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NATO Secretary-General: Sweden to Join NATO by July

NATO was created in 1949 to counter the Soviet Union. In 1990, then-US Secretary of State James Baker assured Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would move “not one inch eastward” after absorbing the soon-to-be unified Germany.
NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told German media that he is confident Sweden will join the bloc by July at the latest.
The next NATO summit will be held in Washington on July 9-11, and Stoltenberg expects Sweden will be a NATO member before the conference kicks off.
Sweden and Finland abandoned decades of neutrality to request NATO membership in May 2022. Finland quickly gained approval but Sweden has been blocked by Turkiye and Hungary.
Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan previously accused Sweden of not taking action against the Kurdish Workers’ Party, which has been classified as a terrorist organization by not only Ankara but also the EU and the US. Sweden has a relatively large Kurdish population and has accepted Turkish dissidents.
The PKK has been running an insurgency in Turkiye for decades, largely operating out of areas in Syria and Iraq.
In July, a Swedish court convicted a man accused of working to finance the PKK, and later that month Turkiye and Sweden signed a “new bilateral security compact,” Sweden agreeing to resume arms shipments to Turkiye. Erdogan has also requested his country be allowed to purchase F-16 fighter jets from the United States.
In the fall, Erdogan announced he was withdrawing his country’s opposition to Sweden’s accession into NATO, and in October he signed the accession protocol and submitted it to the Turkish parliament. Some Turkish lawmakers still oppose the process and have demanded more concessions from Sweden.
However, Stoltenberg says Sweden has honored its commitments to Turkiye and has already made enough concessions.
Hungary’s opposition is based on President Viktor Orban’s assertion that Swedish politicians and media lie about the state of democracy in the country. Orban stressed in a December news conference that there was no deal between his country and Turkiye on Sweden joining the military alliance.
"There is no Hungarian-Turkish agreement" Orban said, adding that approval "will be decided only by [the] Hungarian parliament...when lawmakers decide the time has come for it. They don't have a great willingness to make this decision."
New additions to NATO must be approved by its current members unanimously.
Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly stressed that NATO expansion does not contribute to world peace and that the alliance is a relic of the Cold War.

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US' Nearly $50 Billion B-52 Modernization Program at Risk of Failure

The B-52 Stratofortress' maiden flight took place in April 1952. It is still flown by two active-duty bomb wings and one reserve bomb wing.

The United States Air Force's $48.6 billion plan to modernize its aging B-52 fleet is at risk of failing due to a failure to track spare parts and keep tabs on which manufacturers continue to produce spare parts for the Cold War-era bomber.

The USAF still operates 72 B-52H bombers, the most recent of which was produced in 1962. Despite its age, Air Force Inspector General Robert P. Storch said in a November audit of the program that "the B-52 remains a cornerstone in the Air Force's arsenal."

The modernization plan is designed to extend their use until 2060, 108 years after the B-52's first flight, by outfitting them with new engines, sensors, electronics and a larger, more modern weapons bay. The upgraded planes will also get a new designation, B-52J, to differentiate it from non-upgraded bombers.

The report says the USAF relies too heavily on cannibalizing other planes for spare parts and frequently has to wait for new parts. Both issues have led to a decrease in mission-ready planes for the fleet.

To rectify the issue, the USAF said it would, at the audit's recommendation, implement a code review to ensure that proper inventory codes are used for spare parts. The audit says the USAF only partially responded to its two other recommendations: to create a comprehensive list of all spare parts for the B-52 and start tracking which manufacturers still produce components and how long they plan to continue to produce them.

Because of that partial response, the program remains open to audit and review.

The B-52 operates alongside two other bombers in the USAF, the Rockwell B-1B bomber, introduced in 1986 and the B-2 "stealth" bomber, introduced in 1997. Northrop Grumman is also developing the B-21 Raider, an updated stealth bomber that conducted its first test flight in November 2023.

The USAF says the B-52 is still a capable and versatile craft that can be used alongside the more modern bombers.

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Gaffes, Mistakes & Bloodshed: Scandals That Enveloped Joe Biden in 2023

At 81, Joe Biden is the oldest president ever elected in the United States, which means he technically breaks his own record every day he is in office. That may be Biden's biggest accomplishment while in the White House: that, save a tragedy over the next 300-something days, he will have made it through an entire term in his geriatric state.

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With 2023 coming to a close, it is worth reflecting on US President Joe Biden's third year in office and all the gaffes, stumbles and mistakes he made along the way.

Classified Docs for Me, Not Thee

Throughout 2022, former President Donald Trump's mishandling of classified documents was a huge story, and with a trial against Trump still ongoing, it inarguably remained a massive story for much of 2023.

But the media world was shocked when it learned that Biden, who once called Trump's poor handling of classified documents "totally irresponsible," had stored classified documents he took while serving as vice president to a think tank office in Virginia and in the garage of his home in Delaware.

In his first public remarks regarding the mishandling, Biden brushed off the severity of the situation at the time, telling reporters he had "no regrets," and that "there's no 'there' there." He later shifted blame for the mishap on his team since "they didn't do the kind of job that should have been done to go thoroughly through every single piece of literature that's there" when his offices were being "packed up."

Earlier this month, US media reported that special counsel Robert Hur is not expected to file charges in the case; however, the "double standards" on how the Biden and Trump cases were handled was not lost on Republicans, with many questioning why an FBI raid was not held on Biden's properties as it had been done with his predecessor.

Elsewhere, while Biden has continuously suffered from poor approval ratings, the classified docs case has only seen Trump's rating among supporters skyrocket as his case and others have continued to work their way through the justice system.

