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Journo: US and Israel in 'Quagmire' as Yemen Expands Gaza War Into Regional Conflict

If the US decides to launch direct attacks on Yemeni forces imposing a blockade against Israeli shipping in the Red Sea, it will only make Washington's tenuous situation in the Middle East worse and expand the conflict across the region at a time when the US public is increasingly opposed to such wars, a journalist told Sputnik.

Several major global shipping companies announced that they are to seek alternate routes from the Red Sea after the Yemeni militant group Ansarallah, better known as the Houthi movement, closed it to Israeli cargo traffic, throwing global trade into chaos. In response, the US has mobilized an international task force dubbed Operation Prosperity Guardian to keep the sea lanes open.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon is weighing whether its patrols will be purely defensive in nature or will also include offensive strikes against Ansarallah targets in Yemen, which the group mostly controls after eight years of brutal civil war and Saudi-led military intervention.

Ansarallah's actions, which include capturing several Israel-linked vessels in the area in recent weeks, are in response to Tel Aviv's invasion of Gaza, which has killed nearly 20,000 people and displaced almost the entire population of 2.3 million. The group has also fired ballistic missiles at the southern Israeli port of Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba in the northern Red Sea.

Beirut-based broadcaster and journalist Laith Marouf told Sputnik that the multinational task force assembled by the US includes several European allies but also Bahrain, a small Persian Gulf state that hosts a massive US Navy base, and the Seychelles, an island nation in the Indian Ocean with a coast guard composed of nine small patrol boats used to combat piracy and illegal fishing.

"This is the alliance that the United States is going to face Yemen with to try to allow shipping to go through to the Zionist colony and not make it feel the pain that the Palestinians are feeling with the blockade in Gaza," he said.

"The [recent] attack that the government in Sana'a did on the two ships in the Red Sea was the first attack recorded in any military of a ballistic missile hitting a naval target that is moving at 60-somewhat knots, which was these ships that were moving. So we see now that the Yemenis have actually some of the most advanced land-to-sea missiles in the world.

"Knowing that the American aircraft carrier is now parked on the shorelines of Somalia facing Yemen, they are in the range of these missiles. Probably the Yemenis will not need to hit this aircraft carrier if the United States actually attacks Yemen or any of the sites of launching these missiles from Yemen. The Yemeni forces, all they have to do is sink a few destroyers and that aircraft carrier will scurry running back home because it wouldn't have any protection."

"This is now a dangerous game that the United States is playing, all to defend this Zionist colony. And the American people hearing us right now must understand that the deaths of any American soldiers that are going to come in the next few days will be because the United States

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is defending the Zionist colony and is not defending itself. They will be dying for the sake of Israel," he said.

"Canadian, French, British and American ships will be sinking if the United States or this coalition dares to attack Yemen. Yemen has been under attack for a decade by the United States and its vessels in the region, and even the vessels that were co-operating in the attacks on Yemen - namely the Saudi government and the United Arab Emirates government - have refused to join this coalition. Why? Because their assets will be fried if the United States attacks Yemen. And this is why we're seeing right now: these vessels are each one of them being given a role.

"The Emirates and the Saudis are continuing to allow trade to come through their ports on trucks to Jordan to the Zionist colony, and they're all going to be kept out of this war. In this situation, it's not only that their assets, their oilfields, would be attacked if they join this coalition, but also because they need to continue to be the lifeline of the Zionist colony in terms of trade in the future as this rolls out," Marouf said.

Marouf added that "we will be entering a new stage of this war" if Yemen fires back on the coalition ships because it will trigger wider attacks on US bases in Iraq and Syria by allied militia forces, which have been happening at a somewhat low intensity since early October.

The Axis of Resistance's regional coordination against Israel and its allies "is going to be taught in military schools and strategists' schools for decades to come," Marouf told Sputnik.

"What has been rolling out for the last two and a half months, clearly, the Resistance Axis that includes all these groups in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Yemen and Iran are very coordinated," he said.

"They have all now shared all their capabilities in terms of military and training. So we see units of each one of these components that fought in the different battlefields across the last 15 years in the region. And the technology knowledge on building capabilities has been passed along across this whole region. So now we have a more kind of homogeneous coalition between these groups.

"They all have one thing that they agree on, which is ending American presence in the region and then sovereignty for the peoples. So to see them, how they are playing out right now, each one of them, their own role separately is a brilliant thing to watch. And the United States and Israel are in a quagmire, and the end is clear for everybody to see."

Growing US Public Opposition

He likewise noted that opposition to the Israeli attack on Gaza has continued to grow in the United States, where new protests are happening daily in hundreds of cities and towns, and constituents are pressuring politicians to take a stand against the war.

"For the American voters, it's becoming problematic as we come closer and closer to the elections in the United States. Both parties are championing genocide and the Zionist colony, and the vast majority of Americans do not want to be associated with this genocide and do not want their country to carry the brunt of financing and weaponizing this genocide," he said.

"So what happens in the next election? I think Palestine, just like Vietnam in the 1970s, is going to be one of the decisive things that drive this election and actually the conversation of the United States as a whole. And I hope people of all walks of life take advantage of how Palestine now has exposed all the true lines of power and the limitations of the so-called 'democracy and

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freedoms' that were touted to be given to them and figure out something before the next election. Maybe to push for a third party, if that's even possible at this moment.
"But if the United States is in a regional war that is spilling into a global war before this election, it may be that this election will never happen in the United States. I'm maybe too pessimistic, but I see things from now till next year, if this war keeps on going in the stages that are and how long these stages are taking us, as we see it now, it's taking us two and a half months to get to the stage of real possibility of a regional war. And once this a regional war, how long is it going to take for it to become a global world war? Those are things that may be indicating that all this experiment of democracy in the West is dead."
Israel's Economy in Dire Straits
Marouf noted that Israel was suffering severe economic repercussions due to the war, not just from the recently imposed Yemeni blockade, but also due to the constant bombardments from Gaza, the simmering border war with Hezbollah, and simply due to having mobilized hundreds of thousands of citizens into the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF).
"There are 7 million 'Jewish colonists' in Palestine and already close to a million of them have left. And you know, many of them already have second citizenships, and we heard countries like Portugal all talk about 10,000 Israeli families applying for citizenship. These are the ones that don't have citizenship that are already applying to European countries. And so we have an exit from the Zionist colony on a scale that we haven't seen ever since 1948. And now we also, of course, all the economy of the state is at a total standstill because they have mobilized so many people into the military."
"Ansarullah, the government in Yemen, has been able to shut down all trade, almost 88% of trade has stopped into the [Israeli] ports, even the ones in the Mediterranean. Because remember now, although all the ones that were supposed to go to the Red Sea port in the Aqaba Gulf had to turn around.
"So now there's a delay in an empty space in Israeli ports for the next two weeks. So, the country is in a total standstill and it's now living off the handouts coming from the West. And the American public has an ability to make a difference if they cut these handouts, because this country cannot continue to exist at this moment without that."

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Israel 'Not Prepared' to Face Houthi Gaza Deployment - However 'Rhetorical' the Threat

The war in Gaza has raged since early October, when in response to deadly ground attacks on Israeli border towns by Palestinian militants, Israel launched an all-out assault that has killed an estimated 20,000 people and displaced almost the entire population of 2.3 million. Now, sympathetic regional powers are threatening to get involved.
As Israel's invasion of Gaza rages on, the Yemeni Ansarallah movement, better known as the Houthis, have joined the regional struggle against both Israeli forces and their American allies. Their latest move has been to threaten to dispatch ground forces to Gaza to fight the Israeli

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Defense Forces (IDF) alongside other Palestinian groups like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade.

Sputnik spoke with regional experts about the feasibility of a Yemeni deployment to the Gaza Strip and what the culpability is of the United States, which supports Israel and has launched an international task force to break the Yemeni blockade of the Red Sea to Israeli shipping, in the Gaza conflict continuing and spiraling into a regional war.

Ankara-based security and political analyst Hasan Selim Ozertem told Sputnik that if Ansarallah sent troops to Gaza, however unlikely that is, it would "mean further dispersion of the conflict throughout the Middle Eastern region."

"And this may undermine the regional security further and will not contain the conflict within the borders of Gaza. And this may spill over towards Syria and also to the Red Sea regions."

"Regarding Houthis sending their forces to Gaza, though it is not something possible to do, I suppose, considering the geopolitical dynamics. They need to mobilize the forces and they need to send them via the Red Sea or the Saudi Arabian lands. This is not something possible under current circumstances," he noted.

"So rather than sending troops, I may suppose that there may be some maneuvers to undermine security, as we witnessed in the last couple of weeks, like attacking two vessels carrying oil from the region. So over here, we may also see a further engagement of the coalition forces with the Yemeni Houthis to take control of such conflicts and also sustain security of the traffic flow from the Red Sea through the Suez Canal."

Lorenzo Trombetta, a Beirut-based scholar and analyst specializing in the Middle East, told Sputnik that Ansarallah's threat to send troops to Gaza was "a rhetorical argument used to show muscle" and not an actual threat.

"Israel is of course not prepared to face such a scenario, but, I insist, it is not realistic," Trombetta said.

Mehmet Rakipoglu, a researcher on international affairs at the London-based think tank Dimensions for Strategic Studies, told Sputnik that the Israelis are already overstretched in Gaza, so if Houthi forces made an unexpected appearance it could be decisive.

