into the Palestinian enclave and is an exit point for civilians who are willing to leave Gaza amid Israel's ongoing military campaign there.

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UN PGA Believes Adopted Resolution for Gaza Ceasefire is 'Victory for life' - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, December 13 (Sputnik) - The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) President Dennis Francis believes that the newly adopted Gaza ceasefire resolution marks groundbreaking progress towards peace, the PGA Spokeswoman Monica Grayley said on Wednesday.
"The PGA firmly believes that what happened yesterday [adoption of the Gaza resolution] was a victory for life," Grayley told a UN briefing.
In the past, Francis has called for a humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and urges all parties to the conflict to follow international humanitarian law.
On Tuesday,153 countries of the 193-strong body voted in favor of the resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, while 10 countries voted against the measure and 23 abstained.
On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing over 1,200 people and abducting some 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. According to the Health Ministry of Gaza, about 18,000 people, about 70% of whom are said to be women and children, have been killed so far in the enclave as a result of the conflict.

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Fed Policymakers Project Inflation at 2.4% in 2024, Interest Rates at 4.6%

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Policymakers at the Federal Reserve have projected that US inflation will ease to 2.4% by next year from a current 3.1%, bringing interest rates down as well to a maximum of 4.6% from a present 5.5%, the central bank's Summary of Economic Projections showed.
The outlook came after the Fed's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) left

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rates unchanged at a maximum of 5.5% for a third time since July.

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Israel Stripped Palestinian Men to Ensure They Don't Wear Explosives – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – Israel informed the United States that it had to strip and blindfold a group of Palestinian men to ensure they were not carrying explosive devices on them, but admitted that the release of the photos was a mistake, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

Earlier in December, images from the Gaza Strip emerged on social media, allegedly showing Hamas fighters stripped to their underwear and kneeling. One of the photos showed more than 20 blindfolded men kneeling on the street in front of Israeli soldiers.

Following the outrage over the published photos, the US State Department said on Monday that it requested Israel to provide more information on the issue.

"They [Israel] have informed us that they conduct searches on detained individuals in Gaza to ensure that they are not wearing suicide vests, that they don't have other weapons, that they pose no danger to IDF forces. They made clear to us, however, that these photographs should not have been taken, should not have been released, and they made it clear, going forward, that that will not be their practice," Miller said during a press briefing.

The United States continues to insist that it has no evidence yet of Israeli violations of the international rules of war or humanitarian law as Tel Aviv continues to conduct its military operation in Gaza, despite literally daily reports of egregious deaths of dozens of civilians, including women and children, during carpet bombings of the enclave.

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Musk Developing New STEM-Focused Schools, University in Texas - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk is laying the groundwork for a new university and schools focused on scientific and technical education, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday.

One of Musk's charities, dubbed The Foundation, applied for tax-exempt status with the US Internal Revenue Service, the report said, citing a copy of the application.

Musk seeded the project with approximately $100 million. The project will start by developing a primary and secondary school focused on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), the report said.

The application for tax-exempt status was filed in October 2022 and approved in March 2023, the report said.

The Foundation aims to eventually expand its operations to start a university, the reports said.

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The application indicates that The Foundation expects to start with a class of 50 students, the report added.

Earlier this week, Musk said that two of his companies - SpaceX and Tesla - have noticed a "meaningful degradation" in the capability of US college graduates in recent years.

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Federal Reserve Leaves US Interest Rates Unchanged During December Policy Meeting

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve left US interest rates unchanged during its policy meeting, marking the third time in a row for such a decision after 11 prior interest rate hikes to help ease inflation.

"The committee seeks to achieve maximum employment and inflation at the rate of 2 percent over the longer run," the Fed said in a statement, referring to its policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC). "In support of these goals, the committee decided to maintain the target range for the federal funds rate at 5.25 to 5.5%."

The 5.25%-5.5% range, in place since July, is the highest level in lending rates that the United States has practiced since 2001.

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UN Chief Concerned About Possible Escalation of Conflict Involving Yemen - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is worried about the escalation of the Middle East conflict involving Yemen's Houthis and the potential for an environmental catastrophe in the region, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"It's very much a concern for the Secretary-General, not only in terms of the escalation of the conflict, but also... an environmental catastrophe should a fully loaded tanker with jet fuel explode at sea," Dujarric told a UN briefing.