The Balloons Are Coming! (Biden's Failed China Policy)

Tensions with China were already high in 2022 after then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) visited with separatist leaders in Taiwan, angering the Chinese government. Things only got weirder in 2023 when a balloon appeared in the skies off the coast of Alaska.

The US government claimed it was a Chinese spy balloon. The Chinese government insisted it was an independent weather observation balloon that had blown off course. The media tracked the balloon as it flew over Canada into the United States and across the country. Republicans called Biden weak for not shooting it down immediately, China warned the US against shooting down the object.

In the end, Biden waited for the balloon to cross the US before shooting it down off the coast of South Carolina, angering China and not satisfying Republicans.

Bizarrely, multiple other balloons and other unidentified objects appeared over US and Canadian airspace, most of which were again shot down, but little explanation was given about what the objects actually were. A Boy Scout group claimed their weather balloon experiment vanished around this time, though the State Department denied the possibility they were responsible for its disappearance.

Relations between China and the US started off-base and ended worse in 2023. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen visited then-House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) in the US in April, causing sino-US tensions to grow further throughout the year.

However, Biden had a plan. Chinese President Xi Jinping was one of the world leaders hosted in San Francisco during the APEC summit. It was the perfect opportunity to smooth things over with the world's largest industrial manufacturer.

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According to Biden during a post-meeting presser, things went well. Biden said the two leaders discussed shared issues and reestablished military-to-military contact in an attempt to reduce misunderstandings.

All seemed to be going to plan until, after declaring the engagement over, Biden decided to take one more question:

“Mr. President, after today, would you still refer to President Xi as a ‘dictator’? This is a term that you used earlier this year,” asked the reporter.

“Well, look, he is,” the commander-in-chief replied, drawing near-instant condemnation from the government Biden had just worked hard to court. A clip capturing Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s reaction to Biden’s comments went viral in the following days. Blinken later claimed the visible wince was due to a sore neck.

Biden, Famous for His ‘Empathy’ Ignores & Insults Disaster Victims

In February, a Norfolk Southern train carrying hazardous materials derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, causing a fire. Rather than attempt to douse the flames, city, state and Norfolk officials made the decision to initiate a controlled demolition of the substances.

The resulting explosion sent dangerous chemicals into the air, soil and water. Residents were evacuated, being told they could return less than a week after the derailment and three days after the explosion.

But months later, residents in East Palestine were still sounding alarms about health issues they believed were linked to the chemicals and several videos went viral, seeming to show an oily rainbow film over nearby streams and in muddy soil.

Biden promised to visit the area, but as 2023 comes to a close, he has declined to, citing his busy schedule. However, he did manage to find significant time to vacation in Delaware. According to US media, by August 2023, Biden had spent nearly four out of every 10 days away from the White House, primarily at his two homes in Delaware and the presidential retreat Camp David in Maryland.

“It’s now been just over 7 months - 213 days since the derailment and 186 days since [Biden] promised he would visit," Rep. Bill Johnson (R-OH) wrote in a tweet this August. "He’s had multiple opportunities. Sadly, the only reasonable explanation at this point for his choosing not to visit is that he simply doesn’t care.”

Meanwhile, Biden’s likely opponent in the 2024 presidential election scored some points with voters in the swing state after he visited East Palestine the same month the crash happened. The former president called the federal response to the accident a “betrayal.”

Biden’s lack of empathy for disaster victims arose again after it took 13 days for him to visit Hawaii after devastating wildfires killed more than 100 people. When the US president finally showed up, he attempted to connect with the victims by recounting a house fire that “almost” cost him his car and cat, sparking more outrage.

“Lightning struck at home, on a little lake that's outside of our home—not a lake, a big pond—and hit a wire that came up underneath our home into the heating ducts and air conditioning ducts,” the president said. “To make a long story short, I almost lost my wife, my '67 Corvette, and my cat.”

Reports from the time described the 2004 fire as “small” and “contained to the kitchen,” noting there were no injuries and it was contained within 20 minutes.

Nobody Believes in Zelensky Like Biden

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Biden's poll numbers have never been great, but they did see a slight bump following the start of Russia's special military operation in 2022. During a speech in Warsaw, Poland, a month later he proclaimed the American people stand with Ukraine and urged NATO and the EU to remain unified "today and tomorrow and the day after and for the years and decades to come."

It was a sentiment he repeated often throughout 2022 and 2023, but throughout the year, the American people and some NATO allies turned against Biden's proxy war against Russia.

Polls showed strong support among Americans for Ukraine aid at the start of the special operation but have since reversed, with more than half of Americans opposing additional aid as early as August. America's opinion on Ukraine likely was not helped when classified Pentagon documents were leaked on Discord, showing a grim internal evaluation of Ukrainian Armed Forces capability.

The souring public opinion on Ukraine led the Republican party, which included a small faction opposed to funding at the start of the conflict, to completely turn against further aid. Even US Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), who, along with the late Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) infamously encouraged Ukrainian marines to break the Minsk ceasefire agreement in 2017, came out against sending more aid to Ukraine.

Biden has repeatedly demanded that Congress pass an additional $60 billion in aid for Ukraine, but Republicans have remained steadfast in blocking it, demanding border concessions that are too distasteful for his base to accept.

Meanwhile, parliamentary elections in Slovakia in September ushered in Prime Minister Robert Fico, who ran on a promise to end all aid to Ukraine and in November the Slovak parliament confirmed that agenda.