"If the Houthis carried out their plan, of course it will change the course of hostility in Gaza, because Israel will have to deal with the Houthis. So the focus will be directed at Houthis not just on Gaza, not just on Hamas or Islamic Jihad or any other resistance movements," he said.

"And I am sure that Israel is not ready for this event because the Israeli army was not that eager to launch a ground operation in Gaza. But, somehow, Netanyahu's government convinced them to make it happen. But I think in this strategic calculation, they don't think that the Houthis will make that happen. But if it's happening, most probably Israel will face more challenging threats because the Houthis aren't joking, they are serious. They have been targeting ships carrying anything from or to Israel. So the message is clear," Rakipoglu said.

Rakipoglu explained that Ansarallah has "most concretely" intervened in the Gaza war already, noting that their threatened deployment to Gaza is "a move to challenge the narrative embraced by the United States or Israel."

"It's kind of a threat to both Israel and the US regarding the situation in Gaza. Because the United States is the only country voting against the ceasefires in Gaza. I think if they can send these soldiers to Gaza, of course, it means that there's a regional war," he added.

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“Most probably, the United States will take an action against the Houthis even though they cannot send their army to Gaza. I'm sure that the United States is planning to move against the Houthis,” he said.

Ozertem noted the region of Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) has its own instabilities separate from any US involvement - instabilities the war in Gaza will continue to fan.

“Apart from this, we may underline the responsibility of the United States by blocking the United Nations Security Council resolution invoked by the Secretary-General of the United Nations a couple of weeks ago in case of a ceasefire. Such problems that we observed today could have been avoided, because as the conflict goes on in the region, this undermines regional stability and paves the way for involvement by other actors. This is something expected, not something that was not perceived before.”

Trombetta said the US is by no means the only Western country interested in Red Sea events, either.

“The US shares their quota of responsibility of course, but they are not the sole responsible player for this state of things. The US and UK, together with Israel, intend to revert the Red Sea status quo to prior October 7. In this they are well supported by almost all Western powers,” he said, noting Russia has a similar interest in keeping the sea lanes open, but differs in how it engages with the relevant powers, such as Bahrain, the Saudi monarchy, and Iran.

Rakipoglu said plainly that “of course the United States is responsible for this current escalation, since the United States is the only UN Security Council member that's voting against this ceasefire in Gaza and supports Israel without any humanitarian concern.”

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US Crackdown on Pro-Palestine Organizing Shows ‘Contradiction’ in Foreign Policy Priorities

A recent episode in Congress highlighted a longstanding contradiction in US foreign policy: on the one hand, projecting an open-minded image of Western culture is a major part of US soft power, especially to foreign students on US college campuses; on the other is Washington’s unshakeable support for Israel.

Journalist and political analyst Caleb Maupin told Radio Sputnik’s The Critical Hour on Tuesday that the CIA has long worked to cultivate a “controlled opposition” on the left that would repeat both Western-critical ideas but also defend Western society, whether it was against communism during the Cold War or against “authoritarianism” in the decades since the fall of the Soviet Union.

“This whole thing about the ‘cultural Cold War’ and comparing the early Cold War, which was, you know, the Korean War, McCarthyism, leading into Vietnam, to the late Cold War, which was ultimately the way the Soviet Union was brought down, the color revolutions in 1989 across Eastern Europe, and then eventually the fall of the Soviet Union, was there was a very big shift in how the US presented itself. At the beginning of the Cold War. It was ‘Western democracy and Christianity against the evil commies’, and in the late Cold War, it very much shifted to ‘the

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USA just wants to spread human rights around the world' and a lot of confusing ideological manipulation."

"And you can't underestimate the role of things that don't even seem political, like art galleries and paintings and all of that, right? Coming out of the Great Depression, the school of art that was so popular in the United States was what they called 'social realism.' Go to a post office and look at the murals, you know, it tends to show working-class people, tends to show them a little bit stronger and more muscly than they would be in real life. It tends to show working class people in kind of an optimistic way, people of different races working together, and glorifies the bulk masses of the American people, working hard, creating wealth. That's social realism. And in the 1950s, we understand the CIA argued that that school of social realism was somehow an ideological threat. And so they started funding modern art."

"And we now know the CIA funded Jackson Pollock and did everything they could. You know, this guy who just splattered paint on a canvas, who was a little bit of a leftist, who'd been around the Communist Party in the 1930s - but he made this art that had no shapes or images, and it was just kind of painting splatter on a canvas. And the CIA thought, well, this is what we want to spread around the world. And they teamed up with the Rockefeller think tanks to make it popular. And you would think that that has no political value, right? I mean, who cares that the paintings you're looking at - are they people, are they splattered images - but it did have political value: it was disorienting, especially to the kind of intellectual circles where the Soviet Union had drawn great support in previous times," Maupin explained.

"During McCarthyism, it was, you know, anything that was left-wing or socialist was viewed with suspicion. The US moved in a very, very right wing direction. It wasn't just a crackdown on communism, there was a big crackdown on the LGBT community, they banned any gay person from having a government job. There were strict censorship laws in the media, etc. And it was kind of this right-wing conservative crackdown on the alleged left-wing communists that were everywhere."

"Well, you know, starting in the mid-fifties, we saw a huge effort by the CIA not to push things in a rightward direction, but to push them in a left-wing direction that they could control. And that's what the Congress for Cultural Freedom Program of the CIA was about. It was about finding leftists and socialists who were not in favor of the Soviet Union, who would support their regime-change interventions around the world, and would repeat their propaganda against the socialist countries. They found a way that you could be a leftist, you could be a critic of US society, a critic of American culture, a critic of militarism, but also be on their side when it mattered," Maupin said.

"And we also know about how later in the 1960s, you had Project MKULTRA, which was the CIA's drug program, in which they worked to flood college campuses and other areas where you'd find dissidents with hallucinogenic drugs. They had experimented with LSD and other drugs as potential mind-control vehicles, and throughout the 1960s, there were big sections of the population that were going out and protesting and such. We know that due to the efforts of the CIA, a lot of hallucinogenic drugs were distributed in those circles and a lot of lives were really damaged by the widespread use of hallucinogens. I mean, you read about, you know, Google 'Operation Midnight Climax', it was called, where they just walked through San Francisco dropping LSD into random peoples' drinks, many people had no idea it was going to

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happen, they just started hallucinating. I mean, this was some pretty dangerous stuff they were doing to the American people."

Maupin also noted how the CIA has worked hard to co-opt elements of the intelligentsia, including journalists and academics, including gaining control over the American Newspaper Guild in the late 1960s. However, that practice never disappeared, and recent events revealed a deep contradiction in US interests on college campuses after the US Congress grilled the heads of several leading US universities over growing pro-Palestine sentiments on their campuses.

"In Zbigniew Brzezinski's book - he was the director of national security for the Carter administration, one of the big strategists of the late Cold War - in his book 'The Grand Chessboard', about how to defeat Russia, he spends a lot of time talking about how important Harvard University and MIT and schools like that are, because people from around the world go and study at those universities and through that process are cultivated to like the United States, become friendly allies of the United States, perhaps business partners of the United States, when they go back to their home country," Maupin explained. "And he specifically talks about the role that these Ivy League institutions play."

"Part of that - you know, a lot of those countries that people are coming from are Muslim countries or are countries where people are not as supportive of Israel as they are over here. And part of the role that those schools play is they show people that the United States is a much more open and tolerant society than detractors of the United States would like to believe. And also, they work very, very hard to present an image of the United States that isn't particularly accurate. You know, Harvard is a lot more open-minded, there's a lot more different ideas floating around on the Harvard campus than there are in middle America. But it's very much about creating an image of the United States as an open, free society."

"So, having people at Harvard University who speak against Israel and support the Palestinians actually kind of helps the United States in the long term, but Israel certainly doesn't approve, especially at a time like this, where they're just going after Gaza and they want all the support they can get," Maupin said. "And this shows kind of a conflict of interest. On the one hand, those Ivy League schools are about courting people from around the world and getting them to see that America has room for different ideas, etc. But at the same time, you know, there are a lot of pro-Israel people in the United States who say, especially at Harvard, especially at MIT, especially at Yale and Princeton, we want everyone supporting Israel as loudly as they can. This is a contradiction."

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Uranus' Rings on Display in Stunning New Photo by NASA's Webb Telescope

While NASA's James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) was designed for peering deep into the early universe billions of light-years away, it has also been able to deliver stunning photos of objects in our own solar system using its infrared detectors.

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Using the infrared spectrum of light, which is invisible to the human eye and emitted by heat transfer, the space telescope was able to capture images of features on and around Uranus rarely seen.

In fact, the images released on Wednesday is a much higher-resolution photo from the same set as that released in April, which had just two colors.

"The JWST gives us the ability to look at both Uranus and Neptune in a completely new way because we have never had a telescope of this size that looks in the infrared," Naomi Rowe-Gurney, a postdoctoral research scientist and solar system ambassador for the Webb space telescope at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, told US media.

"The infrared can show us new depths and features that are difficult to see from the ground with the atmosphere in the way and invisible to telescopes that look in visible light like Hubble," she added.

Uranus and Neptune, the two outermost planets that were unknown to the premodern world, are cold "ice giants" similar to the larger gas giants Jupiter and Saturn, but containing more ices and organic elements like oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, and sulfur. Because of their extreme distance, they have rarely been studied directly, with the unmanned Voyager 2 probe making humankind's first close-up visit to both worlds in 1986 and 1989, respectively.

