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1/12/24 Friday

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Civilian Contractor Allegedly Stole $100M From US Military Families

A US Army civilian contractor is accused of stealing more than $100 million meant to be spent on children of military families. Instead, it is assumed that the money were spent to buy cars and properties.

Janet Yamanaka Mello, 57, pleaded not guilty on Wednesday to 10 counts related to her alleged fraud scheme, including mail fraud, criminal handling of money and aggravated identity theft. Mello faces a total of 142 years in prison.

According to the authorities, Mello's scheme went unnoticed for seven years. Part of her role at Fort Sam Houston included determining funding for a grant program meant to supplement civilian partners. In 2016, she formed a shell non-profit company called Child Health and Youth Lifelong Development (CHYLD) and appropriated funds to the company more than 40 times over the past six years.

But allegedly the company did not provide any services and instead gave more than $100 million to herself. Mello largely used the relationships she built up with co-workers and her supervisors but also forged one of her supervisors' signatures several times to approve some of the transactions, according to media report.

According to the indictment, Mello used her ill-gotten gains to purchase luxury jewelry, 78 vehicles including new and classic cars and motorcycles and 31 properties across several states.

One property in Preston, Maryland, a little more than an hour outside of Washington DC sat on a 58-acre lot and included an infinity pool, three garages capable of holding 55 cars, and 16 bathrooms. According to real estate site Zillow, it sold for $3.1 million in August.

Most of the properties, which also included sites in Texas, New Mexico and Washington State, were valued at more than $1 million.

The fleet of vehicles included a 1967 Chevrolet Camaro SS, a 1966 Chevrolet Chevelle SS, a 1966 Ford Mustang and a 1954 Chevrolet Corvette, among others.

The properties and vehicles are being sized by the government.

Mello also had more than $18 million spread across six bank accounts. If she does not make a deal with prosecutors by January 19, she will face a jury trial and selection, according to court documents.

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Brazilian Archaeologists Find Treasure Trove Including 43 Human Skeletons

According to IPHAN, about 43 human skeletons and over 100,000 artifacts were discovered during excavations at the Chácara Rosane Archaeological Site in the Vicente neighborhood of Fialho in São Luis.

Last week, Brazil's Institute for National Historic and Artistic Heritage (IPHAN) announced a "grandiose" discovery: during construction for a new apartment complex in the coastal city of Sao Luis, workers discovered human bones and shards of pottery, which appeared to have been buried for years as their edges had been smoothed with time.

Some of these discovered artifacts were left by ancient civilizations that existed up to 9,000 years ago.

And in the 1970s, research at this site had been carried out by a researcher named Olavo Lima, but it wasn't until now that researchers realized how expansive the site really is.

Wellington Lage, a leading archaeologist, said the Brazilian construction giant MRV hired his company W Lage Arqueologia in 2019 to carry out an impact study at the site. During his research, Lage learned that other relics had been discovered at the site since excavations first began: including part of a human jawbone that had been found there in 1991.

Lage and his team—which includes 27 people—have added to the growing scientific collection, after having discovered a plethora of stone tools, ceramic pieces, and decorated shells and bones, they also discovered 43 human skeletons and over 100,000 artifacts.

"We've been working four years now, and we've barely scratched the surface," said Lage.

Lage and his team also found four eras of human occupation at the site, including: the top layer, which was linked to the Tupinamba people, who inhabited the region when European settlers colonized the area of modern Sao Luis in 1612. The Tupinamba groups lived in large, patrilineal villages, and based their diet on ocean fishing and as well as corn. They were known to be violent, and placed their religious and social values on warfare—as well as, allegedly, cannibalism.

The second layer showed artifacts that are commonly attributed to Amazon rainforest civilizations, followed by a shell mound (a sambaqui) made up of pottery, shells and bones used by some Indigenous groups to either build their homes, or as a part of a burial service.

The third layer, which is about 6.5 feet below the surface, was linked to a group that made rudimentary ceramics and lived between 8,000 to 9,000 years ago, based on the depth of the find, says one report. This third settlement is significantly older than any other pre-Sambaqui settlement found thus far in the region: until now, the oldest dates back to 6,600 years ago.

"This could completely change the history of not just the region but all of Brazil," said Lage, who believes that person migrated from Asia to the Americans—settling in this region of what is now Brazil—at least 1,400 years earlier than previously thought.

According to IPHAN's announcement, "excavations and quantification of the pieces are still taking place". But once that work is done, they will be housed by the Guardian Institution of the Federal University of Maranhao (UFMA) which is building a lab and museum to house the overflow of artifacts—a project which is being funded by MRV.

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Arctic Blast Sweeps Through US, Canceling Thousands of Flights

Nearly 80% of the US can expect to see below freezing temperatures, and over 140 daily cold records could be broken on Monday and Tuesday between Oregon and Mississippi.

The US is bracing for record-setting temperatures this week—including the Deep South—during a cold pattern that could last until the end of January or longer. Chicago's O'Hare Airport, for example, could experience temperatures in the negative teens (Fahrenheit) for the first time since the January 2019 cold outbreak, said the Weather Channel.

Temperatures in the low 20s, even teens, will be felt for those living along the northern Gulf Coast from East Texas to North Florida. Teens, and even a few single digit-lows will be felt in the Deep South—a region which typically experiences winter temperatures of 30 to 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

Temperatures could drop below zero as far south as parts of the Texas Panhandle, Oklahoma and northern Arkansas. Temperatures could also drop below minus 20 (-29 degrees Celsius) as far south as Iowa and Nebraska, and some lows in Montana could see temperatures minus 40 degrees. More than 1 million people across the US state of Washington and Alberta, Canada could also experience temperatures below minus 20.