Such a catastrophe would have a devastating impact on the ecology and fishing, Dujarric added.

Earlier on Wednesday, media reported that the Houthis attempted to fire missiles at a commercial tanker loaded with Indian manufactured jet fuel.

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US Senate Democrat Blocks NDAA Passage in Bid to Prevent Holiday Break - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Democratic US Senator Michael Bennet is placing a hold on the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) in an effort to prevent lawmakers from leaving Washington for the holidays, Politico reported on Wednesday.

Bennet placed a hold on the NDAA to try and keep the Senate in Washington to continue negotiations on border security, which Republicans have tied to a supplemental funding request with Ukraine and Israel aid, the report said, citing a source close to the senator.

Bennet is also eyeing a hold on a Federal Aviation Administration funding extension, which Congress must pass before the end of the year lest the Biden administration's funding expire, the report said.

The House of Representatives is set to conclude their work on Thursday and head home until the new year. The Senate is set to do the same on Friday.

"Ukraine is fighting a battle for democracy. We cannot abandon them at this crucial moment. There is too much at stake - neither the House nor Senate can leave for the holidays without getting this done," Bennet said in a statement via X on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that Republicans appear more interested in spending the holiday season with their families than addressing border security or Ukraine aid.

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State Dept Says No Consular Access to RFE/RL Reporter in Russia

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The United States has not received a consular access to RFE/RL (designated as a foreign agent in Russia) reporter Alsu Kurmasheva in Russia and has made no determination on whether she is wrongfully detained, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"We are closely following her detention. We are aware that there are many possible charges against her," Miller said in a press briefing. "We have sought consular access to her, the Russian government has not provided. We will continue to insist on it. They have acknowledged her detention to us, they have not made a formal notification."

Miller also said that the State Department had not made a determination yet whether she is wrongfully detained.

Kurmasheva's husband, Pavel Butorin, said in November that he would want the US government to designate her as wrongfully detained, believing that the move would elevate her case and commit the US to securing her release. Kurmasheva holds dual US and Russian citizenship.

On October 18, Kurmasheva was detained and charged with failure to register as a foreign agent in Russia, which carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison.

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UN Inquiry Board Will Probe Death of Staffers in Gaza After Conflict - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 13 (Sputnik) - The United Nations would like to see a board of inquiry looking into the loss of lives of UN colleagues and damaged property after the Gaza conflict is finished, the UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"I think a number of you have asked about what will happen after the conflict. After the conflict, there will need to be a board of inquiry from the UN which should look at the loss of property and the loss of UN lives," Dujarric told a UN briefing.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing over 1,200 people and abducting some 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages.

According to the Health Ministry of Gaza, about 18,000 people, about 70% of whom are said to be women and children, have been killed so far in the enclave as a result of the conflict.

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US Hopes EU Can Quickly Agree on Ukraine Funding for 2024, Beyond - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes that the European Union (EU) can promptly agree to provide financial assistance to Ukraine next year and beyond, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"The United States and the EU have been resolute in standing with Ukraine. We believe now is the time to step up that support," Miller said during a press briefing. "We appreciate the EU's continued efforts to provide financial support to Ukraine and hope that the EU can quickly agree on funding for 2024 and beyond."

The European Union is currently trying to reach an agreement on $21.6 billion in military support for Ukraine and intends to include another $53.9 billion in the EU budget to provide macro-financial assistance to the Kiev regime over the next four years. However, the plans face opposition from some EU member states, including Hungary.

Meanwhile, US lawmakers are struggling to agree on a $111 billion supplemental funding request from the Biden administration that includes $61 billion in aid to Ukraine requested by US President Joe Biden. The request was blocked last week due to disagreements in the US Congress, with the Republicans demanding the inclusion of border security measures in the bill.

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

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passed the supplemental funding request.

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IMF, World Bank Announce $4.5 Bln in Debt Relief for Somalia - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank announced on Wednesday that they are providing Somalia with $4.5 billion in debt relief.

"The Executive Boards of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA) have approved the Heavily IndebtedPoor Countries (HIPC) Initiative Completion Point for Somalia, which provides total debt service savings for the country of US$4.5 billion," the two organizations said in a joint statement.

