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1/5/24 Friday

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Big Brother: How Israeli Military Censors Shape One US Network's Gaza Coverage

"CNN has agreed not to be an independent news outlet," said one analyst of the cable network, which tailors its reporting to appease the Israeli government in multiple ways.

Whether due to cultural affinity or the country's status as an important US ally, it's long been observed that mainstream media in America tends to favor Israel in their ongoing conflict with the Palestinians. But one outlet in particular makes an unusual effort to make sure Israeli authorities are satisfied with their reporting.

Analysis published Thursday documented how the television channel CNN treats their coverage of the Palestine-Israel conflict unlike any other journalism the network produces, ensuring Israeli military censors are able to exercise control over its content.

As a US-based outlet, CNN isn't legally obliged to abide by the instructions of the Israel Defense Force's military censor, which has operated in the country for over 70 years.

However, the channel has a long-standing practice of routing all relevant coverage through the network's Jerusalem bureau anyway, ostensibly in order for it to be reviewed by people on the ground there. The practice means all coverage relating to Israel is overseen by journalists operating under the IDF's censors.

"Every single Israel-Palestine-related line for reporting must seek approval from the bureau," said one CNN employee who spoke anonymously about the policy.

"Or, when the bureau is not staffed, from a select few handpicked by the bureau and senior management – from which lines are most often edited with a very specific nuance."

Jim Naureckas of the group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting slammed the policy. "When you have a protocol that routes all stories through one checkpoint, you're interested in control, and the question is who is controlling the story?" he said.

"In a situation where a government has been credibly accused of singling out journalists for violent attacks in order to suppress information, to give that government a heightened role in deciding what is news and what isn't news is really disturbing."

When reached for comment, a representative for CNN defended the practice. "The policy of running stories about Israel or the Palestinians past the Jerusalem bureau has been in place for years," the spokesperson claimed. "It is simply down to the fact that there are many unique and complex local nuances that warrant extra scrutiny to make sure our reporting is as precise and accurate as possible."

But the policy imbues Israeli reporters and government officials with an air of legitimacy not granted to their Palestinian counterparts. In October, the network's News Standards and Practices division sent an email to employees instructing them how to cover Israel's ongoing military operation in Gaza.

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"Hamas controls the government in Gaza and we should describe the Ministry of Health as 'Hamas-controlled' whenever we are referring to casualty statistics or other claims related to the present conflict," read the message.

Death counts released by Gaza's health ministry have repeatedly been determined to be accurate by international experts. If anything, the 22,438 reported deaths in the enclave are likely to represent a low estimate, with thousands more trapped under rubble from Israeli airstrikes.

Civilians make up a large majority of the casualties, with women and children representing about 70%.

"Quotes and information provided by Israeli army and government officials tend to be approved quickly, while those from Palestinians tend to be heavily scrutinized and slowly processed," confirmed the CNN spokesperson.

The control exercised by Israeli journalists in the Jerusalem bureau is reportedly stringent at times, with people there even determining specific terms and language that can be used. The bureau isn't obligated to submit content to the IDF before publishing, but censors in the military have intervened against reporting found to be unacceptable in the past. People working there would likely be well aware of the government's preferred line.

In another voluntary act of cooperation with Israeli officials, CNN recently agreed to send all footage shot in the Gaza strip to the IDF for approval before its release. The agreement was reached in exchange for IDF protection in the besieged enclave. Executive vice president of the Quincy Institute Trita Parsi slammed the move, saying, "In other words, CNN has agreed not to be an independent news outlet." Writer Shailja Patel called the network, "officially an IDF propaganda outlet."

The practice of "embedding" journalists with members of the military has become a common practice since the days of the Vietnam War, when adversarial reporting on the conflict is thought to have played a major role in its unpopularity.

The practice provides the military with ultimate control over what journalists are allowed to witness and report on.

Several prominent personalities at CNN like anchor Jake Tapper are strong public supporters of Israel. Wolf Blitzer, perhaps the channel's most prominent on-air figure, is a self-avowed Zionist who formerly worked for the lobbying group American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

Analyst John McEvoy recently documented how government agencies covertly shape news coverage of Israel on CNN and other media outlets. After the bombing of Gaza's al-Ahli Arab Hospital in October sparked massive controversy, think tanks with ties to Western and Israeli intelligence served as sources for analysis in British state media that absolved the IDF of responsibility for the atrocity. The incident reveals one way US-aligned state actors are able to mold reporting even when it's presented by more ostensibly neutral journalists.

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NASA's Experimental X-59 Plane With Unique Feature to Finally Make Debut

A painted version of the aircraft will be publicly unveiled next week. Engineers hope one distinctive physical characteristic will usher in an age of quieter supersonic flight.

In the latter half of the 20th century the world briefly entered the age of supersonic travel with the debut of the Concorde and the Soviet Union's Tupolev Tu-144. The technology was ultimately retired, but NASA hopes an experimental aircraft set to be unveiled next week will mark the return of the high-speed form of transport.

A fully-painted X-59 Quesst will finally see the light of day after almost six years of construction by Lockheed Martin in California. Like the Concorde and Tu-144, the X-59 is designed to travel faster than the speed of sound, but with one key difference: engineers hope the quieter noise levels produced by the plane will overcome one of the key drawbacks of previous iterations of the technology.

The aircraft produces less noise due to one key physical characteristic. A sharp, 38-foot nose on the front of the plane allows it to more easily slice through the air, reducing older supersonic planes' characteristic ear piercing sonic booms to something more akin to the sound of slamming a car door.

The unique feature is similar in intent to the long noses on Japan's most recent high-speed trains, which are designed to lessen the noise they create when entering tunnels.

Engineers hope the technology can usher in a new era of commercial supersonic transport, having addressed one of its key problems. Formerly, supersonic flights were forced to travel over unpopulated areas in order to not disturb people on the ground below.

NASA plans to fly the X-59 over residential neighborhoods to see if the noise level created by the aircraft is acceptable. After that, they'll seek regulatory approval to reinaugurate supersonic commercial flight.

Novel technology will be key to the experimental plane's operation in more ways than one. While supersonic planes previously maintained pilots' forward vision by employing a "drooped" nose design, the X-59 has no such feature.

In fact, it doesn't even have windows on the front of the aircraft. Pilots will instead see ahead through the use of cameras transmitting video to the cockpit on an electronic screen.

"Our goal is to create an electronic means of vision for the X-59 pilot that provides performance and safety levels equivalent to or better than forward-facing windows," said Randy Bailey, a lead designer of the so-called eXternal Visibility System (XVS) technology.

Although Westerners likely remember the French-Anglo Concorde jet, they may be unaware the Soviet Union was actually the first to unveil a supersonic plane.

The Tupolev Tu-144 made its maiden flight near Moscow in 1968, the year before the debut of the Concorde. The aircraft also went supersonic a full four months before the Concorde in 1969 and became the first commercial plane to achieve Mach 2 the following year.

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Reporting published this week has revealed how CNN takes unusual steps to ensure Israeli officials have influence over reporting on Gaza.

The network submits all Israel-related coverage to its Jerusalem bureau for approval, subjecting the reporting to Israel's military censors.

The policy represents just one way the American media outlet skews its coverage to appease the Israeli government.

Hit the link to get the details

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Former US President Donald Trump is reportedly growing nervous that the US Supreme Court could side against him in the fight over his disqualification from the Colorado 2024 primary ballot.

According to a recent report, Trump has privately expressed he is concerned the conservative justices will rule against him out of fear of being viewed as "political" if they were to rule in his favor.

This week, Trump's legal team asked the Supreme Court to intervene in Colorado's decision to ban him from the primary ballot under the 14th Amendment's insurrection clause. The Supreme Court confirmed on Friday it would hear oral arguments on the case on February 8.

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Activist Ajamu Baraka claims US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's diplomatic efforts in the Middle East reflect the "arrogance" and "amateurism" of the Biden administration.

The former Green Party vice presidential candidate made the statement on Sputnik's Political Misfits program Friday, responding to reports Blinken is attempting to convince countries in the region to accept Palestinians as refugees.

Baraka advocated for the prosecution of officials in both Israel and the United States responsible for what he called an ongoing "genocide" in the Gaza Strip.

"The only way that we're going to be able to stop these criminals is if we are able to restore international law and a respect for international law," he said. "Until we're able to shield power from these maniacs, all of us are basically threatened."

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Blinken's Gaza Diplomacy Reflects 'Arrogance, Amateurism' of Biden Administration

Ajamu Baraka claimed a successful prosecution of Israeli and US officials responsible for "genocide" in Gaza is the only way to end a major threat to the international community.
Human rights activist and 2016 Green Party vice presidential candidate Ajamu Baraka pulled no punches discussing the Biden administration's recent diplomatic efforts in the Middle East Friday, claiming efforts to persuade countries to receive Palestinian refugees "can't be successful."
The Black Alliance for Peace organizer made the claim on an episode of Sputnik's Political Misfits program with host John Kiriakou.
"The notion that the US is going to be able to twist arms or in any way persuade various Arab and Muslim nations to accept the refugees, the people who are being cleansed from Gaza is absolutely absurd," he said. "There's no way that these Arab monarchies and other dubious elements that are running these states in the so-called Middle East are going to be able to align themselves with US policy."
"It would be an invitation to destabilizing their society," added Baraka, referring to reports that Egypt has rejected US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's request to receive 2 million Palestinians. "The same with the Iraqis."
Kiriakou agreed with the assessment. "The Egyptians apparently said 'And put them where?'" he noted. "People live on top of each other in Cairo… And you can't just put them in the Sinai Peninsula, because then the Israelis are going to say, 'Oh my God, there are all these Palestinians right on the border with Israel, and it's too dangerous for us.'"
"It really makes no objective sense," insisted Baraka, calling Biden's consideration of the idea "a consequence of the arrogance that emanates from impunity that they can openly thumb their noses up to international law and support this criminal activity."

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The discussion then turned to domestic politics in Israel, where far-right figures like Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir are playing an increasingly prominent role. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahuwas able to return to power in 2022 by including figures like Ben-Gvir in his cabinet. But, caught between the extremism of the far-right and a reinvigorated opposition that staged massive protests last year, Netanyahu commands the allegiance of a shrinking segment of the country's population.

"Gallup released a poll two days ago showing that Netanyahu has the support of only 15% of Israelis, a stunningly low approval rating in a time of war," noted Kiriakou.

"Can he survive this war politically?" he asked. "And even if he can't, does Israel then get a prime minister who's even more right-wing and even more willing to kill or displace Palestinians?"

Baraka clarified that although Netanyahu is unpopular, the Israeli public overwhelmingly supports the country's devastating military campaign in the Gaza Strip. "At one point, something like over 80% of Israelis supported the attack on Gaza," he noted. Israeli violence in the beseiged enclave has reportedly killed some 22,438 people, with women and children representing an estimated 70% of the casualties.

The activist claimed the best safeguard against the far-right taking further power in Israel is "a successful prosecution of the Israeli criminals that would come out of a decision from the International Court of Justice in the next few weeks, not only Israeli officials, but also US officials. The ICC, the International Criminal Court, would be compelled to begin to identify those individuals responsible for the genocide if there's a favorable dispensation coming from the International Court of Justice."

"The only way that we're going to be able to stop these criminals is if we are able to restore international law and a respect for international law," Baraka added. "If not, then it's quite clear with this Blinken trip and with US policies that they are prepared to use negative force and violence in order to maintain and perpetuate their global economy… Until we're able to shield power from these maniacs, all of us are basically threatened."

The organizer expressed optimism in South Africa's recent filing of charges against Israel at the International Court of Justice, noting that a judgment against Israel would "delegitimize" their policies. Israel reportedly plans to defend itself against the charges in The Hague next week.

British researchers have revealing new photos of Uranus.

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The images of the planet and its celestial neighbor Neptune were revealed in a new study Friday along with analysis dispelling common myths about their appearance.

Neptune is often portrayed as being deep blue in color, but the researchers say the planets actually share a very similar pale cyan hue.

The team also explained the science behind Uranus's status as our solar system's chameleon, sometimes appearing to be a different color depending on when it's observed.

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New Images Show What Neptune, Uranus Actually Look Like

Recent analysis by scientists at the University of Oxford claims the two “ice giants” share a similar hue.

British researchers have revealing new photos of Uranus.

Scientists at the University of Oxford released the images of the planet and its celestial neighbor Neptune on Friday, along with analysis claiming to dispel what astronomers now believe is a common misconception about them. The research was headed by Professor Patrick Irwin at the school’s Department of Physics.

“Professor Irwin and his team found that both planets are in fact a similar shade of greenish blue, despite the commonly-held belief that Neptune is a deep azure,” read a press release on the university’s website.

Widely disseminated photos and illustrations of the planets have more or less faithfully depicted the hue of Uranus according to the scientists, rendering it as a pale cyan with a very slight green tint. But Neptune has been portrayed in a shade more similar to royal blue. The researchers say artificial enhancement of photos dating to NASA’s Voyager 2 flyby in the 1980s is partially to blame.

Neptune is distinguished in part by its faint swirls of clouds and wind versus the more uniform appearance of Uranus. Contrast was increased on the images of Neptune to better demonstrate its texture, but the adjustments resulted in an inaccurate portrayal of the planet’s color.

Professor Irwin’s team says single-color images captured by Voyager 2 were also sometimes incorrectly combined, creating misleading composite photos.

“Even though the artificially-saturated colour was known at the time amongst planetary scientists – and the images were released with captions explaining it – that distinction had become lost over time,” said Irwin. “Applying our model to the original data, we have been able to reconstitute the most accurate representation yet of the colour of both Neptune and Uranus.”

The scientists achieved similar results by applying the same process to images from various sources, which they say proves the reliability of their method.

The researchers also developed an explanation for why Uranus sometimes appears to have a greener tint. High levels of methane in the planet’s atmosphere typically absorb green light, but the researchers say Uranus’s atmosphere is thinner around its poles for reasons they still don’t understand. The planet almost spins on its side with its poles facing Earth during its summer and winter, reflecting green light towards observers.