Temperatures in the cities of Memphis, Dallas, and Nashville are forecasted to stay at a temperature of below freezing for at least 72 consecutive hours.

By Sunday, nearly 110 million people in the US were under wind chill advisories or warnings. On Monday, Iowa was forecasted to experience its coldest primary elections on Monday, with temperatures below zero with wind chills as cold as minus 30 that could cause frostbite in as little as 10 minutes to exposed skin. South Dakota is expected to experience wind chills as cold as minus 45 degrees—a temperature that can cause frostbite in as little as 5 minutes.

For two days in a row, Texas' power grid operator, ERCOT, issued an appeal to its customers to conserve power as it expects "tight grid conditions" amid the intense temperatures.

In addition to the cold temperatures and wind chills, snow is expected to move across the mid-Atlantic on Monday and across the Northeast late on Monday through Tuesday. About 1 to 2 inches of snow is expected in both of those regions. Some areas in Arkansas and Tennessee saw 6 to 8 inches of snow by Monday afternoon. Meanwhile, icy conditions are expected for the South.

The state of Oregon continues to struggle with the onslaught of winter weather after an intense storm dropped nearly 1 inch of ice in some cities and winds knocked out power to more than 90,000 homes and businesses by Monday afternoon.

By late Tuesday, the South should expect a break in the storm.

Thousands of flights have also been disrupted as the US grapples with the arctic blast. By about 2 PM EST, over 5,000 flights flying in and out of the US were delayed, while over 2,000 more were canceled. By 7:30 PM EST, the total delays within, into, or out of the US grew to over 8,000. Total cancellations within, into, or out of the US also grew to over 3,000, according to FlightAware.

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A majority of the disrupted flights occurred at Midwestern and Western airports, as well as some airports in the South. The Denver International Airport, Kansas City International Airport, Nashville International Airport and Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport saw about 25% of their flights delayed. The Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport in Texas saw 34% of its flights delayed. The Reagan Washington National Airport in DC saw 38% of its flights delayed, and the Washington Dulles International Airport had 29% of its flights delayed.

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IMF Warns AI Could Impact Jobs Worldwide, Worsen Inequality & Social Unrest

Countries with developing economies may experience less disruption from AI in the short term, but the IMF warned that those nations' lack of infrastructure and skilled workforce could enhance an overall risk of global economic inequality.

In a blog post on Sunday, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned that artificial intelligence (AI) will "likely worsen overall inequality" in what they see as a troubling trend that policymakers need to address.

Staff for IMF examined the potential impact of AI on the global labor market in a new analysis, IMF said. According to the report, AI will impact high-skilled jobs and as a result, advanced economies are poised to experience the greatest risks from AI—with about 60% of jobs in advanced economies being impacted by AI.

About half of jobs exposed to AI will be complimented by the technology, but the other half could cut labor demand and lead to lower wages. In extreme cases, says the IMF, some jobs will disappear entirely.

Emerging markets will experience an AI exposure of 40%, while low-income countries will be exposed to AI at levels of 26%. The IMF believes that for this reason, these economies will face fewer disruptions from AI. However, many of these countries may be unable to take advantage of the opportunities offered by AI because they lack the necessary infrastructure or skilled workforces. Because of this, the inequality between global economies could worsen.

Older workers and those unwilling to embrace AI will be more vulnerable than younger workers to the negative impacts of AI in the workplace, the IMF added. And for firms that already have access to AI, capital returns will favor those who are already high earners which will "exacerbate" inequality, the IMF adds.

"It is crucial for countries to establish comprehensive social safety nets and offer retraining programs for vulnerable workers. In doing so, we can make the AI transition more inclusive, protecting livelihoods and curbing inequality," the IMF wrote.

The IMF is urging lawmakers in both advanced and emerging nations to begin drafting policies that will help regulate AI so that the benefits of this technology can be experienced and shared responsibly. The agency has already developed an AI Preparedness Index, according to their blog post, that "measures readiness in areas such as digital infrastructure, human-capital and labor-market policies, innovation and economic integration, and regulation and ethics".

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"I can hear those champagne bottle corks popping in Moscow – like it's Christmas every f***ing day," said a European diplomat to US media recently. The envoy discussed the decline of America's influence as domestic political chaos threatens the country's ability to lead on foreign affairs.

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A dozen current and former ambassadors agreed, suggesting global leaders are coming around to Russia's long standing position on the capricious and self-serving nature of the US' engagement with the world.

Last year's House speakership battle and threats of a government shutdown have undermined the US' ability to engage internationally in the midst of major world conflicts.

The trend is likely to create opportunities for Russia, China, and the BRICS economic bloc to provide leadership in an increasingly multipolar world.

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'Champagne Corks Popping in Moscow' as US Global Influence Wanes

Domestic political instability is threatening America's ability to project power and shape the world order.

In the waning days of the Cold War US Secretary of State James Baker made a solemn vow to Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not expand "one inch eastward" beyond a reunited Germany, a promise that was broken in just nine years. Now Russian leaders feel vindicated as the rest of the world is waking up to the increasingly capricious and self-serving nature of 21st-century US foreign policy.

"I can hear those champagne bottle corks popping in Moscow – like it's Christmas every f***ing day," said one European ambassador to a US news outlet. The envoy was one of a dozen current and former diplomats who spoke with the website to discuss how political crisis in the United States is endangering the country's long standing role as a leader in international affairs. Many of them spoke anonymously in order to discuss the sensitive matter with full candidness.