The funds will provide the country with access to critical additional financial resources and help it strengthen its economy, reduce poverty and promote job creation, the statement said.

"Debt service relief has been provided by the IMF (US$343.2 million), IDA (US$448.5 million), African Development Fund (ADF) (US$131.0 million), other multilateral creditors (US$573.1 million), as well as by bilateral and commercial creditors (US$3.0 billion)," the statement said.

Bilateral creditors also include members of the Paris Club group of donors, the Arab Coordination Group, and other participants, it added.

The statement stressed that Somalia has achieved serious progress in meeting the requirements to reach the HIPC Completion Point, having implemented a poverty reduction strategy for at least one year and maintained a sound macroeconomic management track record, while implementing structural reforms.

Following HIPC Completion Point, Somalia's external debt has fallen from 64 percent of GDP in 2018 to less than 6 percent of GDP by the end of 2023, the statement added.

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Biden Meets With Families of US Citizens Held Hostage in Gaza - White House

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden met with the families of several US citizens who were taken hostage by Palestinian Hamas militants during their October 7 surprise attack on Israel, the White House said on Wednesday.

"The President is holding a private meeting with the family members of Americans who were taken hostage by Hamas during the terrorist attacks in Israel on October 7," the White House said in a statement.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer also attended the meeting.

Attendee Jonathan Dekel-Chen said that the meeting was terrific, but declined to provide any

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details on the talks. The families feel they have no better friend than Biden, Dekel-Chen said.
Another attendee, Liz Naftali, said that the families would love a "Christmas miracle."

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CPJ Says Does Not Consider Gonzalo Lira a Journalist, Not Involved in His Case

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The New York-based nonprofit Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) told Sputnik on Wednesday that the criminal case of US citizen Gonzalo Lira, imprisoned in Ukraine, is outside of its competence because it does not consider him a journalist.

"We looked into the incident and determined that it was outside of CPJ's mandate," the CPJ said in a statement. "Our regional program shared that this is because what he has been doing is not journalism, according to our criteria."

A dual citizen of the United States and Chile, blogger Gonzalo Lira, was arrested by the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) on May 5 on charges of justifying Russia's military operation in Ukraine and allegedly disseminating pro-Russian propaganda amid the conflict between the two countries. He was released in July and later arrested again after he attempted to leave Ukraine by crossing the border with Hungary on a motorcycle.

Lira is currently being held at a Ukrainian pretrial detention center in Kharkiv, where he is scheduled to face a court hearing on December 21, according to media reports.

Lira's case has seen renewed interest after journalist Tucker Carlson and billionaire Elon Musk drew attention to it.

In an X post, Carlson stated that Lira "is an American citizen who's been tortured in a Ukrainian prison since July, for the crime of criticizing Zelenskyy." In response, Musk expressed his surprise that a country that has received more than $100 billion from the Biden administration arrested an American citizen for expressing his point of view on current events.

The issue of Lira's fate was raised more than once during press briefings at the White House and the State Department over the summer, including by a Sputnik journalist, but on each occasion officials were unable to provide any details on whether the Biden administration would take action to push for its citizen's release.

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US Does Not Feel Isolated After UNGA's Adoption of Ceasefire Resolution- State Dept

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The United States does not feel itself isolated in any way following the adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

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" No, not at all ," Miller said when asked whether the adoption of the resolution by the number of votes that exceeded the number of votes any Ukraine resolutions denouncing Moscow gathered concern from Washington or made it feel diplomatically isolated.

Earlier,153 countries of the 193-strong body, including 17 EU member states, voted in favor of the resolution proposed by Egypt and Mauritania, while 10 countries voted against the measure and 23 abstained.

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

On October 7, Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing over 1,200 people and abducting some 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 18,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of the conflict, according to local authorities.

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UNGA Resolution on Ceasefire Shows Desire for Middle East Conflict to End - State Dept

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza shows that the world wants the Middle East conflict to end, Strip State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"I would think what you can take away from that vote though is that it is clear that the world wants this conflict to end, which is a goal that we share," Miller said.

On Tuesday,153 countries of the 193-strong body, including 17 EU member states, voted in favor of the resolution proposed by Egypt and Mauritania, while 10 countries voted against the measure and 23 abstained.