That wasn't the only break in NATO on the Ukraine issue. In December, Hungary Prime Minister Viktor Orban blocked €50 billion in aid earmarked for Ukraine and promised to continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Ceasefires Are Bad, Mmkay?

On the subject of the other conflict the US is fueling - Israel's bombing campaign and invasion of Gaza, Biden has fared even worse.

According to a poll released earlier this month, 57% of Americans disapprove of his handling of the situation, compared to just 33% who approve. The same poll found that some one-third of respondents felt as though the Biden White House was being too supportive of Israel's actions.

Despite taking a slightly harsher tone with the Israeli government, Biden and administration officials have repeatedly refused to set any red-lines that would make the US reconsider sending aid and weapons to Israel.

The US has blocked several calls for a ceasefire by the UN Security Council, being the only member state to vote against it, thereby vetoing it.

Multiple human rights organizations have warned about a humanitarian crisis in the area. More than 20,000 Palestinians have been killed since Israel's operation began and more than 570,000 are starving, according to the UN.

The Biden administration's steadfast support of Israel's viscous military campaign has resulted in plummeting polls for Biden among his base, and growing calls from within his own party to shift the administration's Israel strategy.

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Additionally, a steady stream of pro-Palestinian protests have broken out across the country and Biden has been bleeding support among minorities and young voters, a situation that is almost certain to doom his reelection campaign if he cannot reverse the trend before November.

Fear & Loathing in the White House: The Hunter Biden Story

There have been some interesting first son and daughter controversies in the White House. Neil Bush, the son of former US President George H. W. Bush was sued by federal regulators for alleged "conflict-of-interest regulation" violations. Donald Trump Jr. shot an endangered deer in Mongolia. Malia Obama got caught smoking. The Bush twins were cited for underage drinking and allegedly partied with American actor Ashton Kutcher, which seemed like a big deal at the time.

But no first family controversy appears to hold a candle to the much-talked-about presidential son, Hunter Biden. To be fair, Hunter is also considered the most exposed first son in history. He allegedly abandoned a laptop at a Delaware repair shop, the contents of which were eventually leaked to the media just prior to the 2020 election.

The laptop, initially suppressed by much of the mainstream media and large social media sites, included photos and videos of Hunter smoking what appears to be crack cocaine in various stages of undress, including inside a drug rehab facility, while driving his car at high speeds on the highway and with alleged escorts.

It also included emails between Hunter and his foreign business associates, as well as numerous financial records. It is that aspect that has continued to haunt Joe Biden throughout 2023.

According to the House Oversight Committee, which is heading the ongoing investigation into the Biden family, payments were allegedly routed through Hunter and the president's brother James Biden before ending up in Joe's hands.

Committee Chairman James Comer (R-KY) showcased evidence of at least two examples of James Biden depositing money into Joe Biden's account following payments by an American hospital operator and a Chinese company into Hunter or James Biden accounts.

There was also evidence on the laptop that Joe wrote letters of recommendation to universities for the children of a Chinese business associate of Hunter, emails from Hunter complaining about giving half his salary to his father and that he met in person with a number of his foreign business associates, including individuals from Ukraine, Russia, Mexico, China and Kazakhstan.

Throughout his campaign and presidency, Biden repeatedly denied he met or spoke with his son's business associates or discussed business with him.

In early December, House Republicans voted to formally open an impeachment inquiry into Joe Biden. The White House, as it has since the start of the investigation, decried it as politically motivated.

"I did not. And it's just a bunch of lies. They're lies. I did not. They're lies," the president told reporters in December, despite documents put forth by congressional lawmakers.

Hunter Biden was also indicted on gun and tax charges, though those are unlikely to blow back on his father.

Hunter also appeared to cause his father's administration a few more headaches over the summer when cocaine was found in the White House; however, the Secret Service closed the case without a suspect after two weeks. Despite a mass finger-pointing at Hunter due to his

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past with illicit drugs, the White House insisted it didn't belong to anyone in the Biden family - including Hunter, who was there just before it was discovered.

The Inevitability of Age & Decline

It is possible that the reason Biden continues to deny meeting with Hunter's associates is that he doesn't remember meeting them.

Age was an issue for Biden even during his campaign, but rewatching clips from 2020, he looks sprightly compared to present day - although that can be said of many presidents pre- and post-White House. Biden started his presidency older than his predecessors, and it shows.

The 81-year-old president has looked lost while trying to find his way off stage, regularly stumbled over words, said the October 7 surprise attack by Hamas happened 65 years ago, confused popular celebrities Taylor Swift, Beyonce and Britney Spears in a single sentence, tripped over a wire while giving a speech, falsely claimed he was at Ground Zero the day after September 11, and got confused about where to go while watching the reef laying at the tomb of the unknown soldier.

Some 77% of Americans, including a whopping 69% of Democrats, admitted in August that they have concerns about Biden's age, questioning whether he is mentally and physically fit enough to serve for another term.

"I tell you what, I don't know about you, but I'm going to go to bed," Biden said after a 26-minute conference in Hanoi, Vietnam. The September blip didn't help improve the president's image, instead prompting more questions about the commander-in-chief's mental acuity.

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The Pentagon's $48.6 billion program to update the US' aging B-52 bomber fleet is at risk of failure, according to a recent audit.

The audit notes the Air Force relies too heavily on cannibalizing other planes for spare parts, and that there are long wait times for new parts.

The USAF agreed with the assessment that the service perform a code review to ensure spare parts are properly tracked. However, the audit notes the military branch only partially responded to its other recommendations that it create a list of all spare parts needed for the B-52, and that it start tracking manufacturers that still produce those parts and how long they plan to continue.