“The misperception of Neptune’s colour, as well as the unusual colour changes of Uranus, have bedevilled us for decades,” said Dr. Heidi Hammel of the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy (AURA). “This comprehensive study should finally put both issues to rest.”

“Beggars shouldn’t be choosing,” said White House budget director Shalanda Young to reporters yesterday, insisting US President Biden would welcome more Ukraine funding “however [Congress] can pass it.”

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The plea comes on the heels of a $250 million lethal aid package from lawmakers last month, which Young insisted wasn't enough to shore up Kiev's crumbling military effort in the Donbass.

But the prospect of more funding is damaged by the plummeting popularity of continued Ukraine support among Americans, as well as political dysfunction in the country.

Congress faces a deadline to pass basic federal funding in two weeks after narrowly averting a government shutdown last year.

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"We do not want people to spend longer than necessary without a settled place to call home," said Scottish social justice secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville recently as continued funding to accommodate Ukrainian migrants has become politically controversial.

Along with other European countries the UK has taken in Ukrainians since the launch of Russia's special military operation in 2022.

But London already faces a shortage of housing, with 4.3 million new homes needed.

Europe has experienced economic difficulty as Western sanctions against Russia have backfired spectacularly, likely threatening the political viability of continued Ukraine support.

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'Beggars Shouldn't Be Choosing': Biden Desperate for More Ukraine Aid

Political dysfunction and the plummeting popularity of funding for Kiev have combined to imperil the US ally's efforts to wage war.
US President Joe Biden's head budget official sounded a note of desperation in a plea for Congress to pass yet another funding package for Ukraine.
"Certainly, we've bypassed my comfort level," said Office of Management and Budget Director Shalanda Young at a breakfast event with journalists Friday morning. Although legislators sent $250 million in lethal aid to the Zelensky regime just days ago, Young insisted that wasn't enough and urged lawmakers to pass a more substantial package, calling the situation "dire."
Biden has limited legal authority to send weapons to Kiev without congressional approval, but he is only able to send arms from existing US stockpiles rather than devote the funding necessary to replenish them. His administration has explored that approach, but Young insisted presidential action "is not going to get big tranches of equipment into Ukraine."

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The budget chair criticized Congress's inaction, warning that continued military support was important from a standpoint of projecting US power.

"Yes, Kiev might have a little time from other donors to make sure they can keep their war footing, keep the civil service, but what happens in the [European Union], in other NATO allies, if the US pulls out their support?" she said. "What message does that send to the rest of the world? And what will their decisions be if they see the United States not step up to the plate?"

Ukraine has consistently struggled in their conflict with Russia, with a vaunted counteroffensive last year failing to shift the balance of power in the Donbass. With Zelensky's efforts on the battlefield failing, the Ukrainian president seems poised to continue to move the country towards collapse. Kiev has requested American assistance simply in order to continue carrying out basic government functions.

Meanwhile, Russia has performed strongly since the passage of broad Western sanctions in 2022 intended to economically damage the country.

The US president has been so eager to secure money for Ukraine that he's even offered to concede ground to Republicans on border policy, a highly contentious issue for elements of the Democratic Party's base. Biden continued many elements of his predecessor's approach to the issue, even completing segments of former president Trump's border wall.

If Ukraine is approaching ruin, the United States may not be much better off with a low-intensity political crisis still simmering since unprecedented tumult in the House of Representatives last year. Funding for Kiev is likely to be complicated by the renewed imperative to prevent a government shutdown, with a deadline for federal funding looming in less than two weeks. If Congress is unable to agree on a bill, government services will be forced to pause operations and social service payments may be delayed.

Lawmakers reportedly haven't even begun the process of writing the necessary legislation, which requires agreeing on broad spending amounts for various federal agencies.

"I'll take it however they can pass it," Young said, referring to both Ukraine aid and broader government funding. "I mean, beggars shouldn't be choosing. And I'll take it, how they can pass it. It just needs to be passed."

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Scotland Curtails Ukrainian Refugee Support as Europe Faces Economic Hardship

People throughout the continent are calling for a renewed focus on domestic issues after nearly two years of support for Ukraine's failing military effort in the Donbass.

The UK became the latest European country to scale back support for Ukrainian migrants when the Scottish government refused to grant funds to local authorities to cover housing costs this week.

The move was revealed Friday in Scottish media. Local authorities were reportedly seeking £10 million ($12.7 million) in order to continue providing temporary accommodation to Ukrainians seeking refuge in the country. The UK is one of a number of European countries that have taken in Ukrainians since the escalation of conflict in the eastern Donbass region in 2022.

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But Scotland's national government balked at the request after previously having questioned the viability of the country's support programs.
"Our welcome accommodation ensures that we can offer everyone who needs it an initial safe place to stay," said Scottish social justice secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville last month. "However, we do not want people to spend longer than necessary without a settled place to call home."
Like neighboring Ireland, the United Kingdom faces a significant shortage of housing. It's been estimated the UK needs 4.3 million new homes to reach the standard of other European countries. The shortage may take half a century to resolve, according to the Center for Cities think tank.
The British Red Cross released a study recently claiming many Ukrainians living in the UK could be left without homes as winter wears on. "We expect thousands of men, women, and children from Ukraine to become homeless here in the UK," said spokesperson Olivia Field.
Many analysts believe Europe is headed towards deepening economic difficulties as Western sanctions against Russia have backfired spectacularly. Energy costs have skyrocketed throughout the continent – especially in Germany, which previously relied heavily on Russian natural gas. The European Union's historical manufacturing powerhouse has faced deindustrialization as a consequence.
Rising energy costs have increased the price of goods in general, leading to a decline in consumer spending. Meanwhile high interest rates intended to tame inflation have caused a contraction of credit. The eurozone's economic growth recently shrunk to just 0.1 percent.
In light of the poor economic outlook, political populists in Europe are likely to call for an increased focus on domestic issues – a common refrain in the UK since citizens voted to leave the EU in 2016.

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"Today we are facing an all-out battle with the enemy," said the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Hossein Salami Saturday.

The commander-in-chief made the remark during a televised ceremony where the country unveiled a new ship and several missile launchers.

"It will be harmful for the enemy to be found near and at a half distant," the general added, sounding a note of defiance as the United States has announced attempts to counter Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.

But President Joe Biden has struggled to secure significant commitments for the operation with France and Spain recently denying any involvement.

The tensions come as South Africa brings charges of genocide against Israel in the International Court of Justice, with Israel expected to answer next week.

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"If we want to be peacekeepers in the world, we need a European military," said Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani in a newspaper interview Sunday, reviving on-off discussion of a European Union army.

"In a world with powerful players like the United States, China, India, Russia – with crises from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific – Italian, German, French or Slovenian citizens can only be protected by something that already exists, namely the European Union," Tajani emphasized.

The comment represents a desire for greater European autonomy as the continent's acquiescence to US-led sanctions on Russia has generated economic strain from Germany to the UK.

It remains to be seen whether most European leaders will continue to support US policy toward Ukraine as the Zelensky regime has increasingly failed in its efforts on the battlefield.

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US House Speaker Mike Johnson called for greater oversight of aid to Ukraine Sunday, questioning how US funds have been spent by the country.

"What is the endgame in Ukraine?" asked the congressional leader. "What is our strategy? What is the objective? How will we have proper oversight over these precious taxpayer dollars?"

"We need accountability for the people who are funding that," the speaker stressed.

Some Republicans have alleged an axis of corruption extending from Kiev to Biden in Washington; former President Donald Trump famously attempted to have authorities in Ukraine investigate Biden.

Johnson also slammed Biden's stonewalling of the House's impeachment inquiry, which seeks to investigate the Biden family's business dealings in Ukraine.

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The United States reportedly fears the failure of the IDF's campaign in Gaza to eliminate Hamas will lead Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to launch a war on Lebanon, it was revealed Sunday.

"The political logic for Netanyahu is to rebound… and have some kind of success to show to the Israeli public," said analyst Bilal Saab, noting that the longtime Israeli leader has become highly unpopular in his country.

"I'm not sure going after Hezbollah [in Lebanon] is the right way to do it because that campaign will be far more challenging than the one in Gaza," he added. Netanyahu faces prosecution on corruption charges in Israel if forced to step down from his position.

The IDF has reportedly already drawn up strike plans for Lebanon, according to Israeli media.

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Iran Faces 'All-Out Battle With the Enemy' Says Military Chief

The head of Iran's armed forces is known for his fiery rhetoric directed towards Israel, the United States, and Saudi Arabia.
The commander-in-chief of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) sounded a note of defiance in a speech Saturday, warning enemy countries to "stay away from this area."
"Today we are facing an all-out battle with the enemy," said Major General Hossein Salami in a ceremony marking the debut of a new ship and missile launchers.
The remark comes as war threatens to break out in the Red Sea, where Houthi militants in Yemen have been attacking ships associated with Israel in retribution for the country's incursion in Gaza. The death toll recently reached 22,438 in the besieged enclave according to local authorities.
"We need to defend our national interests to wherever they extend," said the general in the speech carried on Iranian television. "It will be harmful for the enemy to be found near and at a half distant."
He added that Iran's navy had made a "brilliant leap in its offensive and defensive powers."
The United States recently announced a coalition of countries would work together to counter the Houthis' attacks, but the Biden administration has had difficulty securing substantial commitments. Spain was originally believed to be part of the coalition, but its defense minister clarified it would only act along with NATO or the EU. France insisted its ships would only operate under its own command.
Meanwhile several shipping countries have begun taking longer routes around Africa in order to avoid the area.
Iran sent a warship to the Red Sea earlier this month to protect its own commercial interests there. Some analysts have suggested Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu desires a broader

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war between the United States and Israel's arch-enemy Iran. Netanyahu frequently employs threatening rhetoric against the country.
The Israeli president recently announced military operations would continue in Gaza for several more months, but international condemnation of the country's conduct there is mounting. Recently South Africa filed charges against Israel in the International Court of Justice, accusing the country of authoring genocide. Israel is expected to answer the charges next week in The Hague.

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Italy Calls for 'European Army,' Suggesting Desire for Greater Independence from US

Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani called for the creation of a European Union military force Sunday, reviving an idea that has been occasionally floated by leaders throughout the continent. "If we want to be peacekeepers in the world, we need a European military," the foreign policy chief stated in an interview with an Italian newspaper. "This is a fundamental precondition to be able to have an effective European foreign policy."
"In a world with powerful players like the United States, China, India, Russia – with crises from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific – Italian, German, French or Slovenian citizens can only be protected by something that already exists, namely the European Union," Tajani emphasized.
The comment represents an expression of independence on the part of Italy's ruling right-wing Brothers of Italy party. Some observers believed populist Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni might challenge Western military prerogatives after taking office late in 2022. But Meloni has supported US backing of Israel as well as continued lethal aid to Ukraine.
Some European leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron have suggested the idea of an EU army in the past. Macron famously called NATO "brain dead" in 2019 and said Europe should pursue "strategic autonomy" from Washington. However Macron changed his position after the launch of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, now supporting NATO expansion in Europe.
Macron was preceded in his desire for greater French sovereignty by historical leaders like Charles de Gaulle, who refused to place the country's military under NATO control in the 1960s. He also rejected the establishment of NATO bases in France, seeing the alliance as a tool of US domination.
Although NATO is ostensibly an alliance of equals, every supreme allied commander of the bloc has been American. Some throughout Europe have begun to question the continent's subservience to US foreign policy as Western-backed economic sanctions against Russia have backfired, causing a major energy affordability crisis. Europe was rocked by demonstrations protesting the rising cost of living last year and some German industry has been forced to shut down.
But the rearming of Europe also brings to mind some of the greatest historical tragedies of the twentieth century. After decades of disarmament, Germany has begun to expand its military

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capabilities in recent years. Russia views the expansion of NATO as a threat to its security and has cited the concern in relation to its special military operation in the Donbass region.
In Germany, right-wing political parties have been gaining prominence with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party securing support of more and more voters, according to recent regional elections. Right-wing politicians are also enjoying greater support in Spain, the Netherlands, and in Italy via Meloni's aforementioned Brothers of Italy party.

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US House Speaker Suggests Corruption a Concern in Washington, Kiev

House leader Mike Johnson called for oversight of Ukraine aid, continued investigation of Biden, and a renewed focus on the US' southern border.
US House Speaker Mike Johnson called for greater oversight of US aid to Ukraine Sunday, suggesting concerns over corruption in Kiev played a role in many Republicans' hesitancy to approve further funding.
"What is the endgame in Ukraine?" asked the lawmaker rhetorically during a television interview. "What is our strategy? What is the objective? How will we have proper oversight over these precious taxpayer dollars?"
"What we're saying is, let's do this in a rational manner," he added. "We need accountability for the people who are funding that. The White House has not been forthcoming with those answers," Johnson stressed.
Americans' support for arming Ukraine has declined sharply over the last several months with a plurality now saying the US has sent too much money to the country. The anti-establishment flank of the Republican Party has led the charge against Ukraine aid as President Zelensky's vaunted 2023 counteroffensive against Russia was widely considered a failure.
Some Republicans have also alleged an axis of corruption extending from US President Joe Biden to Kiev. Former President Donald Trump famously attempted to have authorities in Ukraine investigate the Biden family's ties to the country, which are under a cloud of controversy.
Meanwhile Ukraine has been dubbed "the most corrupt nation in Europe" by journalists, with various data supporting the dubious honor. It was reported a year ago that the Kiev regime was using US aid to purchase Russian oil even as the two countries battled in the Donbass region, with officials pocketing the money saved from buying the cheaper fuel.
House Republicans pursued an impeachment inquiry against Biden late last year after it was revealed he had greater knowledge of his son Hunter Biden's business dealings than he originally claimed. Johnson slammed the Biden administration's lack of cooperation with their efforts, noting "the investigation has been impeded, the White House has suddenly refused to turn over documents that have been requested and certain witnesses that are key to unwinding exactly what happened."
"We have investigated these credible claims [of corruption], whistleblowers have come forward, we had three different committees of the House do extensive investigation on this," he added.