On October 7, Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing over 1,200 people and abducting some 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 18,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of the conflict, according to local authorities.

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US Congressmen Comer, Jordan Say Will Hold Hunter Biden in Contempt of Congress

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WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer and Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan announced in a statement on Wednesday that they will hold Hunter Biden in contempt of Congress after defying subpoenas to appear for a deposition.

"Hunter Biden today defied lawful subpoenas and we will now initiate contempt of Congress proceedings," the statement said. "We will not provide special treatment because his last name is Biden."

Earlier on Wednesday, Hunter Biden arrived at the US Capitol for his scheduled deposition with the House Oversight and Judiciary committees, but defiantly said that he would only answer questions at a public hearing rather that a closed-door deposition as the committees had requested.

"As our committees were today prepared to depose Hunter Biden, he chose to make a public statement on Capitol Hill instead where he said his father, Joe Biden, was not financially involved in his family's business dealings," the statement said. "Exactly how was Joe Biden involved? Evidence shows Joe Biden with Hunter's business associates and his name was at the center of the family business strategy."

In September, then-US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy launched an impeachment inquiry following probes into alleged criminal activity by the President Joe Biden and his son, Hunter. The Biden family is alleged to have enriched itself through foreign influence peddling and bribery.

Biden has dismissed the accusations against him, arguing that he has never discussed foreign business deals with his son.

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Blair to Visit Latvia, Poland Dec. 15-18, Talk With Local Officials – National Defense

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – Canada's Minister of National Defense and the country's top General Wayne Eyre will travel to Latvia and Poland between December 15-18 to meet local officials and thank Canadian troops deployed under Operations Unifier and Reassurance, the Defense ministry said on Wednesday.

"The Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of National Defence, accompanied by General Wayne Eyre, Chief of the Defence Staff, will visit Latvia from December 15-16, 2023, and then travel to Poland on December 17-18," National Defense said in a statement. "Minister Blair and General Eyre will meet with Latvian and Polish officials, and thank Canadian Armed Forces members deployed abroad for their service."

Blair will meet with Latvian Defence Minister Andris Spruds and several other officials, the statement said, adding that the meeting will aim at enhancing the Canada-Latvia defense relationship, notably to upgrade the Canadian-led NATO battlegroup in the country to a brigade.

The Ministry added that the Canadian officials would visit the Adazi Military Base to meet and thank Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members deployed in Latvia under Operation

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REASSURANCE.
In Poland, Blair and Eyre will hold talks with Polish officials and CAF members currently deployed to train Ukrainian military personnel under Operation UNIFIER, the statement continued.
Operation UNIFIER was launched in 2015 at the request of Ukraine to train its military personnel. Shortly after Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the mission was extended until March 2025. Operation REASSURANCE is Canada's largest overseas mission, through which it contributes to NATO activities in Central and Eastern Europe.

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Pentagon Says Not Conducting Formal Review of Israel's Use of White Phosphorous Shells

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Defense (DoD) is not conducting a formal review of the Amnesty International report about Israel's use of white phosphorous munitions in the conflict in Gaza, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Wednesday.
"While DoD is not conducting a formal review, the Civilian Harm Mitigation Response team will consider the report along with other publicly available information related to civilian harm as they carry out their responsibility to advise senior DoD leaders. We have no further specifics to offer about the report at this time," Ryder said in a statement.
Earlier on Wednesday, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said that 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.
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 Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

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

(corrects lede)
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 Wednesday.
"We don't have full transparency and visibility on what exactly happened up in Lebanon with

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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 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 Crude Oil Stockpiles Drop 2nd Week In Row After 6-Week Build - Energy Agency EIA

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US crude oil stockpiles fell by more than 4 million barrels for a second week in a row, helping lift market prices for the commodity on Wednesday from a seven-week decline that correlated with prior inventory builds.

Crude in storage slid by 4.259 million barrels during the week ended December 8, following through with the 4.632-million-barrel drop noted during the week to December 1, the US Energy Information Administration, or EIA, reported. Industry analysts polled by US media had expected a stockpile decline of just 1.8 million barrels for the just-ended week.

Prior to the two-week decline, crude stocks rose by nearly 30 million barrels over a six-week period.