Voyager 2's cameras snapped highly illustrative photos of the two worlds in the visible spectrum, but subsequent studies by telescopes on Earth and in Earth orbit, like the JWST and Hubble, have revealed further hidden details.

One such discovery made in 2007 was the Zeta ring, a faint inner ring that is easily visible in the JWST photos.

Nine of Uranus' 27 known moons can also be seen as bright blue and white spheres in the photo. Like the rings, the moons orbit Uranus along its equator, which is tilted 98 degrees thanks to a massive planetary impact early in its life that knocked the planet on its side.

Still, Uranus has polar ice caps, which are visible at the center of the planet in the photo. Uranus takes 84 Earth years to orbit the sun, and is approaching its next solstice in 2028, meaning the icy poles are getting more sun than usual. Meanwhile, the far side of the planet is in the middle of a 21-year-long winter.

Another zoomed-out photo in the set is labeled and shows some of the outermost moons.

NASA has planned a specialized spacecraft mission to Uranus, which the US space agency hopes to launch by 2030, seeing the bizarre world as "an exoplanet in our own solar system."

However, the crowdsourced naming effort hasn't gone so well.

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"If the Houthis carried out their plan, of course it will change the course of hostility in Gaza, because Israel will have to deal with the Houthis. So the focus will be directed at Houthis not just on Gaza, not just on Hamas or Islamic Jihad or any other resistance movements," said Mehmet Rakipoglu, a researcher on international affairs at the London-based think tank Dimensions for Strategic Studies.

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Sputnik spoke with several experts about the feasibility of a Yemeni deployment to the Gaza Strip and what the culpability is of the United States in it becoming a regional conflict.

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WHO Declares JN.1 COVID 'Variant of Interest' as Reported Cases Spike

The omicron subvariant was previously classified under its parent strain, BA.2.86 (or the "Pirola" variant). Pirola, which had multiple mutations compared to the omicron variant XBB.1.5, was targeted in the updated COVID vaccine introduced in September.

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared on Tuesday the omicron strain subvariant JN.1 a variant of interest "due to its rapidly increasing spread."

JN.1, which first appeared in the US in September and has evolved from the variant BA.2.86, or the Pirola variant, has been found in at least 41 countries across the globe. However, the health agency has noted the risk to the public remains low as traditional COVID vaccines still offer protection.

At present, there is no evidence the subvariant can cause an illness any more severe than what COVID patients are already experiencing.

However, health authorities warn that due to its rapid spread, the subvariant could cause an increase in cases this winter. In early November, the variant made up about 3% of all COVID cases globally, but that percentage rose to 27.1% a month later. It is also the fastest-growing variant in the US and has accounted for 21% of infections in the two-week period ending December 9.

The WHO's announcement comes after the collective number of visits to the emergency room in the US for COVID, influenza, and respiratory syncytial virus reached its highest level since February.

"It's coming at the same exact time in which our social networks are expanding as we travel and visit with people we don't normally see," said Katelyn Jetelina, an epidemiologist who publishes a public health newsletter.

"I don't think it means we need to cancel our holidays," Jetelina added. "It certainly isn't going to be a tsunami like we saw with omicron. It's just less than optimal timing."

A "variant of interest" is not the highest level that a subvariant can fall under, though. The WHO classifies "variants of concern" as being the highest level, followed by "variant of interest," and then at the bottom of the list is "variants under monitoring."

"We know that the COVID virus continues to change. And even in the last few weeks, it has changed again," Dr. Mandy Cohen, the director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), told an American news network.

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"The good news is that, that new change to the virus...one, we can still pick it up with our tests. Two, our treatments are still effective against that change. And importantly, the updated COVID vaccine that you can get right now is still good coverage for those changes – we've seen that in the lab," Cohen added.

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Colorado Supreme Court's Ballot Ban on Trump Bound to Damage Biden's Re-election Bid

On Tuesday, the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that former President Donald Trump would not appear on the state's Republican presidential primary ballot. The court decided that Trump was ineligible under the US Constitution's insurrection clause; Section 3 of the 14th Amendment. It is the first time such a ruling has been made.

The backlash from the decision will not affect Trump's campaign, but it will greatly affect President Joe Biden and other Democrats, Daniel Lazare, an author and journalist told Sputnik. Republicans will view the decision as a partisan effort to remove Trump from the ballot, and will see such a ruling as an attempt to "steal" the presidential election in 2024. That same Republican viewpoint was also the catalyst for the January 6 US capitol attack which has landed Trump in this most recent legal dilemma.

Lazare joined Sputnik's Political Misfits on Wednesday, and shared his thoughts on what the impact of such an unprecedented event could be.

"I expect damage to come to the Biden campaign," said Lazare.

"I mean, I think the blowback from this will be tremendous," he continued. "I think that for many voters and certainly for most Republican voters this to them is the final proof that the Democrats are weaponizing the judicial system in order to essentially deny and to knock Trump out before he even has a chance of, you know, appearing on the ballot."

"To the Republicans, it seems that Democrats are trying to manipulate the system to steal the election, to deprive them of their democratic right to take part in an election. And they just see this as the final nail in the coffin. And in the course that this Supreme Court could undo the damage by overturning the Colorado decision. But still, I think that the Democrats will wind up severely hurt by this decision," Lazare concluded.

Lazare agreed when asked if this could be seen as a partisan issue, considering the fact that the Colorado Supreme Court has seven justices all appointed by Democratic governors.

"In Texas the vice governor, or whatever he's called, has called for removing Joe Biden's name on the ballot," said Lazare in reference to Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick's suggestion to take Biden off of the state's primary ballot.

"If this decision stands, there'll be a lot of support for that kind of counter move. And it could happen in many places across the country, at which point you will no longer have an election," he added. "Instead, we'll have something close to a civil war."

"And I think that Democrats will regret this. The Democrats have been trying to block Trump via the judiciary since 2017. And the effect has only been to make Trump stronger and themselves

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weaker. This is the culmination of a half dozen years of what is really a failed political strategy," Lazare concluded.

When asked why Colorado's Supreme Court did not base their ruling off of the criminal case in Georgia, where Trump and others were indicted on charges of illegally conspiring to change the election results in that state, Lazare said: "It's about insurrection".

"That was a big issue in 1868. Yes. Yes. Just three years earlier," said Lazare, most likely referring to the US Civil War that lasted from 1861 until 1865. "Yes, that's right, the insurrection had been defeated."

"And I think what happened on January 6th does qualify as an insurrection, but it is based on an extremely narrow and parched reading of the Constitution, because the Constitution supposedly is about political democracy and giving Americans rights not only free speech, but rights to elect their government. And if Donald Trump, who at this point is the leading candidate in terms of the polls, is denied a place in the ballot then Americans have been deprived of their democratic rights to choose their own leaders. And I think that is extraordinary," he said.

The host of Political Misfits, John Kiriakou, then emphasized that the decision made by the Colorado Supreme Court was not unanimous, seeing as the vote had been 4 - 3. He added that the decision will make Biden look desperate; as if the president believes the only way he can win is if Trump is removed from the ballot.

"One problem is that America does not have a single presidential election. It has 50 separate elections. And responsibility for those elections is really unclear," responded Lazare. "So if state judges start playing games about who can appear on the ballot, then we're going to have complete anarchy. We won't have anything approximating a national election. It's extraordinarily dangerous."

"I just think these Democrats are so foolish and they are hurting themselves because they're confirming the widely held suspicion that they are manipulating the courts in order to decide the election ahead of time before the voters get a chance to vote," he added.

Kiriakou then pointed to a recent poll that showed Trump to be increasingly popular among Republicans when compared to his polls in July. In a similar poll, it showed Trump holding support of 67% of Republican and GOP-leaning voters, while Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former governor and ambassador Nikki Haley are tied with 11% support.

"I think that Nikki Haley, who has done a fairly good job - I think everyone agrees on the campaign trail - is trying to raise her profile nationally. And I mean, I don't know what the consequences will be, but it could be some kind of plum job in a Trump administration, or it could be that she'll be really well-positioned in 2028," said Lazare.

"[DeSantis'] campaign has collapsed or is collapsing as we speak," added Lazare. "And so I think in other words, Americans have had a chance to take a good look at DeSantis and they decided they don't like what they see."

The ruling made by Colorado's top court on Tuesday is unprecedented. This is the first time in the country's history that a state supreme court has disqualified a person from holding office under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment. The reasoning behind that decision was drawn from his conduct during the January 6 storming of the Capitol.

Trump will appeal the decision to the US Supreme Court, a court which holds a conservative majority, and three justices who were appointed by him. In accordance with procedure, the court has stayed the ruling until January 4, or until the US Supreme Court rules on the case.

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Japan Court Orders Okinawa to Approve of Runway Plan for US Marine Corps

The ruling comes at a time when an alliance between Japan and the US seems increasingly important as tensions between the US and China grows.

On Wednesday, the Fukuoka High Court Naha branch ordered Okinawa to approve the central government's construction plan for a key US base.

The Marine Corps Air Station Futenma base, which is located in the densely populated city of Ginowan, is to be moved to the Henoko district in Nago—an offshore location. However, the seabed at this site is too soft for reconstructing the base.