The program remains open to further audit and review.

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NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told German media he is confident Sweden will join the bloc by July at the latest.

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The next NATO summit will be held in Washington on July 9-11, but Stoltenberg expects Sweden will be a NATO member before the conference kicks off.

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Is another ballot disqualification in the works for Trump in New York?

Council members in the Empire State are said to be reportedly urging New York's Board of Election to boot the former US president from the 2024 primary and general election ballots.

The reported developments come just days after similar efforts were taken in Colorado and Maine, both of which Trump has condemned as a political attack against his reelection efforts.

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Former US President Donald Trump has appealed his disqualification from Maine's presidential primary ballot, a new court filing revealed

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told German media that he is confident that Sweden will join the bloc by July at the latest.

The next NATO summit will be held in Washington on July 9-11, and Stoltenberg expects that Sweden will be a NATO member before the conference kicks off.

Sweden and Finland abandoned decades of neutrality to request NATO membership in May 2022. Finland quickly received membership but Sweden’s was blocked by opposition from member states Turkiye and Hungary.

Turkiye’s opposition is largely based on accusations that Sweden has not done enough to combat the Kurdish Workers’ Party (KPP), a separatist group that Turkiye has designated a terrorist organization.

In October, Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that he was dropping his opposition to Stockholm’s membership after Sweden instituted several constitutional and legal reforms and signed a bilateral security compact with Sweden.

Some Hungary lawmakers have accused Swedish politicians and media of lying about the state of democracy in that country. Hungary has not signaled that it will withdraw its opposition to NATO’s expansion into Sweden.

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Votes on new membership into NATO must be approved unanimously.

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The program remains open to further audit and review.

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Sensitive Military Documents Leaked on War Thunder Forums, Again

Technical military documents that were unclassified but marked export-controlled were posted on the War Thunder forums, a message board for users of the hyper-realistic military sim.

Members of the board often engage in long-running arguments and sometimes post technical documents and manuals to support their arguments. However, posting classified or export-controlled materials is illegal and forbidden by the site's rules.

The documents were posted on December 12 and were removed minutes later, but not before users managed to create copies of the posts. The posted materials include two pages from the M2A2 Bradley Armored Infantry Fighting Vehicle's technical manual, including information on the commander's hatch, turret assembly and spall liner (inner armor).

This is the 14th leak of classified or export-controlled documents on the War Thunder forums since the game's initial release in 2012. However, the game's developer, Gaijin Entertainment, insists that the leak did not originate on the game's official forums.

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As far as we know, this particular leak did not appear on War Thunder forums first. It was published online on December 8 or even earlier and has been spreading on various platforms for days until it landed on War Thunder forums," Gaijin Entertainment founder Anton Yudintsev said. "While we did our part in helping to limit the leak spreading further by deleting that post, we can do nothing with what's happening on other platforms."

Pope Francis criticized war manufacturers and called for the end of violence around the world, paying particular attention to Gaza.

"We see this played out in Bethlehem, where the birth of the Saviour is followed by the slaughter of the innocents. How many innocents are being slaughtered in our world! In their mothers' wombs, in odysseys undertake in desperation and in search of hope, in the lives of all those little ones whose childhood has been devastated by war. They are the little Jesuses of today, these little ones whose childhood has been devastated by war."

Pope Francis noted that you cannot be opposed to war without opposing weapons.

"To say 'no' to war means saying 'no' to weaponry. The human heart is weak and impulsive; if we find instruments of death in our hands, sooner or later we will use them. And how can we even speak of peace, when arms production, sales and trade are on the rise? … How much violence and killing takes place amid deafening silence, unbeknownst to many!" Pope Francis told the gathered crowd. "Yet that is something they ought to know! It should be talked about and written about, so as to bring to light the interests and the profits that move the puppet-strings of war."

Pope Francis called for a future when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation" and called for the return of hostages taken by Hamas during the October 7 attack and the end of military operations in Gaza and Israel's "appalling harvest of innocent civilian victims."

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US Vice President Kamala Harris is the least popular vice president during their first term since Dan Quayle in the early 1990s.

According to poll aggregators, Harris is up to 16 points underwater, with one analysis showing that only 39% of voters hold a favorable view of the vice president while 55% hold an unfavorable view. That would make her two points less popular than US President Joe Biden, who is facing his own historically bad polls.

Mike Pence, Biden, Dick Cheney and Al Gore all had higher favorability ratings than Harris during their first term in office.

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More Than 103 Killed, 141 Injured in Explosions in Iran's Kerman - Reports

TEHRAN, January 3 (Sputnik) - The number of victims killed in the explosions in the Iranian city of Kerman has now exceeded 100, with over 149 people injured, Iran's IRNA news agency reported on Wednesday.

The head of the Kerman emergency department said that 103 people were killed and another 141 were injured as a result of the two explosions near the burial site of Qasem Soleimani, the former commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force.

The first explosion occurred on Wednesday afternoon at a cemetery in Kerman, and minutes later a second blast targeted the road leading to the cemetery, IRNA reported.

A mourning procession was taking place to mark the fourth anniversary of the death Soleimani, who was killed in a US drone strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020. Tehran imposed sanctions against a number of US citizens over their involvement in the assassination.

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US to Extend Military Presence at Qatar Base for 10 Years – Reports

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) – The US has reached an agreement with Qatar to extend its military presence at Al Udeid Air Base for 10 years, CNN reported Tuesday, citing four officials.