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“The investigations led to a certain point, the truth has been followed wherever it led, because that's the responsibility of Congress.”
Investigations have revealed that Biden was with his son Hunter during phone calls where Hunter discussed business dealings in Ukraine. Republicans have also unearthed a web of complex companies and financial maneuvers the Biden family has used to move money around. Biden was previously one of the poorest US senators with a reported net worth of negative $106,000 in 2008, but his financial fortunes have dramatically improved since his time as vice president under Barack Obama.
“You have more than $20 million that has been moved to the Biden family through many of their shell companies and in LLCs, that they set up. We know that a lot of that money came from foreign adversaries,” Johnson claimed Sunday.
“We know that Joe Biden discussed Hunter Biden's business dealings at least 22 times with his associates from these foreign countries, and we know he was not truthful about it, he lied about the American people at least 16 times on record,” he added. “So it raises a lot of questions.”
Johnson also insisted any further US aid to Ukraine must be accompanied by funds devoted to border security; House Republicans have made repeated efforts to legislatively link the two issues in recent weeks.
“We must secure the US border before we secure anyone else's,” Johnson insisted.

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US Reportedly Fears New Israel-Lebanon War After Netanyahu Struggles in Gaza

Senior IDF officers have reportedly already approved strike plans against the neighboring country where Israel is widely considered to have lost a war against Hezbollah in 2006.
The United States fears Israel will launch a major assault on Lebanon in the coming days, setting off a wider war in the region with “all hell breaking loose” according to sources in the Biden White House Sunday.
“It is in no one’s interest – not Israel’s, not the region’s, not the world’s – for this conflict to spread beyond Gaza,” said Matt Miller, a spokesman for US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.
The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) has sent signals in recent days that it’s planning an attack on Israel’s neighbor to the north after withdrawing troops from the Gaza Strip. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised to “destroy” the Palestinian group Hamas there after militants launched a major attack on Israel on October 7. But IDF ground troops have faced heavy casualties even as Israeli air strikes have killed more than 22,000 in the territory.
“IDF leadership understands very well that the most they can do is severely degrade the military capabilities of Hamas,” said analyst Bilal Saab in US media.
Faced with a perceived failure in his Gaza campaign and heavy unpopularity among the Israeli public, observers suggest Netanyahu is incentivized to shift his focus elsewhere. “The political logic for Netanyahu is to rebound… and have some kind of success to show to the Israeli public,” said Saab.

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"I'm not sure going after Hezbollah [in Lebanon] is the right way to do it because that campaign will be far more challenging than the one in Gaza," he added.
Israel stunned many observers when it launched a drone strike on Beirut last week, killing a Hamas commander there. The close US ally reportedly failed to notify Washington of the attack ahead of time.
The provocative attack in the Lebanese capital occurred on the four year anniversary of US President Donald Trump's killing of popular Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, causing observers to interpret it as a threat against another country in the region.
Netanyahu faces multiple corruption charges in Israel and faces the threat of prosecution if dislodged from his position as prime minister. With that in mind, analysts fear the longtime leader will launch a wider war in order to save his political career. US involvement could follow, especially if Iran enters the fray on behalf of its proxy forces.
Israel was previously involved in a 34-day war with Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006, which it is widely considered to have lost. Observers say the militant group has grown stronger since then.
Israeli forces also went to war in Lebanon in the early 1980s. IDF bombing of Beirut was so intense that US President Ronald Reagan called his counterpart in Israel Prime Minister Menachem Begin to urge him to cease the attack, labeling it a "holocaust." Begin was reportedly offended by the remark, believing the term shouldn't be used to describe Israel's killings.
The IDF has reportedly already drawn up strike plans for Lebanon, according to Israeli media. Over the weekend Blinken prepared for a trip to Israel, reportedly in order to help de-escalate the situation.
But both Blinken and US President Joe Biden have a long history of strong support for Israel, with Biden even referring to himself as a "Zionist." Biden once took to the floor of the Senate to stress Israel's importance as a proxy for US interests in the Middle East, saying, "If there were not an Israel, we'd have to invent one."
The Biden administration has occasionally suggested it's attempting to control its Middle Eastern ally but has been apparently unwilling to withhold military aid or suggest material consequences for their conduct. US representatives at the United Nations have repeatedly vetoed and watered down resolutions criticizing Israel.

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Plan to Bury Human Remains on Moon Draws Fire From Native Americans

Private companies are planning to send human remains to the lunar surface, but a Native American group rejects the idea.
Two private US companies are planning to rocket human remains into space for a burial on the moon, but the leader of the Navajo Nation has denounced the idea.
Monday morning's launch of the Peregrine lander represents the first effort by private companies to send a lander to the moon. United Launch Alliance and Astrobotic have contracted with various institutions seeking to contribute to the spacecraft's payload – among them are two companies seeking to bury DNA and human remains on the lunar surface.

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But the Navajo Nation, which along with other Native American tribes views the moon as highly sacred, opposes the idea.

“We're not trying to say, 'don't do exploration, don't go to the moon and don't do those types of scenarios,’” said Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren in a call with reporters. “All we're just saying is this is the one part that we feel like there should be some sacredness to it.”

Nygren calls the plan “an act of desecration” and has complained to the US Department of Transportation and NASA, whose Commercial Lunar Payload Services program sanctioned the launch.

“We recognize that some non-NASA commercial payloads can be a cause for concern to some communities,” respondedJoel Kearns, an administrator at NASA’s Science Mission Directorate. “And those communities may not understand that these missions are commercial and they're not U.S. government missions, like the ones that we're talking about.”

Kearns framed Monday’s launch as an opportunity to explore commercial opportunities created by space launches and insisted the US agency was powerless to intervene against the private companies. However the US government announced the creation of an “interagency group” to study the Navajo Nation's concerns.

The US government has historically ignored Native tribes’ complaints against desecration of symbols they consider sacred, such as when a giant monument was carved from Mount Rushmore, known as Tȟuŋkášila Šákpe or “Six Grandfathers” to the Lakota people. The Sioux Nation has demanded the return of the land the massive sculpture was carved on, which the US Supreme Court found was illegally seized from the tribe.

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US Air Force B-1 Bomber Crashes During Training Flight in South Dakota

The B-1 bomber is a nuclear-capable, jet-powered aircraft. With the largest payload of guided and unguided bombs, high speed and impressive handling, it is considered the backbone of the US bomber fleet. Of the 100 originally built, less than 60 remain in active service.

A B-1 Lancer bomber crashed during a training mission on Thursday in South Dakota, US military officials have confirmed.

According to a statement by the Ellsworth Air Force Base, the crash occurred at around 5:50 p.m. local time while attempting to land at the base during a training operation.

The statement confirmed all four crew members on board managed to safely eject from the aircraft. The bomber reportedly exploded after it crashed. Unverified emergency transmissions shared across social media described officials working to control an active fire at the scene.

According to media reports, the weather was foggy and icy in the area at the time of the crash. The accident was confined to the base itself, though nearby residents claimed on social media they felt the blast in their homes.

Ellsworth Air Force base is home to two squadrons of B-1 Lancer bombers.

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The accident is the second high-profile training exercise crash by the Air Force in less than three months. In late November, an Air Force CV-22 Osprey crashed off the coast of Japan, killing the crew on board.
The base's statement says further details on the crash will become available after a board of officers conducts an investigation.

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Biden White House Eyeing 'Another Firefight' in Asia With ROK-US Decapitation Drills

The militaries of South Korea and the United States have been conducting “decapitation drills” aimed at assassinating North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, South Korean officials admitted on South Korean television late last month.
The recent revelation that South Korea is staging so-called "decapitation drills" for a potential assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un underscores just how the Biden administration is "looking to start another firefight," journalist and activist George Koo told Sputnik.
The training drills have occasionally been spoken about among South Korean politicians but South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won Sik’s recent comments that “ROK-US special operation forces are… conducting [decapitation drill] training” proved a rare public admission that such plans exist.
Shin detailed that such assassination programs remain an “option” for South Korean and American forces.
“It seems to me that South Korea and Washington somehow got all the badly written screenplays from Hollywood,” Koo told Sputnik’s Critical Hour on Thursday. “All hell would break loose if they try it, whether they are successful or not. That is obviously a declaration of war.”
Co-host Wilmer Leon questioned the timing of the article’s release, noting it came out as tensions in the region have experienced a recent spike. Koo said it was in response to threats by North Korea in a “tit-for-tat rhetoric” that would lead to more tension in the area, potentially forcing someone to “push the button” to start a nuclear war.
“North Korea has steadfastly been reacting and responding to the threats from the US and South Korea,” Koo explained. “There's no abatement in sight and there's no stepping back… [it’s as if] the Biden administration is looking to start another firefight.”
Nearly every northern US city would fall under the umbrella of an intercontinental ballistic missile attack, Koo noted as fellow co-host Garland Nixon added there would not be “much left of South Korea either if they do that.”
Koo further pointed out that even if nuclear war were averted, the United States has proven incapable of securing a country after killing its leader.
“We did that with [Muammar] Gaddafi in Libya and what a mess that followed. Even though Libya did not have retaliatory nuclear weapons, we didn't win that one," he said, recalling similar steps were taken with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

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"We're pretty good at decapitating, but we are not very good at restoring order before, after, [or] at all."

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US House Report Reveals Trump Firms Earned Millions in Foreign Payments During Presidency

The revelations in the report are strikingly similar to accusations made by Republicans against the Biden family.

Former US President Donald Trump's companies received millions of dollars from foreign governments and companies while serving in the White House, new documents released by House Democrats have revealed.

The transactions were detailed in a report titled "White House For Sale" released on Thursday. It details millions in transactions received by Trump-owned companies, including from China, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates among other nations.

The biggest spender was China, which spent $5.5 million in total on business connected to Trump, including from China's Embassy in the US, a state-owned bank and Hainan Airlines Holding Company.

Saudi Arabia placed second, spending more than $615,000 at Trump-owned hotels.

There were no payments in the report from Russian entities, despite the long running Democrat conspiracy known as "Russiagate" that Trump conspired with Russia to influence the 2016 election.

As the report notes, while Trump handed over the day-to-day operations of his companies to his sons, he declined to divest his assets, as is typical for presidents before entering office. The report claims Trump maintained personal ownership and control of the companies, including the ability to draw on funds without outside oversight.

The report seemingly reflects accusations that Republicans have made against President Joe Biden and his family. Last month, House Republicans opened an informal impeachment inquiry into Biden, focusing on foreign business deals made by the president's family members.

Responding to the report, US Rep. James Comer (R-KY) argued the situations are not comparable.

"Former President Trump has legitimate businesses, but the Bidens do not," Comer argued, adding that in contrast to Trump, who owns several properties and businesses, the Bidens were simply "cashing in on the Biden name."

"No goods or services were provided other than access to Joe Biden and the Biden network," he said.

The son of the former president, Eric Trump, argued that his father's hawkish stance on China while in office proves he was not compromised.

"That narrative is insane, there is no president in United States history who was tougher on China than Donald Trump," he said, noting that the Chinese embassy had signed a 20-year lease in Trump Tower in 2008, long before the elder Trump entered office.

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The report, however, argues that while some payments were coming in, those same countries were lobbying the Trump administration for certain policies.

“These payments were made while these governments were promoting specific foreign policy goals with the Trump administration and even, at times, with President Trump himself, and as they were requesting specific actions from the United States to advance their own national policy objectives,” the report reads.

It also points to comments Trump made during a campaign rally in 2015, bragging about his relationship with Saudi Arabia.

“Saudi Arabia, I get along great with all of them,” he said, according to the report. “They buy apartments from me. They spend $40 million, $50 million. Am I supposed to dislike them? I like them very much!”

The report urges Congress to consider new disclosure rules that will help them obtain more information. The documents come from years of litigation by Democrats to access a portion of Trump’s business records. However, once Republicans gained control of Congress, those efforts were halted.

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US Navy Recovers Wreckage, Black Box From Deadly Osprey Crash in Japan

There were 844 military deaths due to accidents in 2022 according to the Defense Casualty Analysis System. Numbers for 2023 have not yet been published.

The US Navy has recovered the majority of the Air Force CV-22 Osprey ariel vehicle that crashed off the coast of Japan in late November. Significantly, the aircraft's block box was recovered, according to the Air Force.

The salvaged wreckage will be delivered to Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni where it, particularly the recorder, will aid in the military’s investigation into the crash.

“Critical equipment identified by investigation officials has been recovered, including the Voice and Data Recorder, often called the black box. The equipment will be transported to laboratories for data retrieval with follow analysis of the data at AFSOC,” the service detailed.

The Osprey is a tiltrotor military aircraft that can perform vertical takeoffs and landings like a helicopter but has a range in line with traditional turboprop planes. It crashed during a routine training mission, traveling from MCAS Iwakuni to Kadena Air Base.

Seven bodies of the eight-person crew have been recovered, the eighth remains missing but is presumed deceased.

According to Japanese media, the salvage was raised out of the ocean on December 27, but that date has not been confirmed by the US military. It was reportedly recovered using the USNS Salvor, a military Sealift Command rescue-and-salvage ship, which joined efforts by the Japanese government and civilian crews.

The analysis is expected to take several weeks

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US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen stated on Friday that the US economy reached a "soft landing," a phrase used to refer to an event in which the central bank is able to ease inflation and cool off a hot economy without creating an economic disaster.

“What we’re seeing now I think we can describe as a soft landing, and my hope is that it will continue,” Yellen said on Friday. “A year ago, most forecasters believed we would fall into a recession. Obviously, that hasn’t happened.”

But Yellen’s announcement that the US economy has reached a “soft landing” may do little to assuage Biden supporters, who have turned away from the commander-in-chief in recent months. Despite creating an economy which looks “good” on paper, Biden could face losing his job in 2024 as Americans continue to feel frustrated as they overpay for everyday necessities.

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Report: Trump Privately Fearing US Supreme Court May Back Colorado Ballot Decision

While the former president has reportedly told close confidantes that he believes the US Supreme Court will vote overwhelmingly in his favor, he has also shown signs of a growing paranoia that the high court may choose to do otherwise.