"When the United States' voice is not as strong, is not as balanced, is not as fair as it should be, then a problem is created for the world," said Ronald Sanders, the ambassador from Antigua and Barbuda to the United States.

Many of the most urgent pleas came from European envoys whose countries have long relied on the US for guidance on foreign affairs. The instinctual trust in America for steady leadership led Western countries to sign on to US-led sanctions against Russia in 2022 without hesitation,

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a move which has had harsh economic consequences in Germany and elsewhere. Now leaders are left wondering if US instability will further exacerbate the sacrifice they've made.

Domestic American politics has become increasingly fractious in recent decades – what was an almost unthinkable threat of a government shutdown in the 1990s has become a nearly perfunctory aspect of budget negotiations under divided government. But now the political dysfunction imperils foreign policy as well.

Envoys were reportedly dismayed when US lawmakers injected a contentious debate over border security into discussions of assistance for Ukraine and Israel – such aid would've sailed through Congress unanimously in years past. The unprecedented battle over the House speakership last year also rankled observers, with the country's legislature paralyzed by partisanship as Hamas' attack on Israelprovoked a major conflict.

The unexpected politicization of Ukraine assistance has led supporters to devise creative new arguments to sell it to GOP lawmakers – demonstrated last year when an ad campaign by neoconservative commentator Bill Kristol urged backing for Kiev as a way to undermine China. But the prospect for continued aid seems shaky at best as analysts say the Zelensky regime is highly unlikely to reverse its fortunes on the battlefield.

The prospect of former President Donald Trump returning to the White House next year was cited by some envoys as threatening continued instability and damage to America's reputation as a "pillar of democracy and global stability." On Monday a video went viral on the X social media platform of a Trump supporter welcoming the prospect the controversial billionaire would institute a "dictatorship."

But most figures cited "structural forces" encouraging the trend regardless of who wins the presidency in November.

The decline of the United States has created an opening for other countries to intervene in diplomatic affairs typically seen as the domain of great powers, as when China negotiated an historic agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia recently. The successful mediation stands in contrast to the US' abandonment of its Iran nuclear deal, which was cited by one figure as an example of America's duplicitousness.

The BRICS economic bloc also seems poised to continue to grow in influence in the coming years, especially as countries abandon their use of the US dollar in light of its weaponization through coercive sanctions.

Recently Russian President Vladimir Putin commented on the continued military confrontation between Israel and Hamas, saying the outbreak of hostilities there demonstrated the failure of a US-led world order to ensure peace and stability. Increasingly it appears other world leaders are coming around to the Russian position on the matter.

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Poland has a beef with the European Union leadership over Ukrainian agriculture.

The country's new agriculture minister under Prime Minister Donald Tusk has protested the bloc's liberalized trade policy with Ukraine since 2022, claiming it's undermined Polish farmers

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by flooding the country with cheap food. Nevertheless, the EU leadership has signaled that they plan to continue the policy for another year despite the consequences for Poland and other Central European countries.

Truckers staged a demonstration at the Poland-Ukraine border last year over the issue and have been joined by farmers protesting government policy recently in Germany and the Netherlands.

Ukraine has moved in the direction of closer association with the EU since 2014's US-backed Euromaidan coup prevented the country from joining a Russia-led trade bloc.

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A dozen current and former ambassadors agreed, suggesting global leaders are coming around to Russia's long standing position on the capricious and self-serving nature of the US' engagement with the world.

Last year's House speakership battle and threats of a government shutdown have undermined the US' ability to engage internationally in the midst of major world conflicts.

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The Chinese foreign minister met with Arab League nations over the weekend, releasing a joint statement calling for a ceasefire and long-term resolution of the Palestine-Israel conflict.

The leaders advocated the implementation of relevant resolutions passed by the United Nations and a global peace conference to resolve the long running crisis.

The statement also criticized recent US and UK strikes on Yemen, which Chinese media characterized as an "escalation" of tensions and an attempt to distract from the fundamental nature of the conflict.

"The US, which is pouring fuel on the fire in the Israel-Palestine conflict, also wants to play the role of fireman… but in fact, the US is responsible for the conflict," read an article in Chinese media.

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Poland Has Beef With EU Over Ukrainian Agriculture

Central European countries have protested the consequences of the bloc's free trade policy that has flooded countries with cheap agricultural goods.

The proposed ascension of Ukraine to the European Union has been a controversial issue for more than a decade, but now disagreement within the economic bloc has risen to the surface with Poland slamming the consequences of liberalized trade for its domestic agricultural industry.

"Poland will not give its consent to the idea pushed by the European Commission to extend trade liberalization with Ukraine under the current conditions, which pose a threat to Polish farmers," wrote Michał Kołodziejczak, the leader of the Polish farmers' group AgroUnia, on the X social media platform (formerly Twitter).

Kołodziejczak was appointed deputy agriculture minister under the government of Donald Tusk, who began a second term as Poland's prime minister after elections late last year. Tusk promised to "bring back Poland to Europe" after years of strained relations under the opposition

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Law and Justice (PiS) party. But the former European Council president has made clear he'll continue to oppose EU leadership on trade policy with Ukraine.

So-called "solidarity corridors" between the EU and Ukraine were established after the commencement of Russia's special military operation in the Donbass in 2022. The special policy suspended customs duties and other barriers to trade with the Zelensky regime. But Poland has protested that the flooding of the EU market with Ukrainian grain, eggs, poultry, and other food products has lowered price and demand within the bloc, devastating local farmers.