The agreement has not been publicized amid heightened scrutiny on Qatar for permitting the residence of Hamas leaders.

The base hosts the largest US military presence in the Middle East and has been a key hub for the US Central Command's air operations.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited the base last month, but did not mention the extension. The Pentagon also declined to comment on the matter.

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US House Committee to Start Hold Mayorkas Impeachment Hearing on January 10 – Chair

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) – The chair of the US House Homeland Security Committee said Wednesday that it will hold its first impeachment hearing into Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas on January 10, Punchbowl News reported.

"Our investigation made clear that this crisis finds its foundation in Secretary Mayorkas'

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decision-making and refusal to enforce the laws passed by Congress, and that his failure to fulfill his oath of office demands accountability," Committee Chair Mark Green told Punchbowl in a statement, referring to the US-Mexico border crisis.

Green said that the committee's investigation that concluded in December found sufficient evidence to impeach the secretary.

Mayorkas is accused of misusing taxpayer funds and ignoring border security measures.

The impeachment proceedings come amid a surge in migrant arrivals to the southern US border. Fox News reported on Tuesday that US officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters in December, the highest number ever recorded in a single month.

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Death Toll in Iran's Kerman Explosion Rises to 73, Another 170 Injured - Reports

TEHRAN, January 3 (Sputnik) - The number of victims in the explosion in the Iranian city of Kerman has surpassed 70, with 170 people injured, Iran's IRNA news agency reported on Wednesday.

Head of the Kerman province Red Crescent Reza Fallah told IRNA that some 170 injured people have been taken to hospitals, while 73 have been killed.

Earlier in the day, IRNA reported an explosion near a cemetery in Kerman, and minutes later the agency reported a second explosion on the road to the cemetery.

A mourning procession was taking place to mark the anniversary of the death of Qasem Soleimani, the former commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Soleimani was killed by a US drone strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020. Tehran imposed sanctions against a number of US citizens over their involvement in the assassination.

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US 'Confident' Hamas Used Al-Shifa Hospital as Command Center, to Hold Hostages – Reports

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) – The US intelligence community is "confident" that Hamas and other Palestinian military groups used Al-Shifa hospital in Gaza to hold some of the hostages and as a command center for their operations against Israel following the October 7 attack, The Associated Press reported on Wednesday citing a new intelligence assessment.

While the assessment supports Tel Aviv's claims that the Shifa hospital complex served as a base for anti-Israel activities, the released information does not provide any proof that it was the central node for military operations by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the report said.

"The US Intelligence Community is confident in its judgment on this topic and has independently corroborated information on HAMAS and PIJ's use of the hospital complex for a

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variety of purposes related to its campaign against Israel," the report cited the assessment as stating.

Moreover, the assessment believes that the militant groups "used the al-Shifa hospital complex and sites beneath it to house command infrastructure, exercise certain command and control activities, store some weapons, and hold at least a few hostages," but evacuated several days before Israeli forces raided the hospital complex on November 15 and destroyed sensitive documents and electronics.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip, while its fighters breached the border, opening fire on the military and civilians. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 22,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of Israeli strikes, local authorities said.

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

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UN Experts Raise Alarm Over US Planned Nitrogen Hypoxia Execution – UN

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) – Four UN experts expressed alarm on Wednesday over the US' planned execution of Kenneth Eugene Smith using nitrogen hypoxia, according to a release.

"We are concerned that nitrogen hypoxia would result in a painful and humiliating death," the experts said in the release.

They noted that the execution would be the first to use nitrogen hypoxia and warned that experimental executions by gas asphyxiation would likely violate the prohibition on torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment.

The UN experts include Morris Tidball-Binz, special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Alice Jill Edwards, special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; Tlaeng Mofokeng, special rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; and Margaret Satterthwaite, special rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers.

Smith was convicted of murder for hire in 1988. He was originally sentenced to life without parole by a jury, but it was overridden by a judge with a death sentence.

He is scheduled to be executed on January 25 in Alabama. Authorities sought to execute Smith last November using lethal injection, but botched the attempt.

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US Senator Menendez Faces More Accusations for Bribes to Assist Qatar Govt - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - US Senator Robert Menendez has been accused of receiving bribes in order to use his authority to assist the government of Qatar and benefit Egypt, the Justice Department said in an indictment.

"From at least in or about 2018 up to and including in or about 2023, Menendez and his wife, Nadine Menendez, a/k/a Nadine Arslanian, the defendant, engaged in a corrupt relationship with three New Jersey associates and businessmen Wael Hana, a/k/a Will Hana, Jose Uribe and Fred Daibes, the defendants, in which Menendez and Nadine Menendez agreed to and did accept hundreds of thousands of dollars of bribes in exchange for using Menendez's power and influence as a senator to seek to protect and enrich Hana, Uribe and Daibes and to benefit the Arab Republic of Egypt and the State of Qatar," the indictment said.

The bribes included cash, gold, payments toward a home mortgage, compensation for a low-or-no-show job, a luxury vehicle and other things of value, the indictment said.

Menendez faces charges of conspiracy to commit bribery, conspiracy to commit honest services fraud, count of conspiracy to commit extortion under color of official right, and conspiracy for a public official to act as a foreign agent, according to the indictment.

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Trump Appeals Disqualification From Maine's Presidential Primary Ballot - Court Document

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump is appealing his disqualification from Maine's presidential primary ballot, challenging Maine's Secretary of State Shenna Bellow's final order, a court document revealed.