Former US President Donald Trump is reportedly growing nervous that the US Supreme Court - of which three justices were appointed during his term in office - could side against him in the fight over his disqualification from the Colorado 2024 primary ballot.

According to a recent report, Trump has privately expressed that he is concerned the conservative justices will rule against him out of fear of being viewed as “political" if they were to rule in his favor.

In an interview with a US news channel, Alina Habba, Trump’s attorney, echoed those same fears more openly.

"That's a concern that he's voiced to me, he's voiced to everybody publicly, not privately. And I can tell you that his concern is a valid one," Habba said. “Republicans are conservative, they get nervous.”

The high court grew much more conservative under the Trump administration, with the former president having appointed three conservative justices - Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett - to the bench.

“They - unfortunately - sometimes shy away from being pro-Trump because they feel that even if the law is on our side, they may appear to be swayed much like the Democratic side would do. So they’re trying to look neutral,” she added.

This week, Trump’s legal team asked the Supreme Court to intervene in Colorado’s decision to ban him from the primary ballot under the 14th Amendment’s insurrection clause. The court responded on Friday, revealing that it would hear oral arguments on the case on February 8.

Shenna Bellows, Maine’s secretary of state, also declared Trump ineligible for the state’s primary ballot, citing the same clause in her 34-page decision. Trump’s challenge to Bellows’ decision will be filed in a state court, as opposed to the Colorado decision which was appealed to the Supreme Court.

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While Trump's legal team battles the decision made in Maine and Colorado, they are also working on four criminal indictments in four different states.

On Friday, Chris Christie, the former New Jersey Governor and GOP presidential candidate, criticized the decisions saying they make the former president into a "martyr." Christie was once a political ally to Trump and has become one of the former president's biggest Republican critics.

"You know, he's very good at playing 'Poor me, poor me,' he's always complaining. The poor billionaire from New York who's spending everybody else's money to pay his legal fees," said Christie.

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Yellen Confirms US Economy Has Acquired 'Soft Landing' Status After Recession Worries

According to one report, the US was able to add 216,000 jobs in December and held the unemployment rate steady at 3.7%. However, that same report found that job growth slowed overall in 2023.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen stated on Friday that the US economy reached a "soft landing," a phrase used to refer to an event in which the central bank is able to ease inflation and cool off a hot economy without creating an economic disaster.

"What we're seeing now I think we can describe as a soft landing, and my hope is that it will continue," Yellen said on Friday.

"The American people did it," she added. "The American people go to work every day, participate in the labor market, and form new businesses. But President Biden has tried to create incentives that give Americans the tools they need to help this economy grow."

Yellen's comments follow a US job report that showed an unexpectedly strong job growth for the month of December, when the US economyadded 216,000 jobs to the market. Those numbers exceeded forecasts. However, the year of 2023 showed 2.7 million jobs (225,000 a month) added to the workforce, which was down from 4.8 million (399,000 a month) from the year 2022.

"There has been a lot of pessimism about the economy that's really proven unwarranted," she added. "A year ago, most forecasters believed we would fall into a recession. Obviously, that hasn't happened."

The pull back from the post-COVID surge may be a result of the Federal Reserve's efforts to pare back job and wage growth in order to reach the "soft landing" effect.

Yellen's announcement that the US economy has reached a "soft landing" may do little to assuage Biden supporters, who have turned away from the commander-in-chief in recent months.

Despite overseeing an economic recovery from the COVID pandemic and creating an economy which looks "good" on paper, Biden could face losing his job in 2024 as Americans continue to feel frustrated as they overpay for everyday necessities.

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In a statement addressing the jobs report on Friday, the president acknowledged the sore topic. "I know that some prices are still too high for too many Americans, and I am doing everything in my power to lower everyday costs for hard-working Americans," said Biden.

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Palace of Aigai, Where Alexander The Great Was Crowned, Reopened to Public

Built more than 2,300 years ago, the site would mark the rise of Alexander the Great before being destroyed by Romans in 148 BC.

On Friday, the 2,300-year-old Palace of Aigai in northern Greece was fully reopened. Its reintroduction to the world is part of a 16-year renovation that has cost more than 20 million euros ($22 million) and included financial support from the European Union.

The imposing structure takes up an area of approximately 15,000 square meters (3.7 acres) and is the largest building seen in classical antiquity. It was dubbed by one academic as the "Macedonian Parthenon", as the Parthenon could actually fit inside of it three times.

"After many years of painstaking work, we can reveal the palace… What we are doing today is an event of global importance," Greece's Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said during an inauguration event at the site on Friday.

The palace "has a cultural and national character, because it confirms the Greek identity of Macedonia throughout the centuries," Mitsotakis added.

Built more than 2,300 years ago during the reign of Phillip II who had transformed Macedonia into a dominant military power, the palace was where Alexander the Great was crowned king at the age of 20 after a political rival assassinated his father in 336 BCE.

Two years later Alexander would begin his conquest in the East that took him as far as modern-day Afghanistan.

The palace features a monumental propylon (a temple entrance), a mega peristyle (with 16 Doric columns on each side and could have accommodated 8,000 people), a dome, a library, and a "smaller" western peristyle that served auxiliary uses.

Sadly, this impressive piece of history was destroyed by the Romans in 148 BC. But excavations to unearth the site began in 1865 and continued until the 20th century. The restoration project then got off the ground in 2007 with assistance from the European Union---with an investment which is predicted to help boost Greece's tourist revenue.

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Largest-Ever Male Specimen of Deadly Spider Found in Australia

The deadly spider named "Hercules" will be used to help save lives.

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The largest ever male specimen of a Sydney funnel-web spider (Atrax robustus) was recently discovered on the Central Coast, about 50 miles north of Sydney. The spider was first given to a local hospital before being taken to its new home at the Australian Reptile Park.
Experts from the park then realized it was the largest male specimen ever discovered by a member of the Australian public.
The spider, now named “Hercules”, measures 7.9 centimeters (3.1 inches) from foot to foot, surpassing the measurement of the park’s previous record holder—a male named “Colossus”---from 2018. The largest funnel-web spider ever found was a female named “Megaspider”. In 2021 she was discovered, measuring 8 centimeters from foot to foot (about the size of a tarantula).
“We’re used to having pretty big funnel-web spiders donated to the park, however receiving a male funnel-web this big is like hitting the jackpot,” said Emma Teni, a spider keeper at Australian Reptile Park.
Typically, funnel-web spiders measure anywhere between 1 and 5 centimeters in length with females usually being larger and less deadly. They can most often be found in forested areas as well as suburban gardens in cities, including Sidney, as well as the coastal city of Newcastle in the north and the Blue Mountains in the west of Australia.
They dwell in burrows and will rush out to catch meals which may include invertebrates such as small lizards and beetles. But unfortunately, those burrows can include one’s backyard garden.
The Sydney funnel-web spider is also among Australia’s most venomous species, and is capable of killing a person in as little as 15 minutes. Its fangs are also incredibly sharp, and can pierce a human fingernail.
Since the development of an antivenom in the early 1980s, no deaths from the spider have occurred. Previous to the development of the antivenom, though, the University of Melbourne recorded at least 13 deaths caused by these spiders.
"People can bring any collected funnel-web spiders to the Reptile Park itself," Teni explained. "However, if they can’t get to us, we have drop off zones around Sydney, the Central Coast and Newcastle and all facilities are provided with a spider safety kit to house the spiders until the Australian Reptile Park staff can come and pick them up each week.”
Hercules will be added to the park’s antivenom program, where the spider’s venom will be extracted and used to create an antidote. The park believes this practice could save up to 300 lives every year.
“With having a male funnel-web this size in our collection, his venom output could be enormous, proving incredibly valuable for the park’s venom program,” said Teni.

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Astronomers Warn Moon's Resources Could be Destroyed by Exploitation

The European Space Agency (ESA) predicts that between $73 and $170 billion in revenue could be generated annually from the exploitation of celestial resources until 2045—or, until they run out.

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The Moon could be badly exploited and suffer irreversible damage, astronomers said, in an effort to caution those who wish to survey the lunar landscape. Dozens of probes are gearing up to do so over the next few years.

Series of Moon explorers are being largely funded through NASA's $2.6 billion Commercial Lunar Payload Services (CLPS) initiative. CLPS contracts allow NASA to work alongside private American companies in order to "deliver science and technology to the lunar surface", according to their website. The companies "bid on delivering payloads for NASA", and beginning in 2023, commercial deliveries will "perform science experiments, test technologies, and demonstrate capabilities to help NASA explore the Moon as it prepares for human missions."

For example: just this week, the Peregrine mission one was announced to be preparing for its launch on Monday, making it the first US Moon lander since Apollo. The mission will aim to locate water molecules on the Moon, measure radiation and gasses around the lander, and evaluate the lunar exosphere, according to NASA.

But some astronomers are cautioning the excitement by warning that unrestricted access to the Moon's resources could cause irreversible damage, and could upend future research opportunities.

"The issue has become urgent," said Martin Elvis, of the Center for Astrophysics, Harvard & Smithsonian. "We need to act now because decisions made today will set the tone for our future behavior on the Moon."

Professor Richard Green, an astronomer from the University of Arizona, echoed those sentiments, adding: "We are not trying to block the building of lunar bases. However, there are only a handful of promising sites there and some of these are incredibly precious scientifically. We need to be very, very careful where we build our mines and bases."

"A few deep lunar craters have been discovered to have been shrouded in shadow since the Moon formed billions of years ago. Sunlight has never reached their floors and so they are unbelievably cold – probably only a few dozen degrees above absolute zero. And that makes them scientifically very valuable," Green explained.

These craters could be used to house tools like infra-red telescopes which are required to be cooled constantly. But these craters could also contain water in the form of very cold ice that failed to evaporate in the early stages of the Moon's life. Therefore, these seas of ice could hold information about how and when water arrived both on the Moon---as well as on Earth.

But lunar pole water, as well as many of the minerals found there, could be easily taken from by colonists and used for the construction of permanent bases on the Moon.

Plans to create a legislature to protect interplanetary resources may go into effect later this month. A working group created by the International Astronomical Union is planning to meet UN officials to begin negotiations, according to one report.

A 2018 study brought by ESA predicts that between $73 and $170 billion in revenue could be generated annually from the exploitation of celestial resources until 2045. Global powers may also have vested interests in lunar resources, such as helium-3 which is a key component of nuclear fusion.

"The trouble is that it takes a long time to make changes to UN treaties, so we have to act now if we are to have a hope of making sure we have international agreements in place to protect the unique scientific features of the Moon and ensure they are not destroyed through thoughtless exploitation," said Green, who is heading the working group.

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International treaties created during the Cold War prohibit the national appropriation of outer space, the Moon, and other celestial bodies. However, just because they don't "belong" to any particular party or group, does not mean they cannot be exploited. Rafael Harillo, a lawyer, defines the problem succinctly: "The sea belongs to everyone and the fish belongs to [the people] who catch them."

The Artemis Accords have already been signed by 33 countries, after first being launched in October of 2020 under the Donald Trump administration. The agreement', which drew from the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, hopes to return humans to the Moon by 2025.

This multilateral agreement contemplates and justifies the extraction of resources, explained one lawyer, without implying "intrinsically national appropriation," meaning: when "nations engage in mining activities on the Moon, they do not obtain property rights over the extracted materials". But the accords are not legally binding, and have received heated criticism for being too US-centered. The accords also do little to prevent private companies from mining precious resources.

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Woman in Her 90s Found Alive in Rubble Five Days Following Earthquake in Japan

The death toll from the 7.5-magnitude earthquake climbed over 120, including a 5-year-old boy who died on Friday.

An elderly woman in her 90s was miraculously discovered alive under rubble five days after an earthquake hit central Japan. She was found by rescue workers in the wreckage of a two-story building in Suzu, a city located in the Ishikawa Prefecture of Japan.

The 7.5-magnitude earthquake first slammed into the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa Prefecture just shortly before 4 PM local time (7:00 GMT). At least 126 people have died while 200 people are still missing, according to reports. Eleven people were reported to be trapped under two homes that collapsed in Anamizu.

At least 30,000 people had been evacuated to auditoriums, schools and other facilities in response to the quake. And at least 100 rescuers—including soldiers and firefighters—were sent to the city upon learning that two women had been buried there. An elderly woman in her 90s was reportedly responsive when she was discovered, but suffering from hypothermia.

A woman in her 40s was also discovered under the rubble, in a state of cardiopulmonary arrest. The women were reportedly found more than five days after being buried by the 7.6 magnitude quake. Typically, chances of survival in the first 72 hours after an earthquake diminish rapidly.

The condition of a 5-year-old boy who sustained injuries during the earthquake worsened and he died on Friday. The boy had suffered injuries after boiling water spilled on him during the quake.

The highest number of deaths were recorded in Wajima city followed by Suzu with more than 500 people injured. At least 100 landslides hit the area, with some blocking roads. The earthquake's aftershocks threatened to bury more homes. Some roads were already partially

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collapsed and others which were greatly damaged were at further risk of collapsing from the aftershocks which would threaten relief shipments.

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Millions of Americans Across the US Experiencing Powerful Winter Storm

The New Year has kicked off with a powerful winter storm for millions of Americans in the Northeast. The storm is forecasted to bring heavy snow, blizzard conditions, strong winds and flooding.

A US winter storm is on track to move from the Southwest---near the Gulf Coast---to the Northeast, stretching all the way to Maine. That storm will eventually end on Sunday, but the next storm is forecasted to begin on Tuesday bringing several inches of rain that night (into Wednesday) for much of New England. The storm will also wreak havoc across the US, just east of the Rockies, beginning on Monday.

Snow impacted about 60 million residents in the Northeast across the weekend, many of which were college students returning to campus following their winter break. Moderate to heavy snow is forecasted for the central Appalachians as well as much of New England, according to one report. Snow had already accumulated to six inches across areas of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Maryland.

Snowfall is expected to reach six to 12 inches across Omaha, Des Moines, the north region of Chicago, and south of Green Bay, Wisconsin. Northern New Mexico and the southern region of Colorado could also expect to see a foot of snow, while other parts of Colorado were forecasted to receive up to 30 inches.