Polish truckers blocked the border between Poland and Ukraine for weeks last year, protesting the knock-on effects of the trade policy on their industry. Meanwhile agriculture ministers in Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia likewise expressed opposition to the continued trade liberalization.

Nevertheless EU leadership has signaled that it plans to continue the policy with Ukraine until 2025. "The draft EU regulation extending duty-free trade with the AU until 2025 is to be adopted by the College of Commissioners on Tuesday," reported a Polish radio station.

European farmers have emerged as a powerful voice against government policy in recent years, with German farmers protesting recently against planned cuts in agricultural subsidies forced by the repercussions of US-led sanctions on Russia. Farmers in the Netherlands have also been protesting proposed climate policy there.

Continuing tensions with the UK's fishing industry have emerged as a major issue after the country's vote to leave the European Union in 2016.

Western leaders openly cheered on anti-government protesters in Ukraine leading up to the country's so-called Euromaidan coup in 2014. At stake was whether Ukraine would move towards joining the EU or whether President Viktor Yanukovych would accept a more advantageous offer to join a Russian-led trading bloc.

Since then evidence has emerged of the United States' role in the regime change operation in Ukraine.

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Car Ownership Unaffordable for Majority as Most Say 'American Dream' Doesn't Hold True

Belief in the so-called "American dream" that hard work is rewarded was found to be a minority position among every demographic group polled.

Two surveys released Monday provide troubling insight into Americans' cost of living and overall faith in the country's economic system.

The first, based on Census data and information from the car shopping app CoPilot, reveals that the cost of a new car has become unaffordable for most Americans.

The conclusion was arrived at by examining the average cost of a new automobile, which has risen substantially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Supply chain issues and a shortage of chips shut down manufacturing in 2020. Pent-up demand surged the next year, driving prices sky high.

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The price of a new car has reportedly increased by 30% since 2020 as automakers' focus on more expensive vehicles with luxury amenities has also played a role in the rising cost. Americans in the used car market are also experiencing sticker shock as the average cost of second hand vehicles has risen 38%.

"Prices saw a substantial run-up in the spring, driven by confident consumers at the upper end of the market, and they never fully recovered," said Pat Ryan, the CEO of CoPilot. "Across most brands and segments, car prices have barely moved from the levels at which they started the year. When you also factor in multiple interest rate hikes, there were not many deals to be had for car shoppers."

Meanwhile a new poll finds that an overwhelming majority of Americans believe the so-called "American dream" is only a myth.

The survey asked respondents whether the statement "if you work hard you'll get ahead," held true in the country in 2024. A full 69% of Americans said it did not.

Included in that number were 18% who said the "American dream" was always a myth.

The figure has changed substantially since the first time the polling firm asked the question in September 2010. Although the survey was conducted in the shadow of the housing crisis and the Great Recession, half of Americans at that time still said the American dream was a reality. Some 43% said it didn't hold true, and only 4% said it never did.

Since then, much of the financial precarity that was commonplace at the time has become a permanent feature of the US economy, with so-called "gig work" – Uber driving, food delivery, etc. – taking the place of more traditional jobs.

Certain demographics are more pessimistic than others – only 21% of both Black Americans and people between the ages of 18 to 29 believe the American dream holds true. 18% of Americans in households making less than $50,000 annually say it does.

But even only a third of Americans making over $100,000 per year said the American dream is real. A belief in the notion was a minority opinion among every demographic group polled, regardless of race, income, education, or partisan affiliation.

In light of the negative economic picture, world powers are increasingly hedging their bets by ditching the US dollar in global trade and seeking expanded cooperation with countries like Russia and China.

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China Slams US, Issues Statement With Arab League Calling for Gaza Ceasefire

"The US, which is pouring fuel on the fire in the Israel-Palestine conflict, also wants to play the role of fireman," read an article in Chinese media criticizing America's "unconditional support for Israel."

China released a joint statement with Arab League nations Sunday urging a ceasefire in Gaza and advocating a two-state solution to resolve the long running Palestine-Israel conflict.

The resolution emerged after Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul-Gheit in Cairo, Egypt.

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The statement called for dialogue with Palestinian groups and a global peace conference to move towards implementing a two-state solution, advocating a “government of Palestine for the Palestinians.” The leaders urged the full implementation of resolutions passed by the United Nations which have long criticized the Israeli occupation of internationally-recognized Palestinian territory. The United States typically uses its influence and position on the UN Security Council to block and undermine resolutions criticizing Israel’s conduct.

The leaders also promoted the resumption of direct peace talks between the Israeli and Palestinian sides.

The statement then touched on recent US and UK-backed airstrikes against the Houthi movement in Yemen, which Chinese media criticizedas an “escalation” of the situation and an attempt to distract from the broader conflict. Chinese media called for the respect of the “sovereignty and territorial integrity of Yemen,” a critique of the airstrikes that it noted lacked authorization by the UN.

Finally, China called for the sending of humanitarian aid to Palestinians, which it labeled an “imperative moral responsibility.” China insisted that the only way to ultimately safeguard commercial interests in the Red Sea is to achieve “a just settlement of the Palestinian issue.”

“We have a common responsibility to ensure the security of the Red Sea, and we will not be deceived by the US to fuel such tensions,” said Li Weijian, a researcher at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies.

China and Arab League countries also vowed to move forward on economic cooperation via China’s Belt and Road initiative during the meeting.