The central government then applied for permission from Okinawa to reinforce the land. Okinawa rejected the request and suspended the landfill work. The plan could potentially damage the environment, and is estimated to cost 930 billion yen ($6.5 billion), and will take 12 years to finish.

Opposition and protests from residents have also slowed the process.

Wednesday's decision made by the presiding judge at the Naha Branch, Miura Takashi, will move forward a construction plan that has been suspended amid legal proceedings for years.

The branch told Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki to improve the plan within three weekdays after receiving a copy of the ruling. If Tamaki fails to do so, then Tetsuo Saito, the land minister, will approve the plans by proxy.

Saito filed this latest lawsuit in October after Tamaki failed to clarify whether or not he would accept the order to move ahead with the plans. In response to the ruling, Tamaki has said that the the decision undermines the will of the island's residents.

The governor can still appeal the decision, but the local government will be unable to stop the constriction unless the top court overturns the decision completely.

During the trial, the central government argued that the construction project will protect the country, and Okinawa's rejection will undermine public interests.

Okinawa, the site of a major WWII battle, is home to more than half of the 50,000 American troops based in Japan under the bilateral security pact. Tamaki has called for a reduction of US military presence in Okinawa, and has also demanded the immediate closure of the Futenma base as well as the complete ejection of the new base plans.

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US Joint Chiefs Chairman Speaks to Chinese Counterpart for First Time - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Brown held a video teleconference with his Chinese counterpart on Thursday, marking their first contact since Brown took office.

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"Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. CQ Brown, Jr., spoke with People's Liberation Army of China Chief of the Joint Staff Department Gen. Liu Zhenli by video teleconference today. This was the first time the leaders spoke since Gen. Brown became Chairman," Joint Staff spokesperson Navy Capt. Jereal Dorsey said in a statement.

The military officials addressed the importance of cooperation to responsibly manage competition, avoid miscalculations, and maintain direct lines of communications, the statement added.

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Интерес и спрос на встречи с Санта-Клаусом в США растет после пандемии – ассоциация

ВАШИНГТОН, 21 дек - РИА Новости, Дмитрий Злодорев. Опасения в том, что после пандемии люди будут бояться приглашать Санта-Клауса на Рождество, не оправдались, и американцы проявляют большой интерес и здоровый спрос на общение с ним, сказал в интервью РИА Новости глава ассоциации Санта-Клаусов Стивен Арнольд.

"В нашей организации мы опасались по поводу того, что после пандемии люди будут бояться устраивать личные встречи и фотографироваться. Но сейчас очевидно, что в последние два года существенно увеличился спрос на общение с Сантой. В результате у нас даже ощущается дефицит "помощников Санты", чтобы мы могли удовлетворить все запросы", - сказал Арнольд, который является президентом Международного Братства Настоящих Бородатых Санта-Клаусов.

Он выразил уверенность в том, что главные рождественские традиции в США остаются неизменными. По его словам, люди продолжают покупать подарки и наряжаться в костюм Санты.

Арнольд поделился светлыми чувствами, которые он испытывает, исполняя роль Санты и даря тем самым людям радость.

"Да, это серьезная работа. Но я наслаждаюсь ею, когда вижу радостные лица детей и взрослых, когда чувствую, что присутствие Санты делает всех и все вокруг светлее. Я не сомневаюсь, что стал лучше, потому что нашел образ, приносящий любовь и радость в мою жизнь каждый день", - сказал он.

При этом глава братства Санта-Клаусов добавил, что данное хобби приносит неплохой доход. Он также признался, что верит в миссию и философию Санты – приносить радость, быть щедрым и сострадательным.

"Конечно, я понимаю, что получу подарки, которые сам же и приготовил, но все же оставляю чулки, которые нужно наполнить, и подарки, которые следует развернуть. Главным образом, я делаю это для того, чтобы увидеть воодушевление окружающих меня людей", - признался он.

Арнольд поделился, что у членов его братства есть постоянные русские клиенты, поэтому некоторые американские Санта-Клаусы, которых приглашают на их мероприятия, время от времени становятся русскими Дедами Морозами. Он также выразил уверенность в том, что и Дед Мороз, и Санта-Клаус имеют много общего.

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"Я считаю, что оба они, как и другие персонажи, связаны со святым Николаем и историями, как он помогал людям. Конечно, в каждой стране у них есть свои особенности, но тем не менее, они являют собой общее настроение людей, показывают, как хорошо верить в Санта-Клауса", - считает Арнольд.

Международного Братства Настоящих Бородатых Санта-Клаусов, согласно информации на официальном сайте, является крупнейшей в мире ассоциацией профессиональных Сант и их помощников, которая насчитывает свыше 2200 участников.

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Americans Show Healthy Demand for Santa Claus Visits After Pandemic - Association Chief

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - An increasing number of Americans continue to show interest and a healthy demand for Santa Claus visits after the end of the COVID pandemic, International Brotherhood of Real Bearded Santas (IBRBS) President Stephen Arnold told Sputnik.

"We've seen substantial growth and a healthy demand for Santa and Mrs. Claus in the last two years, with almost a lack of sufficient number of Santa Helpers to fulfill the need," Arnold said.

Arnold pointed out that most of the major Christmas traditions in the United States remain intact and Americans continue purchasing gifts and using Santa to celebrate.

Arnold also said he experienced warm feelings while continuing portraying Santa Claus and making people joyful during the holidays.

"While it is hard work, I very much enjoy performing and watching the faces of children and adults in awe when the presence of Santa brightens the entire room," he said.

Arnold also said there is no doubt he has become a better person for portraying Santa Claus, which has brought love and joy into his own life.

In addition to providing joy to oneself and others, the hobby can bring some financial rewards as well, he said.

Arnold emphasized that he strongly believes in Santa's philosophy and mission of showing generosity and compassion to others as well as spreading joy by providing presents.

"Of course, I receive gifts from myself, but I still leave out stockings to fill and presents to unwrap, mostly to see the excitement in the people around me," he said.

Arnold said that many IBRBS members have Russian clients and portray "Ded Moroz," which translates to "Grandfather Frost."

Both Santa Claus and Grandfather Frost come from the same prototype and have a lot in common, Arnold said.

"I think that all the main characters emanate from St. Nicholas and the stories about his life and interactions he had. Certainly, each country or ethnic group has carved out a bit of personalization for their character, but they still represent the general thoughts and good nature of what it means to believe in Santa," Arnold added.

The IBRBS is the world's largest organization of professional Santa Clauses, Mrs. Clauses and their associates. The brotherhood is comprised of 2,200 members and provides them with

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scholarships and educational opportunities.

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Ex-DOJ Prosecutor Says Colorado Supreme Court's Ruling on Trump 'Very Flawed'

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Colorado Supreme Court's decision to remove former President Donald Trump from the state's 2024 election ballot is very flawed and not expected to hold up in higher courts, ex-US Justice Department prosecutor Ronald Sievert told Sputnik.

On Tuesday night, the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that Trump is disqualified from the 2024 Republican primary ballot due to his role in the events on January 6 at the US Capitol, citing the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution. The amendment restricts people who are engaged in insurrection from holding public office.

"I believe those conclusions are very flawed," Sievert said on Wednesday. "I also think there is serious debate as to whether what happened on Jan 6th was an 'insurrection' as that word was meant in the Constitution-it was written after a civil war against the Federal Government- as opposed to a big riot."

Sievert added that he would not expect politically balanced higher courts to uphold this decision.

Siever explains that the Colorado Supreme Court's opinion concluded that Trump intended a violent attack on the capitol while ignoring that the former US president said "march peacefully and patriotically." The court also ignored that the day before the January 6 riot, Trump offered to have the National Guard available, which would not be something to consider had he wanted a violent attack on the US Capitol, Sievert said.

The Trump campaign described the Colorado Supreme Court's ruling as being a "completely flawed decision" and said they will appeal.

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Trump Asks Supreme Court to Delay Hearing Case on 2020 Election Immunity Claim - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump is urging the US Supreme Court to reject a request by Special Counsel Jack Smith to decide quickly on his claim to presidential immunity in the 2020 election subversion case, according to a court filing by his attorneys.

Last week, Special Counsel Jack Smith asked the Supreme Court to rule on whether Trump is immune from criminal prosecution on charges of plotting to overthrow the 2020 election. Smith said it was of imperative public importance that Trump's claims of immunity be resolved by the Supreme Court so that his trial can proceed as quickly as possible.

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"The petition for writ of certiorari before judgment should be denied," Trump's legal team said in a court filing in response on Wednesday.

The filing challenged the special counsel's plea for "extraordinary haste," saying that such matters should be decided with caution and deliberation, not at "breakneck speed."

Trump's attorneys in the filing also criticized what the special counsel called the "public interest," saying Smith was acting out of "partisan interest" by trying to ensure that Trump will be subjected to a months-long criminal trial at the height of a presidential campaign in which he is the "leading candidate" and the "only serious opponent" of the current administration.

Trump's trial is set to begin on March 4, 2024, but legal appeals are threatening to delay the proceedings. Trump's lawyers have been seeking to postpone his trial until after the 2024 election.

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Alex Saab Arrives at Venezuela's Miraflores Palace, Maduro Says 'Justice Has Triumphed'

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro greeted Alex Saab at the Miraflores Palace in Caracas following his release from US custody.