For Americans living in northwestern Pennsylvania, much of New York and New Jersey, and all of New England, the storm spiraled into a major snowstorm. Boston is expected to receive an accumulation of four to eight inches of snow, while cities in Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, Vermont and New Hampshire could pick up six to 10 inches of snow, while southern Maine could see as much as 12 to 18 inches of snow.

More than 15 million Americans living across Texas to Florida are under severe storm threats for Monday. An additional 35 million who live between Florida's Panhandle to the Outer Banks of North Carolina are under the same threat level for Tuesday.

Strong winds are also expected for Tuesday, moving across the West North Central US down through the West South Central US—missing much of Texas but still hitting east Texas, and then through the East South Central US up through to Washington, DC, as well as Buffalo, New York. Wind speeds are forecasted to be anywhere from 40 to 60 miles per hour, with the maximum wind speed predicted to be 75 miles per hour. The wind could down trees and cause widespread power outages.

The storm will then continue into Tuesday as well Tuesday night with rain and thunderstorms expected in the South Atlantic US as well as Alabama. Rain, snow, and ice will stretch across the South up into the Northeast US including: Tennessee, Indiana, Ohio, and parts of Michigan

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and much of New England. Snow will continue for Missouri, Iowa, and parts of Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan.

The National Weather Service releases an Excessive Rainfall Discussion on Sunday, warning of a moderate risk of excessive rainfall for the Southeast (near the Gulf Coast) that is expected for Monday into Tuesday. The "anomalously deep cyclone" will move across the Southern Plains towards the lower to mid-Mississippi Valley.

"Widespread and potentially significant river and flash flooding are likely from the central Gulf Coast through much of the Eastern U.S. early this week," the Weather Prediction Center said. "Powerful onshore winds will lead to widespread coastal flooding along the eastern Gulf Coast and much of the East Coast."

Rainfall totaling one to 3 inches is forecasted for the Gulf Coast all the way up through New England with some areas even forecasted to receive more than four inches. Flood risks may become a concern for the Northeast, as it will follow their snowstorm from the weekend and add to the accumulation. Flood risks are also in place along the western coast of Louisiana to Florida's Panhandle.

Winds will then increase again on Tuesday night for a majority of those living in: New England, much of New York and New Jersey, the eastern parts of Pennsylvania, Washington, DC, and the eastern regions of North Carolina and South Carolina. That same wind circulation will reportedly affect Kentucky, Indiana, and the northern region of Tennessee, as well as the eastern regions of Illinois and Wisconsin. Wind speeds could reach a maximum of 90 miles per hour, and more power outages and downed trees are to be expected.

"Gusty winds on the warm side of the storm may exceed 50 MPH and cause damage over the Appalachians to the East Coast," the Weather Prediction Center added.

Boston's National Weather Service office has even suggested that they will have to issue hurricane-force wind watches for coastal areas during the storm. Some of those winds, they said, could be close to a Category 1 hurricane. The storm may also make beach erosion and high surf a threat for many coastal regions.

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Pence Denounces Conspiracy That FBI Was Behind Jan 6, But Claims 'Riot' Was Not an 'Insurrection'

According to a report from November, the former Vice President said in the wake of the 2020 presidential election that Trump had surrounded himself with "crank" attorneys, embraced "un-American" legal theories, and nearly Pushed the US toward a "constitutional crisis".

On Sunday, former Vice President Mike Pence denounced the debunked conspiracy theory that the US Federal Bureau of Investigation was responsible for instigating the January 6, 2021 attack or "insurrection". Pence was the VP under former President Donald Trump, who is taking on new legal battles as Maine and Colorado have pushed him off of their primary election ballots after citing an insurrection clause in the US Constitution as their reasoning.

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"I've seen the director of the FBI repeatedly assure the American people that the FBI were not the instigators of the riot that occurred on January 6. And frankly I'm very grateful for the efforts of the FBI to bring nearly 1,000 people to justice who ransacked our capital and who did violence against police officers that day," the former VP told an American news reporter.

"We've been assured again and again that it was not the case," he continued.

"I just must tell you, having been there that day, to see people literally breaking windows, ransacking the Capitol, it just infuriated me. I remember thinking 'not this, not here, not at the United States Capitol,'" Pence added.

Pence's statement is in response to a recent poll which found that a quarter of Americans believe the FBI was responsible for instigating the January 6 US Capitol attack. Even after detailed congressional investigations and about 700 defendants pleaded guilty to crimes committed during the attack, the debunked conspiracy theory has continued to be pushed.

At least 34% of Republicans believe this conspiracy theory to be true, compared to 30% of independents and 13% of Democrats. And at least 44% of those who voted for Trump believe the conspiracy theory that the FBI instigated the January 6 attack, the poll also found.

During the criminal hearings which stemmed from the attack, attorneys for January 6 defendants have blamed Trump for their clients behavior, and cited Trump's encouragements to "fight like hell" as well as his debunked voter fraud claims.

Trump continues to encourage such theorizing as well. Speaking at a rally in Sioux, Center Iowa on Friday---the day before the anniversary of the attack---he said: "By the way, there was Antifa, there was FBI, there were a lot of other people there too leading the charge,"

In reference to Trump's struggle to stay on primary election ballots in the states of Maine and Colorado, Pence was asked if he believes Trump engaged in insurrection on January 6, 2021.

"I've never called what happened on January 6 an insurrection," Pence said. "It is noteworthy that even in the federal case in Washington, DC the president hasn't been charged with insurrection."

"I was there, it was a riot, the way it broke out. And I've never seen it any other way. And while I said the president's words were reckless—and I believe that history and the American people will hold him ultimately to account for his role in that day—I think these efforts to take the decisions away from the American people are antithetical to the very democracy that President Biden and many Democrats talk about wanting to defend," said Pence.

"I'm very confident that the American people will choose wisely, I'm confident that we'll run our elections, but removing the former president or any other candidate from the choice of the American people I don't believe is in the interest of the country and I have reason to be confident that the Supreme Court of the United States will see it just that way," Pence concluded.

During his rally on Friday in Iowa, Trump warned that the US would be in "big, big trouble" should the US Supreme Court side with Colorado in their case against Trump.

Colorado's Supreme Court determined last month that the former president's name should be barred from the state's primary ballot over his role in the January 6 insurrection, citing the 14th Amendment's insurrection clause. He was removed from the ballot in Maine, which cited the same clause. Meanwhile, Trump's legal team continues to battle four criminal indictments against the former president which are spread out across four different states.

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Disgraced Prince Andrew Not Going Anywhere Following Epstein Document Dump - Report

King Charles III's disgraced brother Prince Andrew will reportedly reject any efforts to be evicted from his mansion by the King after his name was featured nearly 70 times in newly unsealed documents related to the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Prince Andrew has previously settled a lawsuit in 2022 with his accused victim, who says she was only 17-years-old when she was trafficked and coerced into having sex with Prince Andrew by the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. As a result, Andrew's public standing was irreversibly tarnished and he was made to step back from his royal duties.

But recently, unsealed documents from a 2015 defamation suit against Ghislaine Maxwell, Epstein's girlfriend, have unveiled more salacious details of Andrew's crimes. The papers also reference other celebrities, including former President Bill Clinton and Stephen Hawking.

In light of the "Epstein document dump", the Duke of York, 63, has reportedly vowed to fight any attempt to be evicted from his 30-room Royal Lodge in Windsor which he shares with his ex-wife, Sarah Ferguson.

"The King can't force him out. He has a cast iron lease that he has absolutely every intention of honoring," a source said, referring to a 75-year lease Andrew signed in 2003. Andrew has reportedly spent over 7.5 million British pounds on the estate ($9.5 million) and still owes more than $2 million in repairs.

The King has reportedly considered moving his disgraced brother into a smaller home, such as the Duke and Duchess of Sussex Harry and Meghan's former home Frogmore Cottage. He has also considered cutting off his brother's security funding at the estate, according to reports.

In a 2014 court filing, one victim said she was "forced to have sexual relations with this Prince when she was a minor in three separate geographical locations". The locations included Maxwell's London apartment, a separate location in New York, and "on Epstein's private island in the US Virgin Islands (in an orgy with numerous other underaged girls)."

Epstein reportedly told a victim to give Andrew "whatever he demanded". And another accuser said in her deposition that Andrew touched her breast while they were posing for a photo on a couch at Epstein's Manhattan townhouse in 2001. During that testimony, the victim said he groped another underage girl's breast with a puppet that looked like him.

And according to Epstein's former butler—who worked for the sex offender from 1991 until 2002—Andrew received "daily" massages when he "spent weeks" at Epstein's Palm Beach, Florida mansion.

According to a 2019 indictment against Epstein, the late financier would lure his child victims under the impression that they would give him a massage which would then "become increasingly sexual in nature". It is not presently clear if the massages Andrew received were such as that.

"I can't remember if he had more than one [per day], but I think it was just a massage for him," the butler said of Andrew's "massages".

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According to a report, the unveiled documents do not reveal any new major allegations, though they mention Andrew nearly 70 times. Many of the new names revealed include victims, members of law enforcement officials, Epstein's household staff, and friends and family. And not everyone mentioned in the documents committed some kind of wrongdoing. More documents are expected to be released in the coming days after 191 of about 250 documents were first unsealed on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday.

Some of those who were accused of committing wrongdoing include: the American investor Glenn Dubin, American billionaire heir and businessman Tom Pritzker, the late French modeling scout Jean-Luc Brunel, the late New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, and lawyer and former Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz. Both former presidents Bill Clinton and Donald Trump appeared in the documents, but were not implicated in anything illegal.

American financier Epstein, 66, was indicted on federal sex trafficking charges in July of 2019. He died by suicide in jail before he could face trial. While testifying for a 2016 sexual abuse lawsuit, he invoked the Fifth Amendment about 600 times. Maxwell was then arrested in 2020 and accused of assisting Epstein in his abuse scheme. She was convicted by a federal jury in December of 2021 on five federal counts, including sex trafficking a minor and conspiracy, and is now serving 20 years in prison.

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WWII-Era Munitions Discovered Off Southern California Coast at Dumping Site

Among the discovered items were Hedgehog and Mark 9 depth charges, as well as Mark 1 smoke floats.

While working to map parts of Southern California's deep-sea as part of a follow-up survey, an unexpected discovery was made when World War II munitions were found scattered across the seafloor. The munitions, which were found off the coast of Los Angeles, include anti-submarine weapons and smoke devices, marine researchers said on Friday.

The discovery was made during a survey of the known offshore site in April, in an area known to have been used as a dumping ground for industrial and chemical waste from the 1930s through the 1970s. The surveys are a part of an effort to better understand the impact of these industrial dumping sites, which has led to the presence of the pesticide DDT that is harming marine life and has been linked to cancer in sea lions.

The research is being led by UC San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography, and is a follow-up to the discovery of more than 25,000 "barrel-like" objects that were found using sonar in 2021. The barrels were believed to contain DDT, but further research suggested that the DDT contamination is actually linked to acid waste containing DDT that was stored in above-ground tanks that were then dumped into the sea from barges.

"Our analysis of sediments are showing that bulk dumping of DDT acid waste was the norm, that DDT immediately entered the environment and was likely not in barrels," said David Valentine, a researcher with UC Santa Barbara.

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Using hundreds of hours of high-definition video of the area, researchers were able to identify some of the mysterious objects and barrels thousands of feet below the surface. They concluded that most of the objects were “multiple types of discarded military munitions and pyrotechnics,” said Scripps researchers.

“In every debris line sampled with video, the majority of targets were found to be munitions,” Scripps said. “According to scientist Eric Terrill: ‘we started to find the same objects by the dozens, if not hundreds.”’

Among the discovered items were Hedgehog and Mark 9 depth charges which were typically used to attack submarines, and Mark 1 smoke floats which are chemical smoke munitions used by warships to conceal movements.

“This is a really interesting piece of work, because what it demonstrated or what it validated is that in fact there aren’t a huge, vast quantity of barrels down there — at least not what we were thinking,” said Brice Simmons, a marine biologist with Scripps, on Friday. “It turns out that a lot of the dumping was simply bulk material dumped off to the side.”

Officials from the US Navy told researchers at Scripps that the “disposal of munitions at sea at this location was approved at that time to ensure safe disposal when naval vessels returned to U.S. port.” But they added that they are reviewing the findings to determine “the best path forward to ensure that the risk to human health and the environment is managed appropriately.”

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Biden Says Senior Advisor on Infrastructure Mitch Landrieu Leaving Administration

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden announced on Monday that his Senior Adviser on Infrastructure Coordination Mitch Landrieu is leaving the administration.

"I offer my deepest gratitude to Mitch for his leadership and for his decades of service to the American people. I will miss his counsel greatly," Biden said in a statement.

The president noted that under Landrieu’s leadership, the United States announced more than 40,000 infrastructure projects.

In addition, Biden said the United States expanded affordable high-speed internet access to more than 22 million people and started improvements on some 135,000 miles of roads.

Biden did not explain why Landrieu is leaving his current position. However, US media reported that he will be co-chairing the Biden-Harris campaign ahead of the upcoming 2024 presidential elections in November.

Landrieu is expected to join the Biden-Harris campaign in the coming weeks, according to the reports.

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US Looks Forward to Engaging With New UN Chief's Personal Envoy for Cyprus - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is looking forward to engaging with Maria Angela Holguin Cuellar, who was appointed to serve the UN Secretary-General's personal envoy for Cyprus, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"Ms. Holguin brings considerable foreign policy expertise to this role, and the United States looks forward to engaging with her as she undertakes her efforts to search for common ground on the way forward toward a peaceful and prosperous future for the people of Cyprus," Miller said in a statement.

The spokesperson said Holguin's appointment comes at a critical juncture in which direct and sustained engagement is essential, recognizing that the future of all Cypriots will be impacted by the efforts.

Miller also emphasized the United States' steadfast support for the UN Security Council's framework for Cyprus.