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US Calls Nauru’s Breaking of Taiwan Diplomatic Ties 'Disappointing' – State Department

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) – The US Department of State has called Nauru’s decision to break diplomatic ties with Taiwan "disappointing," according to a release.

"While the Government of Nauru’s action on January 15 to sever its diplomatic relationship with Taiwan is a sovereign decision, it is nonetheless a disappointing one," State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in the release on Monday.

Miller called Taiwan a "reliable, likeminded, and democratic partner," contrasting it with China, which allegedly "often makes promises in exchange for diplomatic relations that ultimately remain unfulfilled."

He added the US would continue to deepen and expand its engagement with Taiwan and encouraged other countries to do so too.

Nauru’s announcement followed on the heels of the Democratic Progressive Party’s (DPP) victory in Taiwan’s general election on Saturday. Taiwanese voters elected Vice President Lai Ching-te as their leader, keeping the pro-independence DPP in power for a third term.

Taiwanese Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Tien Chung-kwang said at a press briefing on Monday that China had deliberately orchestrated Nauru’s breaking of diplomatic ties to occur in the wake of the elections.

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The Chinese Foreign Ministry has welcomed Nauru's decision as proof that "the one-China principle is where global opinion trends and where the arc of history bends."

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China Embraces All Investments With 'Open Arms' as Economy Grows 5.2% in 2023 - Premier

DAVOS, Switzerland, January 16 (Sputnik) - Chinese Premier Li Qiang said on Tuesday that China welcomes investments from all countries with "open arms," adding that the economy is estimated to have boomed 5.2% last year.

"We embrace investments from businesses of all countries with open arms," Li said during the Davos World Economic Forum (WEF) in Switzerland.

The prime minister also said that China's economy was estimated to have grown around 5.2% in 2023, which is "higher than the 5% target set at the beginning of last year."

"As the second-largest economy in the world China has established after decades of development sound and solid fundamentals ... Just as a healthy person often has a strong immune system. Chinese economy can handle ups and downs in its performance, the overall trend of long term growth will not change," the official added.

Speaking about the world as a whole, Li underlined that today "countries have very close economic linkages," meaning "their macroeconomic policies have more notable spillover effects in the face of global crises." Therefore, "fragmented and separate responses" will only debilitate the world economy, he concluded.

On Monday, the founder and chairman of WEF, Klaus Schwab, said in an interview with the Chinese broadcaster CGTN that the presence of the Chinese premier at the forum will help in "rebuilding trust."

This year, China sent a large delegation to Davos. Beijing is thought to have around 10 state ministers attending.

The 2024 edition of the World Economic Forum is taking place from January 15-19. It is expected to attract over 2,800 participants from over 120 countries, including prominent figures from business, political, and academic circles.

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US CENTCOM Says Seized Alleged Iranian Weapons Intended to Resupply Houthis

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) – The US Central Command announced Tuesday that it seized alleged Iranian weapons last week that were en route to resupply the Houthi group in Yemen.

"On 11 January 2024, while conducting a flag verification, US CENTCOM Navy forces conducted a night-time seizure of a dhow conducting illegal transport of advanced lethal aid

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from Iran to resupply Houthi forces in Yemen as part of the Houthis' ongoing campaign of attacks against international merchant shipping," CENTCOM said in a press release.

US Navy Seals boarded the dhow near the coast of Somalia and seized Iranian-made ballistic missile and cruise missiles components, including propulsion, guidance, and warheads for medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs), and anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), the release said.

Two SEAL members involved in the operation remain lost at sea, the command confirmed.

Central Command said the same weapons have been used by the Houthis to attack ships transiting through the Red Sea.

This marked the first seizure of Iranian-supplied lethal advanced conventional weapons to the Houthis since the group began attacking merchant ships in November in response to Israel's war on Gaza, the release stated.

Iran denies sending weapons to the Houthis. It has also rejected the West's allegations of Iran's involvement in Houthi attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea, saying that the group is acting on its own.

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Zelenskyy Tries to Raise Private Funding for Ukraine at Davos Economic Forum

MOSCOW, January 16 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Tuesday attended a closed-door meeting with business and banking executives on the sidelines of the 2024 World Economic Forum in the Swiss city of Davos to try raise private funding for Ukraine.

"I also met with JP Morgan executives and major international investors. Attracting private capital to rebuild Ukraine is important to us. We hope that JP Morgan will help attract a large number of global investors and corporations to the Ukrainian economy," Zelenskyy wrote on X.

Zelenskyy also attended a meeting on the "horizons" for Ukraine, alongside European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, World Economic Forum President Borge Brende, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and US Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery Penny Pritzker, among others.

Stoltenberg said after meeting with Zelenskyy that there were reasons to be optimistic about Ukraine's future.

"Despite a serious battlefield situation, there is cause for optimism: Ukraine retains its independence, Ukrainians have rejected Russia and chosen the West; and Ukraine is closer to NATO than ever before," he wrote on X.

The 2024 edition of the World Economic Forum is taking place from January 15–19 and is expected to attract over 2,800 participants from over 120 countries.

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UN Calls for Halting Alabama Nitrogen Gas Execution – UNHCR

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) – The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) on Tuesday called on Alabama state authorities to halt the imminent execution of Kenneth Eugene Smith with nitrogen gas, warning it could breach international human rights treaties.

"The UN Human Rights Office calls on Alabama state authorities to halt Smith's execution, scheduled for 25-26 January, and to refrain from taking steps towards any other executions in this manner," UNHCR spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani said in a release.