"Justice has triumphed," Maduro said during a joint press conference with Saab from the Miraflores Palace on Wednesday.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) -

NEW WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The United States and its partners announced revisions to the price cap compliance regime for Russian oil to further complicate efforts by exporters to circumvent it, according to a joint statement released by the US Treasury Department on Wednesday.

* The United States imposed Russia-related sanctions on four entities and one vessel, the Treasury Department said.

* Slovakia will not follow the example of countries that have decided to freeze Russian property, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico said

US-VENEZUELA PRISONER EXCHANGE

* The United States and Venezuela reached an agreement to secure the release of ten Americans and 20 "political prisoners" in a deal involving several other people as well, senior Biden administration officials said on Wednesday.

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* A senior Biden administration official said that the US president made an extremely difficult decision to release a Nicolas Maduro ally - Alex Saab to Venezuela in exchange for ten Americans and the fugitive Fat Leonard, who has been seeking asylum in Venezuela.

SITUATION IN RED SEA

* The EU Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) operation Atalanta will assist the United States in protecting the marine navigation in the Red Sea, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Wednesday.
* Operation Prosperity Guardian led by the United States and its allies is in place, and military ships have already been deployed to the region to protect commercial vessels from attacks by Yemen's Houthis, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.

ISRAEL INVASION OF GAZA

* The death toll from Israel's bombardments of the Gaza Strip since October 7 has exceeded 20,000 people, including more than 8,000 children, and more than 52,000 have been injured, the Palestinian enclave's government said on Wednesday.
* Palestine has appealed to the International Criminal Court (ICC) regarding Israel's military actions in Gaza, Palestinian Ambassador to Austria Salah Abdel-Shafi told Sputnik.
* The United States is likely to insist on a humanitarian pause instead of a ceasefire in Gaza during the UN Security Council meeting scheduled for Wednesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
* General mobilization is being carried out in northern Yemen to send soldiers to Gaza if there is such an opportunity, member of the political office of Yemen's Ansar Allah rebel movement (also known as Houthi) Houtham Assad told Sputnik.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The United States is nearly out of money to support Ukraine and out of time to approve more assistance, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.
* Ukraine has lost up to 250 soldiers (killed and wounded) in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* The peace plan promoted by Ukraine is absurd as it is trying to look for settlement options without the participation of Russia and this has no potential for results, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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US, Partners to Launch 2024 Pollution Monitor Mission Over Southern Hemisphere - VP Harris

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - NASA is collaborating with South Korea and its European Space Agency (ESA) partners to launch an orbital mission next year to map air pollution and other global climate change data over the Southern Hemisphere, Vice President Kamala Harris announced on Wednesday.

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"Next year we will launch a satellite to collect air pollution data across the Southern Hemisphere," Harris told a meeting of the National Space Council at the White House.

The mission will enable policy makers across South America and Africa to access important data on climate change, air pollution and other environmental problems, Harris said.

On Monday, NASA launched its tropospheric emissions monitoring instrument as a payload on Intelsat 40E on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket to provide unprecedented resolution of monitoring major air pollutants – down to four square miles over North America.

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US Lawmakers Urge White House to Abandon 'Failed' Russian Oil Price Cap - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - A group of House Republican lawmakers sent a letter on Wednesday to White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, urging the Biden administration to abandon its failed price cap on Russian oil in favor of comprehensive energy sanctions.

"We are writing to urge the Biden administration to target Moscow's hard currency revenues by abandoning the failed oil price cap scheme and imposing comprehensive energy sanctions on Russia," the letter said

The oil price cap is an expression of resignation by the United States that it would be unwilling to enforce primary and secondary sanctions to cut off Russia's energy trade, the letter said.

The lawmakers support additional sanctions by the US Treasury Department on both Russian financial institutions and third-country entities that purchase Russian oil, the letter said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said that Russia does not recognize the Group of Seven price cap on Russian oil out of national interests.

The letter was signed by US Congressmen Patrick McHenry, Andy Barr, Blaine Luetkemeyer and French Hill.

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Every Legal Option Must Be Explored to Remove Trump From California Ballot - Lt. Governor

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - California Lieutenant Governor Eleni Kounalakis on Wednesday wrote to Secretary of State Shirley Weber demanding that she explore "every legal option" to remove former President Donald Trump from the state's 2024 ballot.

"Based on the Colorado Supreme Court's ruling in Anderson v. Griswold (2023 CO 63), I urge you [Weber] to explore every legal option to remove former President Donald Trump from California's 2024 presidential ballot," Kounalakis wrote in her letter.

Kounalakis said she was prompted by the ruling to conclude that Trump is ineligible to appear on the state ballot as a presidential candidate due to his alleged involvement in the so-called

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insurrection on January 6, 2021. Kounalakis also said Colorado's decision could serve as the basis for a similar decision in California.

"California must stand on the right side of history," the letter said. "The constitution is clear: you must be 40 years old and not be an insurrectionist."

The White house has said on its website that the US Constitution lists three qualifications for the presidency - the president must be at least 35 years old, be a natural born citizen and must have lived in the United States for at least 14 years.

On Tuesday night, the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that Trump is disqualified from the 2024 Republican primary ballot due to his role in the events on January 6 at the US Capitol, citing the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution. The amendment restricts people who are engaged in insurrection from holding public office.

The Trump campaign described the Colorado Supreme Court's ruling as being a "flowed decision" and said they will appeal.

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UNSC Delays Vote on Gaza Aid to Thursday to 'Allow Additional Time for Diplomacy'

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) – The UN Security Council has postponed a vote on a resolution that calls for boosting humanitarian aid for Gaza until Thursday morning to allow additional time for diplomacy, UNSC President Jose De La Gasca said on Wednesday.

Ecuador holds the presidency of the council for the month of December.

"The Security Council has agreed to continue negotiations today to allow additional time for diplomacy. The presidency will schedule adoption for tomorrow morning," the Ecuadorian diplomat said.

The UN Security Council was originally set to vote on the Arab-sponsored resolution on Monday. The vote has since been pushed back several times in an effort to avoid another veto by the US.

"We believe today giving a little bit space for additional diplomacy could yield positive results, and we are going to be optimistic trying to do that," UAE ambassador to the UN Lana Nusseibeh told reporters.

Nusseibeh pointed out that discussions are going on at the highest levels, adding that "diplomacy takes time."

The UAE envoy expressed confidence that the resolution would be adopted.

"I am optimistic, but if this fails, then we will continue to keep trying because we have to keep trying. There is too much suffering on the ground," she said.

Nusseibeh also stressed that the ongoing discussions between Egypt, Qatar and Hamas did not impact the decision to delay the vote. "They have not been raised in Council deliberations," she said.

The draft resolution calls for a halt to hostilities in Gaza to allow for urgently needed aid deliveries to flow in via all land, sea and air routes. It also asks the UN Secretary-General to create a monitoring mechanism for aid to ensure that no humanitarian relief is provided to

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parties to the conflict.

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UPDATE - US Reaches Deal With Venezuela to Release 10 Americans, 20 Venezuelan Prisoners - Official

(Edits para 3 with clarification from Justice Department)
WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States and Venezuela reached a deal to secure the release of 10 Americans and 20 "political prisoners" in a deal involving several other people as well, senior Biden administration officials said on Wednesday.
"As a result of this deal there will be 10 Americans coming home today… along with Fat Leonard [Francis], and Venezuela will be releasing 20 political prisoners, and they will also be releasing Mr. [Roberto] Abdul as well," one senior administration official said.
In addition to the 20 political prisoners and Abdul, Venezuela will suspend three arrest warrants, another senior administration official said. Although the administration official initially claimed that Venezuela would extradite Francis to the US, the Justice Department later prompted them to clarify that he was "arrested and returned to the United States."
Six of the Americans released under the deal were declared wrongfully detained, the official said. US President Joe Biden is granting clemency to Alex Saab as part of the deal, which the US hopes will place Venezuela on a more democratic path, the official said.
Saab was arrested in Cape Verde on a US warrant for money laundering in 2020, while traveling to Iran on a humanitarian mission for the Venezuelan government. Venezuela claims that he was kidnapped by the US government and has since sought his release.
Francis, a Malaysian national, allegedly bribed US Navy sailors for classified material. Francis escaped home confinement and fled to Venezuela.
Roberto Abdul, an organizer of the October opposition primaries in Venezuela, was arrested on treason charges in early December.

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US Focused on Securing Release of Other Americans Worldwide After Venezuela Deal - Biden

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is focused on securing the release of Americans detained in countries around the world, US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday, following the announcement of a prisoner release deal with Venezuela.
"Even as we celebrate the return of these Americans, we also remain deeply focused on securing the release of the hostages in Gaza and wrongfully detained Americans around the world, including Evan Gershkovich and Paul Whelan, who are being detained in Russia, and Americans in Afghanistan, Syria, and China," Biden said in a statement.

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Earlier on Wednesday, the Biden administration announced a deal with Venezuela to return 10 detained Americans and release 20 political prisoners.

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Humanitarian, Human Rights Groups Urge Pentagon to Protect Civilians in Gaza - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - More than a dozen humanitarian and human rights groups on Wednesday sent a letter to US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin urging him to take steps to protect civilians in Gaza amid Israel's military invasion of the Palestinian enclave.