"Petitioner Donald J. Trump, by and through undersigned counsel, petitions this Court for review of a final order issued by Respondent Secretary of State Shenna Bellow," the court document said on Tuesday.

Trump is aggrieved by the final order because the secretary of state was a biased decisionmaker who should have recused herself and otherwise failed to provide lawful due process; had no legal authority under the law to consider the federal constitutional issues presented by the challengers; and she made multiple errors of law and acted in an arbitrary and capricious manner, the document said.

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UN Security Council to Hold High-Level Meeting on Palestine - French Ambassador

UNITED NATIONS, January 3 (Sputnik) - A high-level UN Security Council meeting will be held on January 23 to address the issue of Palestine and the regional environment, French Ambassador to the United Nations Nicolas de Riviere said.

"On the 23rd of January, we're going to have a high-level meeting that will be focused on the Palestinian issue but also the regional environment," Riviere said on Tuesday.

The ambassador added that the meeting would be in an open debate format and that ministers from the Middle East region and others have been invited to participate.

France presides over the UN Security Council for the month of January.

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US National Debt Rises Above $34 Trillion for First Time in History - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - US national debt has surged over $34 trillion for the first time in history, according to the fiscal data published by the Department of the Treasury.

As of December 29, 2023, the US national debt reached $34,001,493,655,565.48 for the first time in the history of the United States, the data showed on Tuesday.

On December 28, the US national debt stood at $33,911,227,723,170 and the Biden administration took just one day to increase the national debt by almost $100 billion, according to the data.

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Biden Petitions Supreme Court to Remove Texas Wire From Mexico Border - Legal Appeal

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has filed a petition with the US Supreme Court to remove a razor wire fence erected by the state of Texas to prevent unauthorized entry into the United States by illegal immigrants across the land border from Mexico, a court document said on Tuesday.

"This Court should vacate the injunction pending appeal entered by the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit," Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar wrote in the filing..

The state of Texas led by Governor Greg Abbott, a Republican, erected the concertina wire barrier along the land border on the Rio Grande. The Biden administration started cutting the wire and the state of Texas reacted in 2023 by suing the federal government saying it was undermining security in the state, the second most populous in the United States.

"(T)he injunction violates 8 USC 1252(f) (1), which provides that lower courts generally lack “jurisdiction or authority to enjoin or restrain the operation” of certain provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) - including 8 USC. 1225, which provides for the inspection

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of noncitizems in the United States," the filing said.
In December 2023, a US federal appeals court ordered Border Patrol agents to stop removing the wire. Prelogar's appeal is an emergency application, appealing to the Supreme Court to reverse that decision and allow the removal of the wire barrier to continue.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) –
VIOLENCE IN GAZA
* Five people died and three were injured by Israeli attacks on the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) headquarters and a nearby hospital in the Gazan city of Khan Younis, the PRCS said on Tuesday.
ISRAEL'S ATTACK ON HAMAS POLITICAL OFFICE IN BEIRUT
* A suspected drone strike by Israel at the Hamas political office in Beirut killed two commanders of Al-Qassam Brigades, which is the Palestinian group's military wing, state Lebanese media cited Hamas as saying Tuesday.
* The death toll from the drone attack on an office of Palestinian movement Hamas in Beirut has risen to six, Lebanon's National News Agency reported.
* The killing of senior Hamas leader Saleh al-Arouri in Lebanon underscores the warnings of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres about a possible spillover of the Gaza conflict into the region, Deputy Spokeswoman Florencia Soto Nino said.
UKRAINE CONFLICT
* One person died and five were injured as a result of a Ukrainian missile attack on the southwestern Russian city of Belgorod, regional governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said on Tuesday.
* The administration of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has informed NATO allies that minesweepers donated to Ukraine by the United Kingdom will not be allowed to sail through the Turkish straits of the Bosporus and Dardanelles in line with the 1936 Montreux Convention.
AIRPLANE INCIDENT IN TOKYO
* Nearly 400 people who were on board the plane that caught fire in Tokyo's Haneda airport have been evacuated, Japanese media reported on Tuesday.
* Five people who were on board the Japan Coast Guard aircraft which collided with a passenger plane have been confirmed dead, local media reported citing police.
* At least 17 people were injured in the collision between a passenger plane with a Japan Coast Guard aircraft in Tokyo's Haneda airport, Japanese media reported.
EARTHQUAKE IN NEW YORK
* The US Geological Survey (USGS) told Sputnik on Tuesday that it had detected an earthquake in New York's borough of Queens prior to the reported explosions in the area.
* The explosion reported on New York City's Roosevelt Island did not involve terrorism, the New York Police Department said.
* The US energy company Con Edison told Sputnik that it has received no reports of either

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outages or equipment issues on Roosevelt Island, where authorities are reportedly probing a series of early morning explosions.

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NYC Council Members Call for Trump Ballot Disqualification - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 2 (Sputnik) - New York City council members are urging the state's Board of Elections to disqualify former President Donald Trump from the 2024 primary and general election ballots due to his alleged involvement in the events following the 2020 election, the National Review reported on Tuesday.

"The Board of Elections must give effect to the Fourteenth Amendment and its safeguards to protect the integrity of New York's electoral process, maintain the public's faith in our democratic system, and respect the rule of law," councilman Shekar Krishnan is quoted in the report as having written in an email this week to other council members.