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Oil prices, meanwhile, rose from six-month lows, responding to the positive stockpiles report from the EIA.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, crude for January delivery was up 83 cents, or 1.2%, to $69.44 per barrel by 11:00 am US Eastern Time (16:00 Greenwich Mean Time). Prior to this, WTI lost nearly $20, or 23%, during a seven-week period since mid-October.

WTI aside, UK-origin Brent crude's most-active February contract was up 92 cents, or 1.3%, to $74.16 per barrel. Like WTI, Brent has lost almost $20, or about 20% in the past seven weeks.

"Concerns around the global economy next year, a weak commitment to output cuts from [producer group] OPEC+ and higher output elsewhere, including record levels in the US, [had been] weighing heavily on [crude] prices into [the] year-end," said Craig Erlam, analyst at online trading platform OANDA.

Also aiding Wednesday's rebound in WTI and Brent was EIA data showing a gasoline stockpile build of just 0.409 million barrels for the week to December 8, versus an expected rise of 1.9 million barrels.

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US Deputy Special Envoy to Iran Says 'Not a Penny' of Restricted $6 Billion Spent

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Special Envoy to Iran Abram Paley said on Wednesday that "not a penny" of the $6 billion of Iranian funds conditionally released in a recent US prisoner exchange deal has been spent.

"As part of this arrangement, we facilitated the transfer of $6 billion in restricted Iranian funds held in South Korea to restricted accounts in Qatar for humanitarian use only. Not a penny of this money has been spent and these funds will not go anywhere anytime soon," Paley testified at a House financial services hearing on Iranian support for terrorism.

The US Treasury's Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes Elizabeth Rosenberg also confirmed at the hearing that "there have been no transfers from the $6 billion dollars held in Qatari financial institutions." She added that there were measures to prevent Iran from diverting the funds to non-humanitarian purposes.

Several representatives challenged their contention that the funds were truly restricted, arguing that its fungibility meant Iran could save $6 billion of funds it currently holds to spend on illegal purposes. On November 30, the House passed the No Funds for Iranian Terrorism Act to block Iran from ever accessing the $6 billion.

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US Senate Could Pass NDAA as Soon as Wednesday - Schumer

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WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The US Senate could pass a finalized version of the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) as soon as Wednesday, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said.

"As soon as later today the Senate will approve our annual defense authorization act," Schumer said during remarks on the Senate floor on Wednesday. "We'll work today to reach a time agreement with Republicans to finish the job on the NDAA as soon as today."

The legislation authorizes more than $874 billion in national defense spending, including hundreds of millions of dollars in aid for Ukraine.

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

Schumer urged the House of Representatives to swiftly pass the legislation as well. However, the House Freedom Caucus said that it opposes the bill due to the clean FISA extension.

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US House Expects Hunter Biden to Come for Deposition After Impeachment Probe Vote - Jordan

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US lawmakers anticipate Hunter Biden will come for a deposition following today's House vote to formalize an impeachment probe into President Joe Biden, House Judiciary Committee chair Jim Jordan said on Wednesday.

"Once we take that vote, we expect him [Hunter Biden] to come in for his interview, for his deposition. And, frankly, we'll also, I think, look at contempt proceedings, as we move forward," Jordan said during a press briefing.

Jordan said that Hunter's lawyer and the White House had previously explained that Hunter couldn't come for a deposition because there has been no formal House vote on an impeachment inquiry.

"Well that's gonna happen today," Jordan added.

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US Senate Republicans More Interested in Holidays Than Tackling Border, Ukraine - Schumer

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Wednesday that Republican lawmakers are more interested in traveling home for the holidays than staying at the Capitol to pass legislation pertaining to border security and Ukraine aid.

"Unfortunately, too many Republicans now seem more interested about flying home for the holidays than sticking around to finish the job," Schumer said during remarks on the Senate floor.

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Republicans should be prepared to stay and work if they truly consider the situation at the US border an emergency, Schumer said.

Congress must swiftly pass a national security supplemental package with Ukraine and Israel aid, as well as pass the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, Schumer said.

Ukraine does not get a “Christmas break” on the battlefield, Schumer added.

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US House Lawmakers Expect to Depose Hunter Biden, Can Have Public Hearing Later – Comer

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – US House Oversight Chairman James Comer on Wednesday said his committee expects Hunter Biden to fully cooperate with a subpoena demanding his closed-door testimony as part of their impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden.