"The undersigned humanitarian, human rights, and protection of civilians organizations write to express our deep concern regarding civilian harm in US-supported Israeli military operations in Gaza and request urgent steps to protect the more than two million civilians suffering under relentless bombardment and starvation there," the letter said.

The letter was signed by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International USA, Refugees International and the Center for Civilians in Conflict, among others.

The letter was also sent to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

The letter urges the United States to oppose the targeting of civilians, withhold assistance that would facilitate violations of international humanitarian law, refrain from transferring explosive weapons to Israel and reject forcible displacement of Palestinian civilians into so-called safe zones.

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Maduro Still Faces Pending US Charges, No Shift on Sanctions Relief - US Official

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – A senior US administration official said on Wednesday that President Nicolas Maduro is still facing pending drug trafficking charges in the United States and sanctions remain on Venezuela, despite a new prisoner exchange deal.

"Nicolas Maduro is still facing pending charges in the United States, that remains in place, and the sanctions relief has not shifted," the official told a press briefing.

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Nuland, Top Jordanian Officials Discussed Accelerating Aid Into Gaza - US State Dept.

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WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Acting US Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and top Jordan officials during meetings in Amman this week discussed a joint commitment to enhance the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza, the State Department said on Wednesday.

"Nuland traveled to Amman, Jordan on December 17-18 to meet with senior Jordanian officials, including Prime Minister [Bisher] Khasawneh," the department said in a press release. "She discussed bilateral and regional priorities, including the shared US-Jordanian commitment to accelerate humanitarian aid into Gaza and enhance the protection of civilians."

Furthermore, Nuland visited Baghdad and Erbil, Iraq, on December 19-20, engaging in discussions on bilateral relations and US priorities in the region, with a particular focus on addressing current security challenges, the statement said.

The statement added that during Nuland's visit to Erbil, she engaged in discussions with Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officials, political party leaders, and interfaith representatives.

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Biden Made 'Extremely Difficult Decision' to Release Saab in Venezuela Deal – US Official

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – A senior US administration official said on Wednesday that US President Joe Biden made an "extremely difficult decision" to release Nicolas Maduro ally Alex Saab to Venezuela in exchange for 10 Americans and the fugitive Fat Leonard who has been seeking asylum in Venezuela.

"In order to make this exchange, the President had to make the extremely difficult decision to offer something that the Venezuelan counterpart had actively sought. And he made the decision to grant clemency to Alex Saab with a pending trial for money laundering, and allow his return to Venezuela in what was essentially an exchange of 10 Americans and a fugitive from justice for one person returned to Venezuela," the official said.

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US Reaches Deal With Venezuela to Release 10 Americans, 20 Venezuelan Prisoners - Official

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States and Venezuela reached a deal to secure the release of 10 Americans and 20 "political prisoners" in a deal involving several other people as well, senior Biden administration officials said on Wednesday.

"As a result of this deal there will be 10 Americans coming home today… along with Fat Leonard [Francis], and Venezuela will be releasing 20 political prisoners, and they will also be releasing Mr. [Roberto] Abdul as well," one senior administration official said.

In addition to the 20 political prisoners and Abdul, Venezuela will suspend three arrest warrants, another senior administration official said. Venezuela will also extradite Francis to a

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federal detention facility in the US, the first official said.

Six of the Americans released under the deal were declared wrongfully detained, the official said. US President Joe Biden is granting clemency to Alex Saab as part of the deal, which the US hopes will place Venezuela on a more democratic path, the official said.

Saab was arrested in Cape Verde on a US warrant for money laundering in 2020, while traveling to Iran on a humanitarian mission for the Venezuelan government. Venezuela claims that he was kidnapped by the US government and has since sought his release.

Francis, a Malaysian national, allegedly bribed US Navy sailors for classified material. Francis escaped home confinement and fled to Venezuela.

Roberto Abdul, an organizer of the October opposition primaries in Venezuela, was arrested on treason charges in early December.

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US Lawmakers Press Chinese E-Commerce Companies on Privacy Risks, Human Rights Letter

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - A group of US lawmakers from the House Committee on Energy and Commerce on Wednesday sent letters to a range of Chinese e-commerce companies, including TikTok, Alibaba, and AliExpress, to inform them about their concerns over data privacy and human rights abuses associated with their activities.

"House Energy and Commerce Committee Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers and Innovation, Data, and Commerce Subcommittee Chair Gus Bilirakis, on behalf of subcommittee Republicans, sent a letter to China-based e-commerce companies raising concerns over data privacy and security risks for American users, the counterfeit products flourishing on these platforms, and reports of horrific human rights abuses," the committee said in a press release.

The lawmakers believe that such e-commerce platforms, like TikTok, TaoBao, Pinduoduo, Temu, Alibaba, AliExpress, and Shein, provide full access to user data, including that of American citizens, as it is allegedly required by the Chinese authorities, the release said.

Moreover, in the lawmakers' view, the Chinese marketplaces sell forged versions of products as well as offer their services to the sellers which may have been engaged in egregious human rights violations, including against Uyghurs, according to the letter.

The platforms have time till January 12 to respond to a long list of questions related to their e-trade activities, the letter said.

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US to Announce Plan to Land International Astronaut on Moon by End of Decade - White House

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris on Wednesday will announce that the United States aims to land an international astronaut on the moon by the end

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of the decade as part of the Artemis program, the White House said in a press release.

"Today, Vice President Kamala Harris will convene the third meeting of the National Space Council during the Biden-Harris Administration in Washington, DC, where she is announcing that, alongside American astronauts, the United States will land an international astronaut on the surface of the Moon by the end of the decade," the release said.

The announcement comes despite a recent warning from the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) that the US goal of making its first Artemis moon landing in 2025 was "unrealistic" due to unresolved problems with space suits and the new lunar lander.

The GAO's November 30 report on the Artemis program noted that more than half of the key steps to develop the new lander are already at least half a year behind schedule

President Joe Biden's 2024 proposed budget requests more than $8 billion for the Artemis program, with regular annual crewed missions to the lunar surface starting with Artemis IV in 2028.

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Oil Extends Rebound on Worries About Red Sea Shipping Lane Attacks

NEW YORK, December 20 (Sputnik) - Oil prices hit two-week highs on Wednesday as fears over geopolitical tensions in the Red Sea and their potential disruption of global crude supply offset an unexpected weekly surge in US energy stockpiles.

With two hours to settlement, New York-traded West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude for January delivery was at $74.47 per barrel, up 53 cents, or 0.7%, on the day. The US crude benchmark has risen 4.7% since the week began, after last week's 0.3% advance. Prior to that, WTI fell almost 20% over a seven-week period.

UK-origin Brent crude's most-active February contract was at $79.84 per barrel, after a 61-cent, or 0.8%, gain on the day. For the week, Brent was up 4.1% after last week's rise of 0.9%. It fell nearly 20% in the seven weeks prior.

"Oil prices are continuing to rebound today, with the risk of disruptions in the Red Sea potentially contributing to the jump we've seen recently," the online trading platform OANDA analyst Craig Erlam said. "Brent and WTI are recovering from similar lows seen earlier this year which is quite the fall off from just a couple of months ago - 20% from peak to trough. And with markets pricing in so many rate cuts now, that could boost the global economy next year and by extension demand."

Both benchmarks have surged higher this week on concerns missile and drone attacks on ships in the Red Sea by the Iran-aligned Houthis in Yemen will result in a major disruption to the global supply of crude.

Around 12% of world shipping traffic passes through the Suez Canal, heading mostly from the Mediterranean to the important Asian market.

These fears were exacerbated on Wednesday after Greece advised commercial vessels sailing in the region to avoid Yemen's waters. Greek ship-owners control about 20% of the world's commercial vessels in terms of carrying capacity.

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The United States has announced the creation of a multinational naval task force to defend commerce in the region, but the Houthis have vowed to continue their attacks, which they claim is in support of the Palestinians in Gaza.

These worries have put a risk premium back into the crude market, overshadowing data from the Energy Information Administration, showing unexpectedly higher US oil inventories during the week to December 15. Higher oil stockpiles typically lead to lower crude prices.

For last week, crude stockpiles rose by 2.909 million barrels, versus expectations for a decline of 2.283 million and the prior week's tumble of 4.259 million.

On the gasoline inventory front, there was a build of 2.71 million barrels last week, against an expected rise of 1.23 million barrels and the prior week's gain of 0.408 million.

With distillate stockpiles, the increase was 1.485 million barrels, versus a projected rise of 0.496 million and the prior week's gain of 1.494 million.

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US Navy Receives Giant New Uncrewed Orca Submarine For Long Range Missions - Boeing

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has taken possession of the first of its new giant-sized Orca unmanned undersea vehicles (UUVs) for long-range missions, Boeing announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"Boeing has delivered the first Orca Extra Large Uncrewed Undersea Vehicle (XLUUV) to the US Navy following acceptance testing completion this month," the release said.

The XLUUV, was named "Orca," a species of killer whale, by the Navy, Boeing noted.

Orca "is a new class of autonomous submarine that can perform long duration critical missions to achieve undersea maritime dominance in changing environments and contested waters," the release explained.

In 2012 Boeing started design and development on the Echo Voyager, a proof-of-concept XLUUV that began its sea testing in 2017, the company said.

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US Consumer Confidence Ends Year With Surge of Optimism Ahead of 2024

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US consumer confidence experienced a sharp uptick in December as Americans appeared to have fewer worries about the economy and inflation when spending, a phenomenon that could bode well into 2024, the Conference Board said on Wednesday.