Though the report cites several council members as having endorsed Krishnan's letter, Democratic councilor Robert Holden is quoted in the report as saying that he found the idea of removing a candidate from the ballot without legal cause 'troubling',

"This trend across the nation, including here in New York, is dangerous. If you are against a candidate, you work hard to beat them at the polls, not prevent them from participating in an election," Holden is quoted as saying to the National Review in the report.

Other council members are quoted in the report as agreeing with Holden, with some calling the letter a 'waste' of the council's time.

"My colleagues should instead be devoting their energy and efforts towards resolving the ongoing migrant crisis and bringing the budget back under control. New York City is facing some very real problems right now, and Donald Trump being on the ballot here is not one of them," Council member Jane Ariola is quoted as saying in the report.

Last month, both Maine and Colorado disqualified Donald Trump from the 2024 primary ballot, citing the insurrectionist clause in 14th Amendment. Both bans are expected to be swiftly appealed in both the State courts and the US Supreme Court.

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US Rejects Israeli Officials' Calls to Resettle Palestinians Outside Gaza - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 2 (Sputnik) – The United States rejects "irresponsible" and "inflammatory" statement by Israeli Ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir, who called for the resettlement of Palestinians outside Gaza, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"The United States rejects recent statements from Israeli Ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar

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Ben Gvir advocating for the resettlement of Palestinians outside of Gaza. This rhetoric is inflammatory and irresponsible," Miller said in a statement. "They should stop immediately."

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UNSC to Meet as Early as Wednesday on Incidents in Red Sea - President

UNITED NATIONS, January 2 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Security Council will likely meet on the ongoing wave of incidents in the Red Sea as early as Wednesday, France's Ambassador to the UN Nicolas de Riviere said on Tuesday.

"I would say that it's very likely that the Council will meet on the issue sooner, probably even tomorrow. So we will confirm this, but I think the situation is bad," Nicolas de Riviere told the journalist during a press briefing as France assumes the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council for January.

On December 19, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced the formation of a multinational maritime coalition to provide security to ships in the Red Sea, following a rise in Houthi attacks against vessels in the area. Houthis have been targeting ships in the Red Sea in response to the Israel's indiscriminate bombardment and invasion of Gaza, inhibiting the flow of trade through the Suez Canal.

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US House Panel to Hold Secret Briefing on UFOs - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 2 (Sputnik) – US House lawmakers will host a classified briefing with the intelligence community on the unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP, also known as UFOs) on January 9, House Committee on Oversight and Accountability said on Tuesday.

"On Tuesday, January 9, at 9:00 a.m. E.T,, the Committee on Oversight and Accountability will hold a classified Member only briefing with the Office of the Inspector General of the Intelligence Community regarding UAPs," the committee said in a statement.

Last year, Congressman Tim Burchett introduced an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to require the US Defense Department to declassify UAP information that does not compromise the national security of the United States.

US Inspector General of the Intelligence Community Thomas Monheim said in a letter to lawmakers in September that the intelligence community is unable to provide members of Congress with information on alleged US government programs to retrieve and reverse engineer unidentified anomalous phenomena.

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US Senator Sanders Calls on Congress to Reject $10Bln Funding for Israel – Statement

WASHINGTON, January 2 (Sputnik) – US senator Bernie Sanders in a statement on Tuesday called upon Congress to reject the $10 billion in new funding for Israel to aid its "brutal war" on the Palestinians in Gaza.

"Congress is working to pass a supplemental funding bill that includes $10 billion of unconditional military aid for the right-wing Netanyahu government to continue its brutal war against the Palestinian people. Enough is enough. Congress must reject that funding. The taxpayers of the United States must no longer be complicit in destroying the lives of innocent men, women, and children in Gaza," the statement said.

The US senator underscored that Americans must understand that Israel's war on the Palestinians is being waged with US bombs making them complicit in destroying innocent lives, and artillery shells with catastrophic results.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip, while its fighters breached the border, opening fire on the military and civilians. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 20,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of Israeli strikes, local authorities said.

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

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Israel Did Not Notify US About Strike Near Beirut Killing Senior Hamas Official – Reports

WASHINGTON, January 2 (Sputnik) –Israel did not notify Washington about the drone strike near Beirut, Lebanon that killed the deputy chief of Hamas' political bureau Saleh al-Arouri, Axios reported on Tuesday citing US and Israeli officials.

The Israeli leadership informed the Biden administration about the attack only after the operation had already begun, the report said.

Earlier in the day, Lebanese media reported that al-Arouri and five others were killed in an Israeli drone attack on the Hamas office in the densely populated residential neighborhood of Mcharafieh, in the southern suburbs of Beirut, but Tel Aviv has not yet officially claimed the responsibility for the attack.

Al-Arouri was the most senior Hamas official killed by Israel since the escalation of the

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Israeli-Palestinian conflict in October.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip, while its fighters breached the border, opening fire on the military and civilians. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 20,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of Israeli strikes, local authorities said.

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

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Johnson to Bring Over 60 Republicans to US-Mexico Border to Advocate for Policy Changes

WASHINGTON, January 2, 2024 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Tuesday that more than 60 Republican lawmakers will accompany him in Texas at the United States' border with Mexico to advocate for immigration policy changes.

"This situation requires significant policy changes and House Republicans will continue advocating for real solutions that actually secure our border," Johnson said.

The lawmakers are expected to accompany Johnson near Eagle Pass in Texas on Wednesday to see first-hand and highlight the impact of the Biden administration's border crisis, Johnson said.

The visit was organized after Johnson sent a letter to President Joe Biden last month urging him to curb the record-levels of illegal immigrants entering the United States and impose a stricter immigration policy.