Hunter Biden earlier on Wednesday arrived to the Capitol on the date of his scheduled deposition with the House Oversight and Judiciary Committees, but defiantly stated that he would only answer questions at a public hearing, not at a closed-door deposition as the committees had requested.

“We expect to depose the President's son, and then we will be more than happy to have a public hearing with him,” Comer told reporters when asked for his reaction to Hunter Biden's remarks.

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Trump Weighs Sanctions Relief for N. Korea in Exchange for Nuke Arsenal Freeze - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump is considering a bargain whereby the United States would allow North Korea to preserve but freeze its nuclear arsenal in exchange for sanctions relief, Politico reported on Wednesday.

Trump might be keen on allowing North Korea to preserve its nuclear arsenal stockpiles if he wins a the presidenitla race in 2024, given his view that arms talks with Pyongyang are futile, the report said citing three individuals familiar with the matter.

Trump is eager to achieve an agreement with North-Korea but is not sure yet what form it would take or what it would include, but the former president would likely propose economic sanctions relief and some kind of assistance, the report said.

This would mark a significant change from his first presidential term when Trump demanded a complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea, the report said.

However, Trump might still want to pursue a long-term nuclear disarmament of North Korea, the report said.

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Trump's campaign spokesperson denied the change of stance on North Korea and noted that the sources did not know what they were speaking about nor could they speak for Trump, the report added.

In 2018, Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un signed a joint agreement to de-escalate relations between the United States and North Korea. The two leaders met the following year in Hanoi to continue the negotiations but failed to reach a deal on the issue of US sanctions against North Korea. The relations between the two countries have since remained tense.

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US Supreme Court Says Will Hear January 6 Capitol Riot Appeal Tied to Trump Charges

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court said on Wednesday that it will hear an appeal from a man charged with obstructing an official proceeding for his actions at the US Capitol on January 6, which hold implications for similar charges faced by former US President Donald Trump.

The US Supreme Court granted a petition for a writ of certiorari in an appeal brought by January 6 defendant Joseph Fischer, who is attempting to have the obstruction charge dismissed, an order list said.

The case challenges the obstruction charge, which is rooted in a law passed in the wake of the Enron accounting scandal in 2002. The law specifically criminalizes "corruptly" obstructing an official proceeding, prompting some January 6 defendants to argue that the law was not meant for cases like theirs.

A US district judge ruled that the law does not apply to Fischer and two other January 6 defendants, but a circuit court reversed the decision.

Trump also faces the same charge in his own January 6 criminal case. It could take months for the US Supreme Court to reach a decision in the case, which may allow Trump's lawyers to delay his trial.

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RPT - Hunter Biden Arrives at Capitol Steps, Defies Subpoena for Closed-Door Deposition

(Fixes typo in headline and lede)

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden arrived at US Capitol steps on Tuesday ahead of his scheduled deposition to announce he will not testify in a closed-door meeting but came to acknowledge his "mistakes."

"I am here today to acknowledge that I have made mistakes in my life and wasted opportunities and privileges I was afforded," he told reporters.

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Hunter Biden Says Ready to Testify at Public Hearing to Answer Any 'Legitimate Questions'

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden said on Tuesday that he is ready to answer any "legitimate questions" posed to him by the US House Oversight Committee during a public hearing and not behind closed doors as the subpoena requires him to.

"I'm here to testify at a public hearing today to answer any of the committee's legitimate questions," Biden told reporters.

Following his remarks to the press that he refused to be deposed behind closed doors, Congresswoman Nancy Mace said via X (formerly known as Twitter) that the Oversight Committee will hold Hunter Biden in contempt of Congress.

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Hunter Biden Says No Evidence Joe Biden Involved in His Business

WASHINGTON, December 13 (Sputnik) – Hunter Biden said on Wednesday that no evidence exists that his father, US President Joe Biden, has been somehow involved in his business dealings amid a Congress probe.

Hunter Biden arrived at US Capitol steps ahead of his scheduled deposition to announce he will not testify in a close-door meeting.

"There is no evidence to support the allegations that my father was financially involved in my business because it did not happen," Hunter Biden told reporters on the Hill.

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Hunter Biden Arrives at Capitol Steps, Defies Subpoena for Close-Door Deposition

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