"December's increase in consumer confidence reflected more positive ratings of current business conditions and job availability, as well as less pessimistic views of business, labor market, and personal income prospects over the next six months," Conference Board Chief

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Economist Dana Peterson said.

December's confidence reading rose to 110.7 from a downwardly revised 101.0 in November.

While December's renewed optimism was seen across all ages and household income levels, gains were largest among householders aged 35-54 and households with income levels of $125,000 and above.

Consumer expectations for the next six months also increased in December, reflecting improved confidence about future business conditions, job availability and incomes, the Conference Board said.

"Expectations that interest rates will rise in the year ahead plummeted to the lowest levels since January 2021, and consumers' outlook for stock prices rose to levels of optimism last seen in mid-2021," Peterson said.

Average 12-month inflation expectations, meanwhile, continued to recede, standing at 5.6%, versus November's 5.7% and October's run to 5.9%.

Consumers' views of their expected family financial situation six months hence also improved in December. Likewise, on a month-to-month basis, buying plans for autos, homes, and big-ticket appliances rose moderately across the board, ending the year on a slightly more positive note.

A Federal Reserve outlook published last week 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%, the outlook said.

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Schumer Says US Senate Done With Votes for Year, Supplemental Funding Talks Continue

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Wednesday that the upper chamber of Congress will not hold any more roll call votes until the new year, but lawmakers will continue negotiations on the Biden administration's supplemental funding request in the meantime.

"There will be no more roll call votes this year, but make no mistake, the winter recess will be a busy and important few weeks for the US Senate," Schumer said during remarks on the Senate floor. "Negotiations will continue around the clock, reaching an agreement on a critical national security supplemental."

Republican members of Congress delayed the passage of the supplemental funding request, which includes aid for Ukraine and Israel, into the new year, due to their insistence on including more stringent border security measures in the legislation.

However, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that the United States is running out of time and money to support Ukraine and underscored the urgency of the supplemental funding request.

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

US Reveals Charges Against Hezbollah Member in Buenos Aires Bombing Plot - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US Justice Department and other law enforcement officials on Wednesday announced in a statement that charges have been unsealed against Samuel Salman El Reda for allegedly orchestrating the 1994 terrorist bombing in Buenos Aires.

"Damian Williams, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Matthew Olsen, the Assistant Attorney General of the Justice Department's National Security Division, James Smith, the Assistant Director in Charge of the New York Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and Edward Caban, the Commissioner of the New York City Police Department (NYPD), announced the unsealing of terrorism charges against Samuel Salman El Reda," the statement said.

El Reda is alleged to have been involved in terrorist operations on behalf of Hezbollah in North and South America and Asia as well as in Lebanon, including in the planning and executing of Hezbollah's July 1994 bombing in Buenos Aires that resulted in 85 casualties.

El Reda has been charged with providing material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization; conspiring to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization; aiding and abetting the receipt of military-type training from a designated foreign terrorist organization; and conspiring to receive military-type training from a designated foreign terrorist organization, the statement said.

However, El Reda is living in Lebanon and the authorities cannot currently reach him, the statement added.

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Biden Says Maduro Following Through on Commitments to Democratic Reform in Venezuela

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Wednesday that Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro is following through on his commitments to carry out democratic reform, according to the White House press pool.

The report also said that Biden would not comment on a potential prisoner exchange deal with Venezuela.

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Afghan Frozen Assets Should Be Returned to Kabul 'As Soon as Possible' - China Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) - Afghanistan's financial assets frozen overseas should be returned to the country's authorities as soon as possible, Chinese Deputy

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Ambassador to the United Nations Geng Shuang said on Wednesday.

Geng made the remarks while explaining the four steps China believes the United Nations should take toward Afghanistan in order to help the Afghan people overcome the humanitarian crisis affecting the country.

"The frozen overseas assets of Afghanistan and their interest should be returned to the Afghan people as soon as possible," Geng said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

China hopes that all parties will adopt a long-term view on Afghanistan, increase development assistance to Kabul and help Afghan authorities restore a functioning banking system, Geng said.

Assistance should be directed at establishing a basic economic order and prompt the country to better integrate into regional trade, cooperation and connectivity, Geng added.

Following the seizure of power in Afghanistan by the Taliban (under United Nations sanctions for terrorism) in 2021, Washington froze approximately $7 billion of the country's reserves deposited in the United States, which aggravated the already deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation, including the spread of famine.

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Blinken Says US Nearly Out of Time, Money to Support Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is nearly out of money to support Ukraine and out of time to approve more assistance, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

“We are nearly out of money that we need, and we’re nearly out of time,” Blinken said during a press briefing, when asked about Ukraine aid.

Blinken underscored the urgency of the Biden administration’s supplemental funding request to the US Congress, which includes aid for Ukraine and Israel.

There is no “magic pot” from which the US can pull funds to support Ukraine, Blinken added.

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US Imposes Russia-Related Sanctions on 4 Entities, 1 Vessel - Treasury

(Adds details, background in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed Russia-related sanctions on four entities and one vessel, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

The United States designated the Hong Kong-based Bellatrix Energy Ltd., Covart Energy Ltd., SUN Ship Management (D) Ltd. and Voliton DMCC from the United Arab Emirates, the Treasury Department said in a statement.

Sanctions were also imposed on the Sanar 15 Oil Products Tanker, which sails under the flag of

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Russia, the statement added.

In addition, OFAC updated the Guidance on Implementation of the Price Cap Policy for Crude Oil and Petroleum Products of Russian Federation Origin. Soon, service providers such as shippers and movers of Russian oil will be required to receive attestations from their sellers or purchasers every time they move Russian Oil.

OFAC will soon require insurance and freight firms to hold and share these documents as necessary down the supply chain, according to a Treasury release.

"Today's designations demonstrate our commitment to upholding the principles of the price cap policy, which advance the goals of supporting stable energy markets while reducing Russian revenues to fund its war against Ukraine. Participants in the maritime transport of Russian oil, especially Tier 1 actors like traders, must adhere to the compliance guidelines agreed upon by the Price Cap Coalition or face the consequences," said Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Wally Adeyemo in a release.

Last year, the United States, EU, Australia, and members of the Group of Seven imposed a $60 limit per barrel on Russian oil.

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White House on Battlefield Situation in Ukraine Says 'Time Not on Our Side'

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The approaching ground freezes on the battlefield in Ukraine coupled with the reluctance of Congress to approve new funding for Kiev, make time an adversary rather than an ally of Washington, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We have every reason to believe that as the ground freezes towards the end of January and into February that will make it easier for Russian forces to go on the move. So even just from an air defense perspective, all these materials are really, really important. So time is not on our side," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby said earlier this week that the Biden administration will be able to send one more security aid package to Ukraine and will run out of money after it unless Congress acts to pass the supplemental funding for Ukraine and Israel.

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

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

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Canada Announces $1.26Bln Investment in Technology Network for Canadian Army - Official

(Adds details in lede, paras 3-7)
WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government will invest C$1.68 billion ($1.26 billion) to modernize the country's military technological network, Parliamentary Secretary to National Defense Minister Marie-France Lalonde said on Wednesday.
"I'm pleased to be here to announce a major announcement in the Canadian army… an investment of C$1.68 billion to provide the Canadian army the technology that they require to do their jobs," Lalonde said during a press conference.
The official said that the funds will be invested in land command control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (LC4ISR).
The LC4ISR procurement will be made under four contracts that have been awarded to General Dynamics Mission Systems–Canada, Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) said in a statement.
The LC4ISR procurements will allow the Canadian armed forces to plan and direct operations, manage operational information, achieve situational awareness, and exchange information, the statement said.
The investment will potentially create and sustain 2,400 highly-skilled jobs in Ottawa, Calgary and across the country, while also contributing about C$260 million annually to Canada's GDP.
On Tuesday, the Department of National Defense announced its intention to acquire 11 Remotely Piloted Aircraft System (RPAS) in a C$2.5 billion deal with General Dynamics.

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US Asks for Another Delay of UNSC Vote on Gaza Aid Delivery, Monitoring - Source

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) - The US mission to the United Nations has requested another delay of a UN Security Council vote on Gaza aid delivery and a monitoring mechanism to oversee supplies, a UN source told Sputnik.
"They are asking for a delay. It is unclear until when," the source said.
The UN Security Council was originally set to vote on an Arab-sponsored resolution on Monday. The vote has since been pushed back several times in an effort to avoid another veto by the US.
The resolution calls for a halt to hostilities in Gaza to allow for urgently needed aid deliveries to flow in via all land, sea and air routes.
It also asks the UN secretary-general to create a monitoring mechanism for aid to ensure that no humanitarian relief is provided to parties to the conflict.
US diplomats have said the US wants to see text in a resolution condemning the Palestinian movement Hamas.

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

Blinken Says US Hopes to Share 'Good News' Regarding Venezuela Later Today

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes to share good news regarding a reported prisoner release deal with Venezuela later on Wednesday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a press briefing.

"We hope to have some good news to share, probably later today," Blinken said, when asked about reports of the deal.

Earlier on Wednesday, US media reported that the US and Venezuela reached a deal to release American detainees and other prisoners in Venezuela in exchange for the release of Alex Saab by the US.