The US border authorities reported more than 250,000 encounters with immigrants crossing the United States illegally in December. More than 8 million immigrants have entered the United States illegally since Biden came to power in January 2021.

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Harvard President Claudine Gay Announces Resignation - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 2 (Sputnik) - Harvard President Claudine Gay on Tuesday announced that she has resigned from her position.

"It is with a heavy heart but a deep love for Harvard that I write to share that I will be stepping down as president. This is not a decision I came to easily," Gay said in a statement.

Gay explained in the statement that she decided to resign after consulting with members of the

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Harvard Corporation, the university's governing body.
Such a move is in the best interest of Harvard, Gay said.
The resignation comes after repeated revelations that Gay was a serial plagiarizer in her work.
Gay's presidency was the shortest in Harvard University's history, spanning six months and two days, according to the Harvard Crimson.

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UN Chief 'Deeply Saddened' Over Loss of Life in Japan Earthquake - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 2 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is "deeply saddened" over the loss of life and material damage caused by the latest earthquake in Japan, United Nations associate spokesperson Florencia Soto Nino said on Tuesday.
A powerful 7.6 magnitude earthquake was reported on Monday in the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa Prefecture, followed by a series of aftershocks. Forty-eight people died and dozens have been injured in Ishikawa as well as Toyama, Niigata, Fukui and Gifu prefectures.
"The Secretary General is deeply saddened to hear of the loss of life and the damage caused by the earthquake, and he expresses his solidarity with the government and the people of Japan," Nino said during a press briefing.
The earthquake was the most powerful to hit the Noto Peninsula since the authorities started keeping records in 1885.
Guterres and the United Nations extend their sincere condolences to the families of the victims and hope for a swift recovery of those who were injured, Nino said.

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Assassination of Hamas Official in Beirut Highlights Danger of Spillover - UN Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 2 (Sputnik) - The killing of senior Hamas leader Saleh al-Arouri in Lebanon underscores the warnings of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres about a possible spillover of the Gaza conflict into the region, Deputy Spokeswoman Florencia Soto Nino said on Tuesday.
"I think this just really highlights what the secretary general had just said about the dangers of a spillover of this conflict into the wider region," Nino said during a press briefing.
Nino said that although the details of the incident have yet to be confirmed, the UN calls on all parties to de-escalate the situation.
Earlier in the day, Arouri, the deputy chief of Hamas' political bureau, was killed in an Israeli drone attack on the movement's office in the southern suburbs of Beirut, Lebanese media reported.
Lebanon's National News Agency reported that a total of six people were killed and several

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others injured in the Israeli suicide drone strike on the Hamas office in the densely populated residential neighborhood of Mcharafieh, in the southern suburbs of Beirut.

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Blinken, Cameron Discuss Multilateral Action to Address Red Sea Attacks - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by telephone with his UK counterpart David Cameron and discussed a host of issues including the importance of the collective multilateral efforts to address Houthi attacks on vessels in the Red Sea, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"They also discussed the importance of collective multilateral action to address threats to global interests posed by Iranian-backed Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea," Miller said in a statement.

In addition, Blinken and Cameron talked about the need to improve the protection of civilians and humanitarian aid deliveries to the Gaza Strip, the statement said.

Moreover, the two officials discussed bilateral efforts the United States and the United Kingdom are taking in support of Ukraine, the statement added.

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USGS Says Detected Earthquake in New York Before Reports of Explosions on Roosevelt Island

WASHINGTON, January 2 (Sputnik) - The US Geological Survey (USGS) told Sputnik on Tuesday that it had detected an earthquake in New York's borough of Queens prior to the reported explosions in the area.

"At 05:45 hours, a 1.7 magnitude earthquake occurred in the Astoria Queens area. Its location was 0.5 miles E-NE of Astoria at a depth of 5km," the USGS said.

The USGS noted that "the event was felt in the New York City area" and that "preliminary reports indicate no local life-safety concerns," according to reports.

New York's official emergency notification system known by the acronym NYCEM announced earlier that the authorities were responding to several explosions on Roosevelt Island. The island is located between the boroughs of Manhattan and Queens.

The USGS said the authorities have reported "no injuries, no impacts to transit, traffic or utility services and no structural stability issues at this time."

The US energy company Con Edison told Sputnik on Tuesday that it has received no reports of either outages or equipment issues on Roosevelt Island, where the authorities are reportedly investigating the explosions.

Local media reported that firefighters responded to phone calls from residents reporting the

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explosions at around 6:00 a.m. EST.

Meanwhile, the New York City Fire Department told Sputnik that the situation is now under control and there have been no injuries reported.

The New York Police Department said that a transformer was believed to have caused the incident.

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Armed Man Breaks Into Colorado Supreme Court, Surrenders to Police - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 2 (Sputnik) - An armed man who broke into the Colorado Supreme Court in Denver and discharged his firearm has surrendered to state police, CNN reported on Tuesday.

The incident unfolded early morning on Tuesday and lasted for almost two hours, the report said.

The suspect, who remains unidentified for now, crashed his vehicle into another one near the Ralph L. Carr Colorado Judicial Center, the report said.

The suspect then entered the judicial center by shooting in a window of the facility, the report said.

Once the suspect held the guard at gunpoint, he took the guard's keys and proceeded to various parts of the building, the report said.

He subsequently called 911 and surrendered to the police, the report added.

The authorities have ruled out any connection to recent threats against the Colorado Supreme Court justices regarding their decision to ban former President Donald Trump from the state’s ballot for the 2024 presidential election.

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