She added that the UN was alarmed by the planned "use of novel and untested method – suffocation by nitrogen gas, which could amount to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment under international human rights law."

The rights are set out in two international human rights treaties that the US is bound by – the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Smith was convicted of murder for hire in 1988. He was originally sentenced to life without parole by a jury, but it was overridden by a judge with a death sentence. He is scheduled to be executed on January 25 in Alabama. Authorities sought to execute Smith last November using lethal injection, but botched the attempt.

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Trump Says His Admin. Will Rebuild US Cities, Provide Police With Immunity to Fight Crime

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) - Former President and 2024 contender for the Republican presidential nomination Donald Trump promised his supporters in Iowa that his administration will rebuild and make safe American cities, and for this purpose, police officers will receive immunity to be able to fight record crime.

"We are going to rebuild our cities and we are going to make them safe, and we are going to give our police officers immunity, so every time they do something they don't get sued and end crime in our cities," Trump said on Monday night after winning the Iowa caucus vote.

More specifically, Trump pledged to rebuild the US capital Washington, including by introducing "unbelievably" harsh penalties for those who shoot people on the streets and engage in other crimes.

Results from the Iowa Republican Party showed that Trump had received 51% of the votes, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis came in second place with 21% of the vote and former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley trailed in third with 19% of the vote.

Iowa will send 40 delegates to the Republican National Convention, which is scheduled for July 15-18 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A total of 2,500 people will vote at the convention. To win the Republican party presidential nomination, a candidate needs to secure the votes of 1,215 delegates.

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Trump Says His Administration Will Pay Off National Debt If He Returns to White House

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) - Former President and contender for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination Donald Trump told a crowd of his supporters in Iowa that his administration will be working to pay off the national debt should he win the presidential election in November.

"We're also going to pay off the national debt, it's about time," Trump said on Monday night after winning the Iowa caucus vote.

On January 4, the national debt exceeded $34 trillion for the first time in US history.

Results from the Iowa Republican Party showed that Trump received 51% of the votes, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis came in second place with 21% of the vote and former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley trailed in third place with 19% of the vote.

Iowa will send 40 delegates to the Republican National Convention, which is scheduled for July 15-18 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A total of 2,500 people will vote at the convention. To win the Republican party presidential nomination, a candidate needs to secure the votes of 1,215 delegates.

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Trump Says in Speech After Winning Iowa Caucus Time to 'Straighten Out the World'

DES MOINES, January 16 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said in a speech after winning the Iowa caucus vote that it is time for Americans to come together and "straighten out the world."

"I really think this is the time now for everybody in our country to come together. We want to come together, whether it's Republican or Democrat or Liberal or Conservative, it would be so nice if we could come together and straighten out the world, straighten out the problems and straighten out all of the death and destruction that we're witnessing," Trump said on Monday night.

Trump also congratulated fellow contenders for the Republican nomination - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy for the results they achieved n the vote.

Results from the Iowa Republican Party showed that Trump had received 51% of the votes, DeSantis trailed in second place with 21% of the vote and Haley trailed in third place with 19% of the vote.

Iowa will send 40 delegates to the Republican National Convention, which is scheduled for July 15-18 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A total of 2,500 people will vote at the convention. To win the Republican party presidential nomination, a candidate needs the votes of 1,215 delegates.

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The final results of the Iowa caucuses are expected later on Monday night.

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Trump Maintains Lead in Iowa Caucus Vote for Republican Pick After 92,000 Votes Counted

DES MOINES, January 16 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump continues to maintain a major lead in the Iowa caucus vote for the Republican presidential nomination with more than 92,000 votes counted, according to results from the Iowa Republican Party.

Results from the Iowa Republican Party showed on Monday night that Trump had received 51% of the votes in Iowa.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis trailed in second place with 21% of the vote and former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley trailed in third with 19% of the vote.

The Republican caucusing is being held at 1,600 polling stations across Iowa.

Iowa will send 40 delegates to the Republican National Convention, which is scheduled for July 15-18 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A total of 2,500 people will vote at the convention. To win the Republican party presidential nomination, a candidate needs the votes of 1,215 delegates.

The final results of the Iowa caucuses are expected later on Monday night.

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US Condemns in 'Strongest Terms' Iran's Missile Strikes on Targets in Erbil - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) - The United States have condemned in the strongest terms the missile strikes carried out on Iraq's Erbil by the Iranian military, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

"The United States strongly condemns Iran's attacks in Erbil today and offers condolences to the families of those who were killed. We oppose Iran's reckless missile strikes, which undermine Iraq's stability," Miller said on Monday. "We support the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government's efforts to meet the aspirations of the Iraqi people".

Earlier in the day, a security source in Iraq told Sputnik that several explosions were reported in Erbil near the US Consulate General and the Erbil International Airport caused by missile attacks.

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps took responsibility for the attacks, saying they targeted the bases of anti-Iranian terrorist groups and specifically one of the main headquarters of Israel's intelligence service Mossad in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Following the attacks, a US National Security Council spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik that the US was in contact with Kurdish and Iraqi authorities following the latest missile attacks in northern Iraq and northern Syria.

Although no US casualties were reported at the consulate, the spokesperson characterized the

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attack as a "reckless and imprecise set of strikes" and the situation was being assessed.

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US Remains 'Vigilant' Following Missile Attacks in Iraq's Erbil - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) - The United States remains "vigilant" and committed to the safety of its personnel and facilities in Iraq following the missile attacks in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, a State Department spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik.