Cyprus has been de divided into a Greek and a Turkish part since 1974. The northern part in 1983 declared itself to be the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and is recognized by Turkey. Negotiations on the reunification of Cyprus have been underway soon after the island's partition.

The United Nations has attempted to mediate the reunification talks but negotiations have reached an impasse. The Cypriot Greeks have voiced their stance to settle the issue only on the basis of United Nations decisions within the framework of a two-zone federation. The Cypriot Turks have advocated for establishing a confederation of two equal republics.

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Blinken, UAE President Discuss Need to Prevent Gaza Conflict From Spreading - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a meeting with UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan stressed the need to prevent the conflict in Gaza from further spreading, State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a readout on Monday.

"Blinken emphasized the importance of preventing further spread of the conflict and stressed continued US commitment to securing lasting regional peace that ensures Israel's security and advances the establishment of an independent Palestinian state," Miller said after the meeting, which took place Abu Dhabi.

Blinken also thanked the UEA for its contributions to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza and stressed the need to address the humanitarian needs of the people in the enclave, Miller added.

Blinken and Sheikh Mohammed also discussed the importance of ending the conflict in Sudan, the spokesperson shared.

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.

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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 22,800 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.

After the outbreak of the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas, the Houthis have intensified their attacks on cargo ships they believe to be linked to Israel in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, vowing to continue the attacks until Israel ends its military actions in the Gaza Strip.

The disruption to maritime trade routes led to the formation of a US-led maritime coalition to provide security for ships navigating through the region.

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Attacks on Serbian Church Prompt More Americans to Explore Orthodox Christianity - Bishop

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The attacks on the Serbian Orthodox Church during and after the Yugoslav wars have prompted some Americans to learn more about Orthodox Christianity, with some of them converting to it, Bishop Jerome (Shaw) of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) told Sputnik.

The bishop, who was born and raised in the United States and converted to Eastern Orthodoxy in the 1960s, said that news about Orthodox Christianity in years past were often published in the US newspapers' culinary sections.

However, the Western attacks on Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church during the 1990s and later on changed the situation and stories about that part of the Christian world became "hard news," he said.

"As a result, more and more people found themselves asking 'What is it that somebody hates so much - and why?' Thus, many Americans went from cultural to ideological Orthodoxy and finally joined the Orthodox church," he said.

The interest in Orthodox Christianity may also be in part because the Russian Orthodox Church may be the most change-resistant institution among the other denominations, Bishop Jerome said. Services and other customs remain as they have been for centuries and only few "secondary" traditions had changed, he added.

Archpriest Michael van Opstall, rector of ROCOR's St. George church in the US state of Utah, said that an increasing number of Americans have expressed interest in Russian Orthodox Christian traditions.

"I suspect that changes happening elsewhere in the world are pushing some people to seek something more firm and less changing," Opstall said.

While some Orthodox denominations turned to the so-called "new" calendar and began celebrating Christmas on December 25, the Russian Orthodox Church, including ROCOR, continues to follow the old calendar style and commemorates the Nativity of Christ on January

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7, he said.

When asked about differences in holiday traditions in Russia and the United States, Opstall said most ROCOR parishes hold the Divine Liturgy in the morning, as they have for decades, but in Russia, the Moscow Patriarchate generally holds it at midnight.

Bishop Jerome pointed out that Christmas in the United States has been commercialized but in Orthodox Christianity it is "first and foremost a religious event."

The bishop noted that after the split into Eastern and Western Christianity in 1054, the latter went a long way through reformation, counter-reformation, Jesuit reform and other changes, resulting in the change of many traditions.

"Efforts have also been made in this country to secularize Christmas observances so that some avoid saying 'Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year' lest they offend non-Christians by mentioning anything connected with the New Testament or with the Bible at all. But the result of all that has been that for those who do keep to Christmas, the spiritual meaning is felt all the more," he said.

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REVIEW: Shadow of January 6 Capitol Riot Looming Large Over US Democracy Three Years After

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Three years after the January 6 storming of the US Capitol after then-US President Donald Trump's election defeat, the United States appears to remain in a sort of Cold Civil War, analysts told Sputnik.

On January 6, 2021, a mob of Trump supporters breached the US Capitol in an attempt to halt Congress from verifying the election results.

Following the January 6 riot, the then Democrat-majority House impeached Trump for "incitement of insurrection." The former US president also faces federal and state charges for alleged election inference in connection to January 6. Trump has denied doing any wrongdoing and of having the legal right to challenge the results of the 2020 election.

Most recently, the US states of Maine and Colorado have decided to oust Trump from their state primary ballots, citing the insurrectionist clause in 14th Amendment. but those decisions will not be effective until a higher court rules on the appeals to their decisions. There are also efforts in the states of Illinois, Massachusetts and California to possibly remove Trump from their state primary ballots as well.

SUPPRESSING DISSENT

The attempt to suppress all political dissent in the United States that had followed the events of January 6, 2021 is real, Europe-based financial analyst and political commentator Alex Krainer told Sputnik.

Krainer also stated that Trump had been subjected to a relentless wave of politically motivated indictments to try and discredit him and create a legal justification to prevent him from running against Biden as the Republican candidate in November.

"Today we see them using attrition lawfare against Trump to try to keep him from winning the

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White House again," Krainer said. "It seems to me that the United States is in a Cold Civil War."

Krainer predicts that even if Trump wins the Republican nomination, he would be forced into defeat by bureaucratic maneuvers and rigged processes.

"Trump losing again will only lead to further consolidation of power under the DNC politburo. ... What this means is that it's become extremely difficult to challenge the [Biden] administration's abuses through the regular, judicial channels which perhaps explains the continuing legal abuse of the January 6 'insurgents," Krainer said.

DESTROYING DEMOCRACY

US constitutional historian and political commentator Dan Lazare told Sputnik that the Democratic legal offensive against Trump is an obvious effort to knock him out of the presidential race before US voters have a chance to head to the polls.

Democrat-controlled state governments, such as Maine and Colorado, are part of a growing effort to delegitimize Trump and destroy democratic procedures, Lazare observed.

The constitutional principles being quoted to justify ousting Trump from primary state ballots have no precedent or valid principle, Lazare pointed out.

"The only conclusion voters will draw is that the Biden forces are as contemptuous of elections as any January 6 [protester]," he said.

The January 6, 2021 storming of the US Capitol represents "another step" towards the collapse of the democratic political process across the United States, according to Lazare.

"The Capitol Hill insurrection marked the further decay of a constitutional structure that has been in growing crisis since Watergate," he said.

University of Houston Professor of African American History Gerald Horne warns that another Trump defeat in the upcoming November vote will not end the current national political crisis, but would only exacerbate it.

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"In contrast to the rampaging crowds and extensive damage during numerous ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests (riots) across America where few protestors were prosecuted or convicted, numerous January 6 attendees have been thrown into prison and/or convicted in processes that appear to violate important Constitutional rights," Ortel told Sputnik.

Trump could return to the White House, but only under an open, free and fair election in November, Ortel said.

"I do not believe any likely Democrat candidate can defeat Trump other than by ‘successfully’ rigging the November 5, 2024 election," Ortel said.

On Friday, Biden during a campaign speech in Pennsylvania accused Trump of making comments reminiscent of those made by Nazi officials in Germany under the Third Reich. In December, Trump rejected comparisons to Nazi German leader Adolf Hitler and called them unwarranted.

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RPT- REVIEW: Shadow of January 6 Capitol Riot Looming Large Over US Democracy Three Years After

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Three years after the January 6 storming of the US Capitol after then-US President Donald Trump's election defeat, the United States appears to remain in a sort of Cold Civil War, analysts told Sputnik.

On January 6, 2021, a mob of Trump supporters breached the US Capitol in an attempt to halt Congress from verifying the election results.

Following the January 6 riot, the then Democrat-majority House impeached Trump for "incitement of insurrection." The former US president also faces federal and state charges for alleged election inference in connection to January 6. Trump has denied doing any wrongdoing and of having the legal right to challenge the results of the 2020 election.

Most recently, the US states of Maine and Colorado have decided to oust Trump from their state primary ballots, citing the insurrectionist clause in 14th Amendment. but those decisions will not be effective until a higher court rules on the appeals to their decisions. There are also efforts in the states of Illinois, Massachusetts and California to possibly remove Trump from their state primary ballots as well.

SUPPRESSING DISSENT

The attempt to suppress all political dissent in the United States that had followed the events of January 6, 2021 is real, Europe-based financial analyst and political commentator Alex Krainer told Sputnik.

Krainer also stated that Trump had been subjected to a relentless wave of politically motivated indictments to try and discredit him and create a legal justification to prevent him from running against Biden as the Republican candidate in November.

"Today we see them using attrition lawfare against Trump to try to keep him from winning the White House again," Krainer said. "It seems to me that the United States is in a Cold Civil War."

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Navajo Say Got No Assurance From US Officials to Remove Human Remains From Launch to Moon

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The Navajo tribe did not receive assurance from US officials during a recent meeting that human remains would be removed from an upcoming launch to the Moon, Navajo President Buu Nygren said during press conference.

The Navajo tribe raised concerns with the Biden administration about plans to send human remains aboard the first US unmanned robotic commercial space mission to the surface of the Moon. The Peregrine mission will launch on Monday and is expected to land on the Moon on February 23 carrying 21 scientific payloads, including human remains, according to NASA

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officials.

"We were given no reassurance that the human remains were not going to be transported to the Moon on Monday, and that was I think the toughest part to hear is that they're not going to remove the human remains," Nygren told reporters on Friday. "We were just told that a mistake has happened. We're sorry."

The Navajo Nation opposes sending human remains to the Moon because it, like many indigenous tribes, holds the Moon in high regard due to its significant role in their spirituality and sacred way of life.

Nygren said he requested White House staff consult with Native American tribes in a timely manner on any future US space missions that are going to carry human remains to the Moon so that we don't have only a few days to respond to any concerns.

"I know that there's another mission that I was informed of that will possibly have human remains into the future, so we've got months to prepare on this," Nygren said. "We're looking forward to getting other tribes on board."

The Navajo tribe does not oppose space exploration, it only opposes human remains being scattered on the Moon, Nygren said.

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Trump Says Biden Pennsylvania Speech Intended to Fearmonger

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donlad Trump said during remarks in Iowa that a speech earlier on Friday by President Joe Biden was intended to fearmonger concerns about Trump.

“Crooked Joe [Biden] is staging his pathetic, fearmongering campaign event in Pennsylvania today,” Trump said on Friday.

Earlier on Friday, Biden spoke in Pennsylvania, where he focused on perceived threats to democracy in the United States by Trump, on the eve of the anniversary of the January 6 US Capitol riot.

Biden compared comments made by Trump to rhetoric in Nazi Germany. In December, Trump rejected the comparisons and called them unwarranted.

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US Army Orders More Than $870Mln in Heavy Artillery Timing Fuzes - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The US Army has ordered more than $871 million worth of additional electronic fuzes for use on its 105mm and 155mm heavy artillery howitzers, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"L3 Fuzing and Ordnance Systems [of] Cincinnati, Ohio was awarded an $871,583,197

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...contract for M762A1/M767A1 electronic timing fuses," the release stated on Friday.
Work on the contract is scheduled to take five years with each order, with an estimated completion date of Jan. 4, 2029, the Defense Department said.
The M762A1/M767A1 is a military unique artillery fuze used on all existing and future US Army howitzer 105mm and 155mm weapon systems, according to published reports.

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Supreme Court Schedules To Hear Appeal of Trumps Colorado Ballot Disqualification - Order

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - In response to the appeal regarding the disqualification of Former President Donald Trump's Colorado ballot, the Supreme Court has approved the petition for a writ of certiorari, scheduling oral arguments for February 8, 2024.
"The petition for a writ of certiorari is granted. The case is set for oral argument on Thursday, February 8, 2024," the court order said on Friday.

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UPDATE - Ghislaine Maxwell Confirms Trips on Epstein Planes With Ex-US President Clinton - Filing

(Updates with more details in para 8)
WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Jeffrey Epstein associate Ghislaine Maxwell confirmed that she traveled on the sex criminal's private planes with former US President Bill Clinton, according to court documents.
"Have you traveled on Jeffrey's planes with President Clinton?" an interviewer asked Maxwell in a recorded deposition. "Yes, I have," Maxwell said.
However, Maxwell could not recall the exact dates of the trips and denied ever having dined with Clinton at any of Epstein's homes.
Epstein's private plane, dubbed the "Lolita Express," has been tied to theories about his alleged sex trafficking.
Epstein died in jail in 2019, while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges. Although Epstein's death was officially ruled a suicide, his brother Mark Epstein said on Thursday that he believes the financier was killed, potentially by the US government.
Another recently released court document revealed that one witness claimed that Clinton threatened US publication Vanity Fair not to publish articles about Epstein. A separate court filing included witness claims that Clinton likes "young" girls.
Documents filed Friday also revealed that plaintiffs in a case against Maxwell sought info on her communication with Hillary Clinton. Moreover, a document claimed that Maxwell's defense team refused to comply with discovery requests involving the Clinton Foundation.

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The filings also included correspondence between Epstein and Maxwell. Epstein encouraged Maxwell to challenge reporters to investigate the Clinton connection. Epstein also told Maxwell that she did "nothing wrong" and urged her to act as such.

Maxwell was found guilty on sex trafficking charges linked to Epstein in December 2021, for which she was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

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Pentagon Says Austin Taken to Hospital After Complications With Recent Medical Procedure

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was taken to the hospital earlier this week after he experienced complications following a recent medical procedure, Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Patrick Ryder said in a press release.

"On the evening of January 1, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III was admitted to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for complications following a recent elective medical procedure," Ryder said in the release on Friday without giving details about Austin's health issue.

Austin is recovering well and is expected to resume his full duties later on Friday, Ryder added.

During the ordeal, US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks was prepared to act for and exercise the powers of the Defense Secretary if required, according to Ryder.

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Over 100 Firefighters Try to Extinguish Fire at New Jersey Warehouse - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - More than 100 firefighters are working to extinguish a massive fire at a warehouse in Elizabeth, New Jersey, CBS News reported.