The Biden administration has no higher priority than to do everything it can to bring Americans out of harm's way, Blinken said.

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The Washington Post Removes Ukraine Conflict Coverage Link From Top of Website

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US news organization The Washington Post removed a link to coverage of the Ukraine conflict from the top of its website's homepage on Wednesday, according to screenshots of the page.

The website previously included a link titled "War in Ukraine" on the top of its homepage, alongside other coverage categories. However, the link has since been removed.

The change in the website comes as the United States splits attention between the conflict in Ukraine and the newer conflict in Israel.

Republican members of the US Congress have held back the passage of a supplemental funding request from the Biden administration, which includes aid for Ukraine, unless lawmakers include more stringent border security measures in the legislation.

The Biden administration has warned that the US risks running out of resources to aid Ukraine unless the US Congress takes further action. Earlier this month, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited the US to speak with lawmakers and advocate for further support of the conflict.

US Senator JD Vance said on Wednesday that the only question for the US is how much more destruction to foist on Ukraine before advocating for peace.

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US Won't Normalize Relations With Taliban Until Key Women Human Rights Recognized– Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) – The United States is not going to normalize relations with the Taliban until the group does not recognize key human rights for women and girls, Deputy US Ambassador to the United Nations Robert Wood said on Wednesday.

"The Afghan women urge the UN to stress to the Taliban that it must include women in all sectors of the society. The US hears this request and will not consider any significant steps towards the normalization of relations with the Taliban until women and girls have meaningful access to education, the workforce, and other aspects of social and political life," Wood said at the UN Security Council meeting.

He reiterated Washington's commitment to providing humanitarian assistance to those in need but pointed out that other measures must accompany such aid.

"That is why the Taliban must reverse their policies to keep women from contributing to Afghanistan's economy," Wood said.

The Taliban came to power in August 2021, toppling the US-backed government as NATO troops were leaving after almost 20 years of US military presence in Afghanistan. Numerous countries and international organizations responded to the militant takeover by cutting aid and ties with Kabul.

In late 2022, the group banned girls and women from attending secondary schools and higher education institutions despite previous pledges not to do so. The move faced international backlash, with many countries urging the Afghan authorities to lift the restrictions on women rights.

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White House Says Will Not Comment on Colorado Supreme Court Decision on Trump

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre refused to provide any comments on the Colorado Supreme Court decision to bar former US President Donald Trump from the 2024 election.

"We follow the law here. I cannot comment on anything that is related to an upcoming election like 2024, and this is a legal process, so I'm just not going to comment," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

Jean-Pierre also refused to say whether the White House considers Trump to be an insurrectionist as defined by the 14th Amendment of the Constitution.

On Tuesday night, the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that Trump is disqualified from the 2024 Republican primary ballot due to his role in the January 6 US Capitol riot, citing the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution. The amendment restricts people who are "engaged in insurrection" from holding public office.

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US Senator Says Ukraine, Western Backers' Desire to Return to 1991 Borders 'Fantasy'

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The desire of Ukraine and its Western backers to return the country to its 1991 borders is a fantasy, US Senator JD Vance said on Wednesday.

"The fundamental problem with the Ukraine war is not inadequate funding or too few weapons. It was the Western conceit that Ukraine could throw Russia back to 1991 borders. That was a fantasy 18 months ago; it is a fantasy today," Vance said in a statement via social media platform X.

The only question for the United States is how much further destruction it ought to foist on Ukraine before advocating for peace, the statement said.

The outcome of the Ukraine conflict will be blamed on lawmakers who were skeptical of funding the conflict, the statement added.

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US-led Operation in Red Sea Already in Place, Ships Deployed – White House

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Operation Prosperity Guardian led by the United States and its allies is in place, and military ships have already been deployed to the region to protect commercial vessels from attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"The operation is already in place. We've got coalition ships in the Red Sea and we hope that they will be able to act on that [threat]," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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Active Discussions Ongoing to Get Another UNSC Resolution on Gaza in Place Kirby

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – There are active discussions taking place at the United Nations to try to get another resolution on Gaza in place, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"There are still very active discussions going on trying to get another resolution in place. I'll certainly let [US permanent UN envoy Linda] Thomas-Greenfield speak to that effort," Kirby said during a press briefing. "It's important for us if the Security Council is going to speak on this that there's a condemnation of Hamas and what they did on the seventh of October."

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US, Allies to Create Safe Corridor in Red Sea Amid Houthi Attacks – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – An international military coalition led by the United States is planning to create a safe passage corridor for commercial ships in the Red Sea amid a growing number of attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels, the Financial Times reported on Wednesday.

The decision by the US-led coalition, shipowners and at least half a dozen allies to set up a safe corridor for commercial shipping in a key trade and logistics artery in the Middle East comes after dozens of vessels decided to change their shipping routes and sail around Africa to avoid being attacked in the Red Sea, the report said.

At the moment, the NATO allies taking part in Operation Prosperity Guardian plan to protect passing ships from drones and missile attacks, and will not escort ships through the Bab-al-Mandab Strait, the report added.

Earlier in the day, Bloomberg reported that the United States and its allies are considering possible military strikes against Yemen's Houthi militia to cripple their ability to target cargo ships in the Red Sea.

On Monday, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin unveiled Operation Prosperity Guardian, saying it will bring together the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, and France, among other countries.

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Ottawa Announces $1.2Bln Investment in Technology Network for Canadian Army - Official

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government will invest C$1.68 (US$1.26 billion) to modernize the country's military technological network, Parliamentary Secretary to National Defense Minister Marie-France Lalonde said on Wednesday.

"I'm pleased to be here to announce a major announcement in the Canadian army… an investment of C$1.68 billion to provide the Canadian army the technology that they require to do their jobs," Lalonde said during a press conference.

Lalonde explained that the funds will be invested in land command control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (LC4ISR).

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CORRECTION - US Set to Veto UNSC Resolution to Ease Aid Deliveries to Gaza, Create Monitoring Mechanism

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to veto a UAE-drafted Security Council resolution to facilitate aid deliveries to the Gaza Strip and create a UN mechanism to monitor humanitarian assistance to the territory, US media reported on Wednesday.

The resolution "demands that the parties to the conflict allow and facilitate the use of all land, sea and air routes to and throughout the entire Gaza Strip, including border crossings, including full and prompt implementation of the announced opening of the Karem Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom Border Crossing, for the provision of humanitarian assistance."

It also asks the UN secretary-general to create a monitoring mechanism for aid to ensure that no humanitarian relief is provided to parties to the conflict.

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US, Allies Revise Russian Oil Price Cap Compliance Regime to Crack Down on Circumvention

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – The United States and its partners announced revisions to the price cap compliance regime for Russian oil to further complicate efforts by exporters to circumvent it, according to a joint statement released by the US Treasury on Wednesday.

"These changes will further complicate efforts by Russian exporters to circumvent the price cap while deceiving Coalition service providers, and further raise costs for any Russian exporters that need premier services but are unwilling to sell oil under the cap," the statement said.

The coalition participants said they would soon require that relevant service providers receive attestations from their counterparties each time they lift or load Russian oil, according to the statement.

"Second, we are introducing changes that will require supply chain participants with access to itemized ancillary costs (e.g., insurance and freight) to share these upon request with entities further down the supply chain. Coalition members will provide guidance to their service providers and relevant industry, as well as details on the transition period, in the coming weeks through their respective domestic processes," it added.

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US Imposes Russia-Related Sanctions on 4 Entities, 1 Vessel - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed Russia-related sanctions on four entities and one vessel, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

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The United States designated the Hong Kong-based Bellatrix Energy Ltd., Covart Energy Ltd., SUN Ship Management (D) Ltd. and Voliton DMCC from the United Arab Emirates, the Treasury Department said in a statement.

Sanctions were also imposed on the Sanar 15 Oil Products Tanker, which sails under the flag of Russia, the statement added.

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Lack of Progress on Human Rights Issues Causes Current Impasse in Afghanistan -UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) -The existing impasse of Afghanistan in relation to the international community is caused by the continuously unresolved human rights issues, UN Special Representative for Afghanistan Roza Otunbayeva said on Wednesday.

"The lack of progress in resolving human rights issues is a key factor behind the current impasse," Otunbayeva told the Security Council members during a meeting on Afghanistan.

Adopting international norms as set out in the UN Treaties Afghanistan ratified will remain to be a non-negotiable condition for a seat at the UN, she added.

The United Nations has a long-term presence in Afghanistan. The UNAMA is the UN's special political mission tasked with assisting the people of Afghanistan, launched in 2002. After the Taliban came to power in August 2021, resulting in severe economic, humanitarian and security crises, the UNAMA stayed in the country to continue its work in cooperation with the de-facto authorities.

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US Vetoes UNSC Resolution to Ease Aid Deliveries to Gaza, Create Monitoring Mechanism

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States vetoed a UAE-drafted Security Council resolution to facilitate aid deliveries to the Gaza Strip and create a UN mechanism to monitor humanitarian assistance to the territory, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Wednesday.

The resolution "demands that the parties to the conflict allow and facilitate the use of all land, sea and air routes to and throughout the entire Gaza Strip, including border crossings, including full and prompt implementation of the announced opening of the Karem Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom Border Crossing, for the provision of humanitarian assistance."

It also asks the UN secretary-general to create a monitoring mechanism for aid to ensure that no humanitarian relief is provided to parties to the conflict.

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