"We are aware of reports of several explosions in Erbil earlier today. There were no impacts on US Consulate Erbil or the new consulate compound under construction. No American personnel were injured. We remain vigilant and committed to the safety of our personnel and facilities in Iraq," the statement said on Monday night.

Earlier in the day, a security source in Iraq told Sputnik that several explosions occurred in Erbil near the US Consulate General and the Erbil International Airport.

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps took responsibility for the missile attacks, claiming that they targeted bases of anti-Iranian terrorist groups, including the main headquarters of the Israel's intelligence service Mossad in Iraqi Kurdistan. The targets were reportedly destroyed, according to US media reports.

A White House National Security Council spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik the attacks were "reckless and imprecise set of strikes" that did not result in any US casualties at the consulate in Erbil.

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Trump Says Feels 'Greatly Honored' by Projected Iowa Caucus Victory - Fox News

DES MOINES, January 16 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said in an interview with Fox News that he feels "greatly honored" to be proclaimed a projected winner in the Iowa caucus vote for the Republican presidential nomination.

"I feel great," Trump said on Monday night. "I am greatly honored by such an early call."

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DeSantis' Spokesman Calls US Media Projections of Trump Win in Iowa Election Interference

DES MOINES, January 16 (Sputnik) - Ron DeSantis' campaign communications director Andrew Romeo has criticized the US media's projections of former President Donald Trump as

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a winner of the Iowa caucuses, calling such early calls "election interference."

"Absolutely outrageous that the media would participate in election interference by calling the race before tens of thousands of Iowans even had a chance to vote," Romeo said in a statement via the social media platform X. "The media is in the tank for Trump and this is the most egregious example yet."

Major corporate-owned media outlets, including ABC News, NBC News, CBS News, the Associated Press and others, projected earlier on Monday night that Trump will win the Iowa caucus vote in the bid for the Republican presidential nomination.

The Republican caucuses are held at 1,600 polling stations across Iowa but it is hard to estimate how many voters will be present at each, a Republican party spokesperson told Sputnik earlier on Monday.

Iowa will send 40 delegates to the Republican National Convention, which is scheduled for July 15-18 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A total of 2,500 people will vote at the convention. To win the Republican nomination, a candidate needs to secure the votes of 1,215 delegates.

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Nearly Half of Iowa Republican Caucus Voters Identify With Trump's MAGA Movement - Poll

DES MOINES, January 16 (Sputnik) - Almost half of Republican caucus participants in Iowa identify with the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement and few acknowledge Joe Biden's 2020 presidential election victory as being legitimate, an Edison Research poll revealed.

According to the poll, nearly half of the 551 surveyed voters align themselves with former President Donald Trump's MAGA movement and nearly two-thirds say they do not believe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election was legitimate.

About 75% of those who consider to be part of the MAGA movement said they support Trump.

In addition, more than half of the respondents said they were not concerned by the criminal charges Trump faces and they would still consider the him fit for the presidency even if he were convicted of a crime.

The Republican caucuses are held at 1,600 polling stations across Iowa but it is hard to estimate how many voters will be present at each, a Republican party spokesperson told Sputnik earlier on Monday.

Iowa will send 40 delegates to the Republican National Convention, which is scheduled for July 15-18 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A total of 2,500 people will vote at the convention. To win the Republican nomination, a candidate needs to secure the votes of 1,215 delegates.

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Early Projections Predict Trump Will Win Iowa Caucus Vote for Republican Nomination

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DES MOINES, January 16 (Sputnik) - Fox News projects that former President Donald Trump will win the Iowa caucus vote in the bid for the Republican nomination in the US presidential election.

ABC News and the Associated Press also said they project Trump will win the Iowa caucus vote on Monday night.

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Trump Holds Early Lead in Iowa Caucus Republican Primary Vote - Early Results

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump holds an early lead in the Iowa caucus votes for the Republican presidential nomination in the upcoming US presidential election, according to early official results.

Preliminary results on Monday night showed that Trump has 75% of support from voters in Iowa followed by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis at 15%.

Former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley has 5% of support from Iowa voters so far, data shows.

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UPDATE - Early Results Show Trump Leading in Iowa Caucuses - NBC News

(Updates with more details in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump leads by a large margin in the Iowa caucuses but it still may too early to forecast a winner, NBC News reported.

The Iowa caucuses kicked off the 2024 US presidential primary season earlier on Monday night and will provide an outlook on how the contenders for the Republican party presidential nomination are doing in their attempt to win the White House.

The results from the voting in Iowa will soon start coming in.

Voters in the Iowa Republican caucuses have said illegal immigration is the most important matter facing the United States followed by the economy, according to an NBC News entrance poll.

The entrance poll showed that 37% of caucus participants said illegal immigration to be the most important issue, while 36% said the US economy,

Eleven percent of respondents said abortion is the most important issue for them and another 11% said it is foreign policy.

The Republican caucuses are held at 1,600 polling stations across Iowa but it is hard to estimate how many voters will be present at each, a Republican party spokesperson told Sputnik earlier on Monday.