The fire has been burning for several hours, sending huge plumes of smoke in the sky that can be seen miles away, the report said on Friday afternoon.

Officials pointed out that they do not rule out that fully extinguishing the fire may take until the weekend, the report said.

The fire started on Friday morning in a vacant warehouse that was once owned by the Singer Sewing Machine Company. However, numerous businesses near the warehouse do operate.

Elizabeth Mayor Chris Bollwage said that the authorities stand ready for a long fight with the fire.

"This fire is going to burn out from the outside, there is no way that we can get firefighters inside the building," Bollwage said.

The mayor asked the New Jersey government to monitor the air quality in the area and beyond and promised to inform Elizabeth residents about the results of the monitoring.

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Epstein House Manager Says Prince Andrew Had 'Daily' Massages - Filing

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Duke of York Prince Andrew would receive daily massages when visiting convicted sex criminal Jeffrey Epstein's Palm Beach home, Epstein house manager Juan Alessi said in a deposition..

"And, so, when he [Prince Andrew] would come and stay, during that time would he frequently have massages?" the interviewer asked Alessi, according to a transcript of the deposition filed Friday. "I would says [sic], daily massages. They have a daily massage," Alessi said.

Both Prince Andrew and his ex-wife, Princess Sarah, were friends of Epstein, as well as Ghislaine Maxwell, Alessi said. Epstein died in 2019 while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges, whereas Maxwell was convicted on sex trafficking charges in 2021 and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Prince Andrew spent "weeks" at Epstein's home in Palm Beach, Florida, Alessi said.

The London police said earlier on Friday that they are not investigating allegations against Prince Andrew in connection to Epstein.

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Ghislaine Maxwell Confirms Trips on Epstein Planes With US President Clinton - Filing

(Update: edits dateline, adds details in para 7)

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Lebanon Files Complaint With UN Chief, UNSC After Israel Attacks Beirut

UNITED NATIONS, January 6 (Sputnik) - Lebanon has sent a letter of complaint to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the president of the UN Security Council after Israel conducted on Tuesday a deadly attack in Beirut, Lebanese mission to the United Nations spokesperson Katia Badr told Sputnik.
"Lebanon sent an identical letter to the president of the Security Council and the Secretary-General about Israel's attack on a residential area in the southern suburb of Beirut, which led to the killing of two Lebanese and five Palestinians," Badr said.
One of the killed - and primary target of Israel's drone attack - was the Palestinian movement Hamas' deputy political leader Saleh al-Arouri.
The letter characterized the attack as being the "most dangerous chapter" in a series of escalating, hostile acts perpetrated by Israel against Lebanon since October 8.
The incidents include Israel bombarding Lebanese villages; displacing civilians; using banned phosphorus munitions; and targeting positions belonging to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, the letter said.
"Lebanon calls on the United Nations to condemn this attack; pressure Israel to desist from escalation; and take all necessary measures to put a stop to Israeli attacks on the sovereignty, territorial integrity and people of Lebanon in order to prevent the conflict from escalating and plunging the entire region into an all-out destructive war that will be difficult to contain," the letter said.
France presides over the UN Security Council during the month of January.

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Biden Says Trump's Comments Reminiscent of Nazi Germany

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said during a speech in Pennsylvania that some of former US President Donald Trump's comments are reminiscent of those made by Nazi officials in Germany under the Third Reich.
"[Trump] calls those who oppose him 'vermin.' He talks about the blood of America being poisoned, echoing the same exact language used in Nazi Germany," Biden said on Friday.
Biden's speech focused on Trump's ties to the January 6 US Capitol riot and alleged threats posed to US democracy by the former president.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) -

MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS
* Attacks on vessels in the Red Sea have not had any meaningful impact on the supply and prices of energy products or even shipping rates in the United States, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Friday.
* The US Central Command said that Iraqi police discovered an Iranian-designed land-based cruise missile on Wednesday that had failed to launch.
* Several people involved in the deadly terrorist attack in the Iranian city of Kerman have been detained, Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi said.
* Lebanon has lodged a complaint against Israel with the UN Security Council over the attack on a Hamas office in Beirut's southern suburb on January 2, Lebanese media reported.
* The Israel Defense Forces said the country's air force had hit a Hezbollah operational command center in southern Lebanon.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* Russia's air defense destroyed a Ukrainian anti-ship missile Neptune over the northwestern part of the Black Sea, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday.
* US House Speaker Mike Johnson is contemplating having direct talks with President Joe Biden on the issues of aid for Ukraine and the migrant crisis on the US border with Mexico, Bloomberg reported.
* About 2,000 Ukrainian trucks are stuck on the Ukraine-Poland border after Polish carriers resumed the blockade of the Shehyni-Medyka checkpoint, the Ukrainian Border Guard Service said.
* Negotiators in the US Congress have made no breakthrough in the efforts to reach a deal to secure new funds for Ukraine and strengthen border security, but discussions are ongoing, a congressional source told Sputnik

ISRAEL INVASION OF GAZA
* EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell will visit Lebanon from January 5-7 to discuss the ongoing conflict between Palestinian movement Hamas and Israel with the country's leadership, the European External Action Service said on Friday.

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* The number of people killed by Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip has increased to 22,600, with over 57,900 others injured, the Palestinian enclave's health ministry said.
* Children in Gaza face a "deadly triple threat" that includes diseases, severe malnutrition and an escalation in military activities, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said.

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Schumer Says Monitoring Tour Bus Rollover, Extends Gratitude to First Responders - Post

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Senator Chuck Schumer said in a social media post that he is overseeing the rollover crash involving a tour bus on I-87, extending gratitude to the first responders on the scene.
"I am closely monitoring the situation with the rollover crash of a tour bus on I-87. I want to thank our brave first responders on the scene, and I'm praying for everyone involved," New York's Senator Chuck Schumer said on Friday.
According to reports, New York State Police responded to a crash on the southbound side of I-87 between Warrensburg and Lake George just before 1 pm on Friday.
The report added that the highway is closed between exits 23 and 22, and first responders are performing rescue operations.

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NRA Chief Wayne LaPierre Resigns Ahead of Civil Corruption Lawsuit

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Executive Vice President of the National Rifle Association Wayne LaPierre has announced his resignation from the organization just days ahead of a civil corruption lawsuit, LaPierre said in an NRA statement on Friday.
"With pride in all that we have accomplished, I am announcing my resignation from the NRA...I've been a card-carrying member of this organization for most of my adult life, and I will never stop supporting the NRA and its fight to defend Second Amendment freedom. My passion for our cause burns as deeply as ever," said LaPierre in the statement, which was published on the organization's website.
Current NRA head of operations Andrew Arulanandam will become interim CEO and executive vice president of the association, according to the website.
In 2020 New York Attorney General Letitia James filed a lawsuit seeking to dissolve the NRA, naming LaPierre among the organization's former CFO, Chief of Staff, and Executive Director of Operations, James alleges that the NRA commmitted tax fraud, violated laws for non-profit groups, and embezzled funds for personal use.
The NRA has since filed a countersuit in federal court alleging that James is violating their free speech protections.

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LaPierre's resignation is effective January 31.

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Apple Could Face Sweeping US Antitrust Lawsuit By First Half of Year - NYT

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Apple could face an antitrust lawsuit from the US government in a matter of months amid an investigation into the iPhone maker's market dominance behavior, the New York Times reported on Friday.

"The Justice Department is in the late stages of an investigation into Apple and could file a sweeping antitrust case taking aim at the company's strategies to protect the dominance of the iPhone as soon as the first half of this year," the report said, citing three people with knowledge of the matter.

Investigators were focused on how Apple used control over its hardware and software to make it harder for consumers to discontinue with the company's devices, as well as for rivals to compete, the report said.

"Specifically, investigators have examined how the Apple Watch works better with the iPhone than with other brands, as well as how Apple locks competitors out of its iMessage service," the Times said. "They have also scrutinized Apple's payments system for the iPhone, which blocks other financial firms from offering similar services."

Senior leaders in the Justice Department's antitrust division are reviewing the results of the investigation and have met with Apple multiple times, including in December, to discuss the outcome.

No final decision has been made on whether a lawsuit should be filed or what it should include, the Times said, adding that Apple has not had a final meeting with the Justice Department, in which it can make its case to the government before a lawsuit is filed.

Yet, The Times predicted that the suit against Apple, when it materializes, would likely be more expansive than previous challenges to the iPhone maker. This time, the action would target the company's powerful business model that draws together devices like the Apple Watch and services like Apple Pay to cultivate customer loyalty.

The probe came as Apple's competitors argued that they have been denied access to key Apple features, like the Siri virtual assistant, saying such practices were anticompetitive.

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Ghislaine Maxwell Confirms Trips on Epstein Planes With US President Clinton - Filing

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Jeffrey Epstein associate Ghislaine Maxwell confirmed that she traveled on the sex criminal's private planes with former US President Bill Clinton, according to court documents filed Friday.

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"Have you traveled on Jeffrey's planes with President Clinton?" an interviewer asked Maxwell in a recorded deposition. "Yes, I have," Maxwell said.

However, Maxwell could not recall the exact dates of the trips and denied ever having dined with Clinton at any of Epstein's homes.

Epstein's private plane, dubbed the "Lolita Express," has been tied to theories about his alleged sex trafficking.

Epstein died in jail in 2019, while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges. Although Epstein's death was officially ruled a suicide, his brother Mark Epstein said on Thursday that he believes the financier was killed, potentially by the US government.

Another recently released court document revealed that one witness claimed that Clinton threatened US publication Vanity Fair not to publish articles about Epstein. A separate court filing included witness claims that Clinton likes "young" girls.

Maxwell was found guilty on sex trafficking charges linked to Epstein in December 2021, for which she was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

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Canada Disappointed by US Anti-Dumping Determination on Tin Mill Steel Imports - Minister

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Canada is disappointed by the United States' anti-dumping determination on imports of Canadian tin mill steel products, International Trade Minister Mary Ng said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the US Department of Commerce determined that imports of tin mill products from Canada, China, Germany and South Korea were being unfairly priced or "dumped" in the US market. Consequently, it decided to impose duties on tin mill imports from Canada and several other countries.

"Today, the US Department of Commerce announced a final anti-dumping duty rate of 5.27% on imports of tin mill steel products from Canada. Canada is disappointed with this determination," Ng said as quoted in a statement issued by Global Affairs Canada.

Ng said that the Canadian steel industry is one that is reliable to its partners in the United States and one that plays an important role in North America's supply, manufacturing and delivery systems.

The imposed duties would weaken existing supply chains between Canada and the United States and significantly contribute to worsening the effects of inflation in both countries, Ng said.

Going forward, Canada will continue to defend the interests of the Canadian steel industry and its workers, Ng added.

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Oil Prices Up in First Trading Week of New Year After Dismal 2023 Close

NEW YORK, January 5 (Sputnik) - Oil prices jumped Friday to close in on their first positive week for 2024 amid the Israel-Hamas conflict and tensions in the Red Sea, even as major Wall Street banks JPMorgan and Bank of America warned of volatility ahead.

With an hour to settlement, US crude oil's West Texas Intermediate (WTI) benchmark was up $1.56, or 2.2%, to $73.75 per barrel.

London's Brent crude was $1.18, or 1.5%, higher at $78.77.

For the week, WTI was up almost 3% while Brent was about 2% higher.

Both crude benchmarks had finished 2023 down about 10% each. But since the new year began, the raging Israel-Hamas war and attacks on vessels in the Red Sea by Yemen's Houthis have helped crude prices recover.

Still, Bank of America said in a research note on Friday that it was taking a defensive stance toward oil stocks because of the long-term price forecast for oil.

The bank said it expects "the $70-$90 (a barrel) Brent trading range in place since OPEC+ intervened to hold".

OPEC+, a 23-nation oil producing alliance led by Saudi Arabia with Russia's help has been cutting production since last year to boost prices. But the effort has only been partly successful due to volatile crude supplies that often spiked, resulting in price crashes.

JPMorgan said it saw oil demand growth at its slowest in nine months in December. While demand in December possibly grew 1.3 million barrels a day year-on-year, demand for the whole of 2023 was estimated to have grown 1.8 million barrels a day.

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NY Attorney General Wants Trump to Pay $370Mln In Civil Fraud Trial - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - New York Attorney General Letitia James wants to make former president Donald Trump and his fellow defendants pay nearly $370 million for their alleged financial fraud, court documents filed on Friday showed.

"Defendants reaped hundreds of millions of dollars in ill-gotten gains through their unlawful conduct. Record evidence, including the substantively unrebutted testimony of Plaintiff's banking expert Michiel McCarty, supports disgorgement of $370 million, plus pre-judgment interest," New York Attorney General Letitia James argued in the filing.

Additionally, the attorney general asked for Trump and his co-defendants, including Allen Weisselberg and Jeffrey McConney, to be barred permanently from serving as officers or directors of a New York corporation.

"Lifetime injunctions barring Trump, Weisselberg and McConney from participating in the real estate industry in New York State or from serving as an officer or director of any New York corporation or other legal entity are necessary and appropriate," said the filing.

Two of Trump's sons, however, were offered a less stringent outcome, with the AG's office asking for a five-year ban on participating in the real estate industry in the state of New York or

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serving as an officer or director of any New York corporation or legal entity.
The document, which spans almost 100 pages, proceeds to summarize evidence from court, including incidences when both Trump and his associates testified during trial.
James brought the civil fraud case against Trump and his associates for allegedly lying about the value of Trump properties.
Trump has consistently denied wrongdoing, characterizing the case as a political witch hunt to prevent his re-election. His attorneys have also argued in separate briefs that no fraud has occurred, instead blaming misstatements on accidental accounting errors.
The filing comes less than a week before closing arguments in the ongoing civil fraud trial are set to begin on January 11. Penalties are expected to be decided by the presiding judge some time afterward.

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US House Speaker Mulls Direct Talks With Biden on Ukraine Aid, Border Security - Source

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson is considering direct talks with President Joe Biden soon about the crisis on the southern border and the White House's request for $106 billion in supplemental funds for Ukraine, Israel and other priorities, a source familiar with the matter told Sputnik on Friday.
"The Speaker said he is weighing it," the source said.
However, the source underscored that the "Senate still has the pen" at the moment.
Congressional Republicans have said they will not approve the White House's supplemental request without measures to strengthen border security and enforce stricter immigration policies.
Senate negotiators have been trying for weeks to reach a deal that would satisfy both the White House and congressional Republicans, but efforts to reach a compromise and pass supplemental funding legislation have stalled.
Another source familiar with the talks told Sputnik that there have been no breakthroughs in the negotiations, but that the discussions are ongoing and fluid.
The White House supplemental request includes $60 billion in new funding for Ukraine as well as additional funding for Israel, Taiwan and Indo-Pacific security.

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Canada, China, Germany and South Korea 'Dumping' Tin Mill Products in US - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Imports of tin mill products from Canada, China, Germany and the Republic of Korea are being unfairly priced or “dumped" in the US market, with those

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from China also being subsidized, the Department of Commerce said Friday.

"Commerce's antidumping and countervailing duty cases investigate the behavior of and seek to hold foreign producers accountable for their unfair trade practices," the department said in a statement. "These findings demonstrate that Commerce took a careful and nuanced approach based on the particular circumstances presented by each company and the governing provisions of US law."

Based on a "thorough, transparent, and data-driven investigation," the department said it found tin mill product makers from the four countries dumping their products in the United States.

It also cleared manufacturers from four other nations of such wrongdoing. "Commerce also finds that imports of tin mill products from the Netherlands, Taiwan, Turkey and the United Kingdom are not being dumped."

Following the issuance of final determinations, the US International Trade Commission, or ITC, will determine whether the domestic industry has been materially harmed or threatened by material injury by the unfairly traded imports.

"While Commerce's investigation focuses on unfair trade practices abroad, the ITC considers the impact on the US industry," the department said.

Only if both agencies come to affirmative final determinations can a trade remedy order and final duties go into effect, it added.

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'No Breakthroughs' in Congress Talks on New Ukraine Aid, Border Security - Source

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Negotiators in the US Congress have made no breakthroughs in their efforts to reach a deal to secure new funds for Ukraine and strengthen border security, but discussions are ongoing, a congressional source told Sputnik on Friday.

"Discussions are ongoing and fluid," the source said. "Efforts continue to tie additional funding [for Ukraine] with border security. No breakthroughs."

Republicans in Congress are trying to negotiate a deal with Democrats and the White House to include stronger border security policies in a supplemental funding bill that would include $60 billion in additional funds for Ukraine. The legislation is currently stalled in the Senate amid ongoing negotiations.

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Canadian Unemployment in December Unchanged, Holds at 5.8% - Statistics Canada

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The unemployment rate in Canada remained unchanged in December from the month before and stands at 5.8%, Statistics Canada Labor Force Survey revealed on Friday.

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"Employment was virtually unchanged (+0.0%) in December and the unemployment rate held steady at 5.8%," the survey said.

There were 1.2 million unemployed Canadians last month - an increase of 19.3% from the previous year, the survey said.

The employment rate fell 0.2 percentage points to 61.6%, as the population aged 15 and older grew by 74,000 (+0.2%), the survey said.

Employment grew among men aged 25-54 by 25,000 (0.4%) and among young woman aged 15-24 by 13,000 (1%), the survey said.

However, it marked a decrease of 27,000 in the category of men aged over 55 (-1.1%), the survey also said.

The employment rate had grown in four provinces, with British Columbia leading the trend with 18,000 added jobs. Ontario, on the other hand, saw the greatest decrease, with 48,000 fewer jobs.

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US House Oversight Says Probing State Dept. About Security Risks of Anti-Coal Efforts

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer sent a letter on Friday to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, seeking information about the State Department's cooperation with environmental groups on anti-coal initiatives and potential impacts on national security.

The House panel received communications between Special Presidential Climate Envoy John Kerry and environmental groups about opposing coal power and joining the Powering Past Coal Alliance (PPCA). The United States joined the PPCA in December.

“Chairman [James] Comer is investigating John Kerry’s collusion with Leftist Environmental Groups to undermine our national and energy security,” the House Oversight Committee said in a statement via social media platform X.

Documents provided to the committee reveal that the State Department sought and received feedback from environmental groups on the PPCA and enabled those groups to influence US foreign policy, Comer said in the letter to Blinken, as quoted by Fox News.

The documents raise concerns about sharing confidential US foreign policy, energy policy and national security policy with environmental groups, the letter said.

The House Oversight Committee is concerned that US government officials providing confidential information to such groups could allow them to pass it along to foreign governments, which could undermine US national and energy security, the letter said.

The letter requests that Blinken provide documents and communications linked to the State Department's decision to join the PPCA by January 19. The letter also requests a a staff briefing on the matter.

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Biden Says US Justice Dept. Denied More Than 500 Illegal Firearm Purchases

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department denied more than 500 illegal firearm purchases by people under the age of 21 through new gun control measures, President Joe Biden said on Friday.

"Thanks to the enhanced background checks enacted by the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, the Justice Department has now successfully denied more than 500 illegal gun purchases by people under 21 years old who presented a danger to our communities," Biden said in a statement.

The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act - signed into law on June 25, 2022 - bolsters background checks for firearms buyers under 21 years of age. The legislation also clarified which firearms dealers are required to obtain a federal firearms license.

Congress must enact universal background checks, ban so-called "assault weapons," pass a national red flag law and end the firearm industry's immunity from liability, the statement said.

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US Adds 216,000 Jobs in December, Showing Labor Resilience in Test to Federal Reserve

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-12)

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The United States added 216,000 jobs in December, the Labor Department said on Friday.

The reported number is some 25% higher than the one expected by Wall Street and is a test of the Federal Reserve's plans to cool the labor market adequately in order to cut interest rates later in 2024.

Wall Street economists polled by US media, on the average, had expected 175,000 jobs would be added last month. November's jobs growth was also revised to 173,000 from a previously published 199,000, making for a reduction of 25%.

The Fed has signaled that it is planning to cut interest rates in the coming months - for the first time in more than four years - if it can get US inflation back to its target of 2% a year.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, stood at 3.1% in November. It was at a four-decade high of 9.1% some 18 months ago as trillions of federal relief spending over the coronavirus pandemic combined with supply chain breakdowns to send prices soaring.

The Fed responded to the runaway inflation pressure by raising interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023.

Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said in December that those rate hikes had brought the central bank "very far" in its fight against inflation. But, he also cautioned that it may take longer than anticipated for interest rate cuts to begin, given the continued presence of inflationary pressures

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in the financial system.

Over the past year, the Fed had repeatedly pointed to an overheated labor market and wage growth - aside from soaring energy prices - as reasons for inflation remaining well above its target of 2% per year.

The Fed had raised rates by a total of 525 basis points since March 2022.

While policy-makers the world over typically celebrate on seeing good jobs numbers, the Fed is in a different predicament. The central bank wishes to see an easing of conditions that are a little "too good" now for the economy's own good - in this case, unemployment at more than 50-year lows and monthly wages that have grown at yearly rates of 4% to 5% since July 2021.

Such job security and earnings have cushioned many Americans from the worst price pressures since the 1980s and encouraged them to continue spending, further feeding inflation.

The Fed's mandate for maximum employment means an unemployment rate below 4%. That has been achieved since January 2022, with last month's rate remaining at 3.8%. The central bank's goal for inflation has remained elusive though.

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Biden's Budget Chief Says Not Optimistic on Possible Government Shutdown - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Office of Management and Budget Director Shalanda Young has said that she is not optimistic on the issue of a possible government shutdown later in January, Bloomberg reported on Friday.

The Biden administration and congressional Republicans are negotiating to reach a compromise for the latter to approve Biden's supplemental request for $106 billion in exchange for a stricter immigration policy and securing the US border with Mexico, the report said.

More than $60 billion of Biden's supplemental request is intended as aid for Ukraine, the report said.

A government shutdown on January 20 is likely as US House Speaker Mike Johnson has vowed that more temporary funding bills will not be passed, the report said.

In case of a shutdown, the Departments of Agriculture, Veterans Affairs, Energy, Transportation, Housing and Urban Development will be closed followed by a nationwide shutdown on February 3, the report added.

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Red Sea Attacks Not Having Effect on Energy Prices, US Shipping Prices Unhurt - Yellen

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Attacks on vessels in the Red Sea have not had any meaningful impact on the supply and prices of energy products or even shipping rates in the United States, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Friday.

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"We actually have ample supplies of oil and we're not seeing any effect at all, energy prices have been quite stable," she said, referring to the situation in the United States. "It's true that shipping costs have gone up somewhat which affects especially shipping between Asia and Europe, but we're really not seeing any effect in the United States. But this is an international challenge we need to work together with other countries to address."

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US House Panels Say Considering Contempt of Congress Charges Against Hunter Biden

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The US House Judiciary and Oversight panels said on Friday that they are considering contempt of Congress charges against Hunter Biden for seemingly defying a subpoena to testify in a closed-door deposition.

"Hunter Biden blatantly defied two lawful subpoenas when he did not appear for his December deposition. Next week, we will consider a resolution and accompanying report to hold him in contempt of Congress for violating federal law," the House Oversight Committee said in a statement via social media platform X.

Biden was set to appear for questioning on December 13, but instead held a press conference that day, where he said he would only answer questions in an open hearing. House lawmakers are investigating the Biden family for alleged criminal activity, including foreign influence peddling and bribery.

Both the House judiciary and oversight panel said on Friday that they will hold markups on January 10 to consider a report recommending that the House of Representatives cite Biden for contempt of Congress — a federal criminal offense.

In December, the White House said that US President Joe Biden was aware of his son's plans to defy the congressional subpoena. The chairs of the aforementioned House committees consequently wrote a letter to White House Counsel Edward Siskel to inquire about whether Biden may have engaged in a conspiracy to help his son obstruct a proceeding of Congress.

On Thursday, US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said that Congressman Eric Swalwell likely broke federal law as well by helping Hunter Biden disobey the subpoena; Swalwell attended the press conference alongside Biden and appeared "very involved" in the matter, Greene said.

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US Sees Major Increase in Migrant Influx From Africa Amid Crackdown in Europe - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The number of African migrants opting to enter the United States has significantly surged amid the ongoing European crackdown on immigration, the New York Times reported on Friday.

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Africans who previously saw Europe as their destination of choice are now putting their hopes overseas and increasingly opt to travel to Central America from where they begin on-foot journeys throughout Mexico to the US border, the report said.

Although the proportion of immigrants from Africa remains relatively low, the US authorities have observed a significant surge in the numbers, the report said.

One of the reasons for the increase is that smuggling networks have diversified and are profiteering from the growing anti-immigrant sentiment and crackdown on illegal immigration in several countries in Europe.

The numbers of African migrants apprehended at the US border with Mexico increased from 13,406 in 2022 to 58,462 in 2023, the report said.

Among the top countries of origin, Mauritania and Senegal alone represented nearly half of the total number, with Angola and Guinea following behind with a combined total of 8,000.

The development aligns itself with an even bigger global trend of individuals leaving their countries over climate change- and economic instability-related reasons, among others, the report added.

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US House Speaker Considering Direct Talks With Biden on Ukraine Aid, Border - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson is contemplating having direct talks with President Joe Biden on the issues of aid for Ukraine and the migrant crisis on the US border with Mexico, Bloomberg reported on Friday.

Johnson is still hopeful that the US Senate finds an acceptable solution, the report said citing a source familiar with the matter.

White House officials are currently negotiating with senators regarding Biden's request for $106 billion in supplemental funds of which more than $60 billion for Ukraine.

The White House is reportedly leaning toward supporting stricter immigration policies and strengthening border security in exchange for Republicans agreeing with the request on supplemental funds.

The United States ran out of funding for Ukraine on December 30 and the Biden administration repeatedly urged Congress to approve more funds.

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Children in Gaza Face ‘Deadly Triple Threat’ of Hunger, Disease, Hostilities - UNICEF

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Children in the Gaza Strip face a "deadly triple threat" that includes diseases, severe malnutrition and an escalation in military activities, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said on Friday.

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"Children in the Gaza Strip face a deadly triple threat to their lives, as cases of diseases rise, nutrition plummets and the escalation in hostilities approaches its fourteenth week," the release said.

Thousands of children have already become victim amid the bombardments as well as other forms of military action and rapidly worsening living conditions, the release said.

A growing number of diarrhea cases and food poverty raise the risk of mounting child deaths, the release said.

"Cases of diarrhea in children under five years of age rose from 48,000 to 71,000 in just one week starting 17 December, equivalent to 3,200 new cases of diarrhea per day," the release said.

The staggering increase in cases of 2,000% in such a short timeframe is a strong indication that child health in the Gaza Strip is fast deteriorating, the release said.

In addition, an increasing number of children are not getting their basic nutrition needs met, raising concerns about acute malnutrition and mortality breaching famine thresholds, the release said.

"UNICEF is particularly worried about the nutrition of over 155,000 pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers, as well as more than 135,000 children under two, given their specific nutrition needs and vulnerability," the release said.

Israel's military operations have damaged or destroyed vital water, sanitation and health systems in Gaza and the ten remaining functioning medical facilities are unable to adequately treat disease outbreaks, the release said.

"UNICEF is calling for the resumption of commercial traffic so the shelves of shops can be restocked, and for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire to help save civilian lives and alleviate suffering," the release added.

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Iraqi Police Discover Failed Iran-Designed Cruise Missile – US Central Command

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) – The US Central Command said Friday that Iraqi police discovered an Iranian-designed land-based cruise missile on Wednesday that had failed to launch, according to a social media post.

"On Jan. 3, Iraqi police in Babylon discovered a land attack cruise missile of Iranian design that failed to launch. The use of Iranian supplied munitions by terrorist groups within Iraq and Syria endanger Coalition forces and local residents. The Coalition is appreciative of the efforts of the legitimate security forces in Iraq for their efforts to prevent future attacks," the CENTCOM post stated.

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