Iowa will send 40 delegates to the Republican National Convention, which is scheduled for July

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15-18 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A total of 2,500 people will vote at the convention. To win the Republican nomination, a candidate needs to secure the votes of 1,215 delegates.
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Early Results Show Trump Leading in Iowa Caucuses But Too Early to Project Winner - NBC

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump leads in the Iowa caucuses but it is too early to forecast a winner, NBC News reported.
The Iowa caucuses kicked off the 2024 US presidential primary season earlier on Monday night and will provide an outlook on how the contenders for the Republican party presidential nomination are doing in their attempt to win the White House.
The results from the voting in Iowa are about to start coming in.
The Republican caucuses are held at 1,600 polling stations across Iowa but it is hard to estimate how many voters will be present at each, a Republican party spokesperson told Sputnik earlier on Monday.
Iowa will send 40 delegates to the Republican National Convention, which is scheduled for July 15-18 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A total of 2,500 people will vote at the convention. To win the Republican nomination, a candidate needs to secure the votes of 1,215 delegates.

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Iowa Caucuses Kick Off 2024 US Presidential Primary Season

DES MOINES, January 16 (Sputnik) - The Iowa caucuses kicked off the 2024 US presidential primary season on Monday night and will provide an outlook on how the contenders for the Republican party presidential nomination are doing in their attempt to win the White House.
Former President Donald Trump, former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy are among the group of most well positioned candidates hoping to win the Republican presidential nomination.
The Republican caucuses will be held at 1,600 polling stations across Iowa though it is still hard to estimate how many voters will be present at each one, a Republican party spokesperson told Sputnik earlier on Monday.
Iowa will send 40 delegates to the Republican National Convention, which is scheduled for July 15-18 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A total of 2,500 people will vote at the convention. To win the Republican nomination, a candidate needs to secure the votes of 1,215 delegates.
The results of the Iowa caucuses are expected to be provided later on Monday night.

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Iowa Restaurant Says Election Special Sleepy Joe Milkshakes Will Put Patrons Right to Bed

DES MOINES, January 16 (Sputnik) - The restaurant Zombie Burger in Des Moines, Iowa, is offering a special menu during the caucuses to honor the contenders for the Republican and Democratic presidential nominations as well as to entertain guests, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the scene.

"Just having fun during the Iowa caucuses. We've done it for several [election] cycles since opening the restaurant. It's just something for us to do for all those who are coming ... for the caucuses," the restaurant's manager told Sputnik on Monday.

The special menu includes a meatball sandwich in honor of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and a spaghetti dish in honor of businessman Vivek Ramaswami. Both men are contenders for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination,

The restaurant also offers the dish "Dictator for a Day" - in reference to former President Donald Trump's statement promising to lead the United States on his first day in office in spite of the severity of the problems it faces - which includes sausages seasoned with "Russian dressing," the manager said.

The manager acknowledged that the most popular item are the "Sleepy Joe" milkshakes, which are prepared with chocolate chips and mint liqueur as well as with "Dark Brandon Shake" chocolate. The later ingredient is a play on a obscene protest phrase aimed at President Joe Biden.

While the special menu suggests slight support for Republicans in the election, the manager insists that their offer involves only entertainment rather than politics.

"A good double Zombie Burger and a Sleepy Joe cocktail will put you right to bed," the manager said.

However, the manager did acknowledge that the sandwich in honor of Governor DeSantis stands out as "the best seller in recent days."

The Republican caucuses will be held at 1,600 polling stations across Iowa, and it is still hard to estimate how many voters will be present at each one, a Republican Party spokesperson told Sputnik earlier on Monday.

It is expected that more than half of the registered Republicans will show up to vote, the spokesperson added.

Iowa will send 40 delegates to the Republican National Convention, which is scheduled for July 15-18 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A total of 2,500 people will vote at the convention. To win the Republican party presidential nomination, a candidate needs the votes of 1,215 delegates.

At the same time, 3,900 delegates are expected to attend the Democratic Party convention in Chicago, Illinois, from August 19-22, with 1,969 votes needed for the nomination. In Iowa, Democrats do not hold caucuses, but vote by mail.

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

US in Contact With Iraqi, Kurdish Officials Following Recent Missile Attacks - White House

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is in contact with senior Iraqi and Kurdish officials following the recent missile attacks in northern Iraq and northern Syria, a White House National Security Council spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik.

"We have seen the reports and we tracked the missiles, which impacted in northern Iraq and northern Syria," the spokesperson said on Monday. "No US personnel or facilities were targeted. We have been in touch with senior Iraqi officials as well as officials in the Kurdistan Region."

There were no US casualties at the consulate, but the United States will continue to assess the situation, the spokesperson said.

The initial indications are that this was a "reckless and imprecise set of strikes," the spokesperson also said.

Iran claimed responsibility for this attack undertaken in response to the terrorist attacks on the Iranian cities of Kerman and Rask, with a focus on the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia), the spokesperson added.

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US 'Not Tracking' Material Damage, Casualties in Attacks on Erbil at This Time - Official

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) - In the most recent attacks in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, no US facilities were damaged and no US casualties have been reported at this time, a US defense official told Sputnik.

"No US facilities were impacted. We're not tracking damage to infrastructure or injuries at this time," the official said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, a security source in Iraq told Sputnik that several explosions were reported in Erbil near the US Consulate General and the Erbil International Airport caused by missile attacks.

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps took responsibility for the attacks, claiming that they targeted bases of anti-Iranian terrorist groups and specifically one of the main headquarters of Israel's Secret Intelligence Service (Mossad) in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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Artificial Intelligence Can Amplify Erosion of Information to Users Online - US Official

DAVOS, January 16 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), despite offering tremendous promise, creates a significant risk in spreading misinformation online, White

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House Office of Science and Technology Policy Director Arati Prabhakar said.
"Generative AI, with all its tremendous promise, is one of the greatest risks - that it could dramatically accelerate and amplify that region of information integrity," Prabhakar told the audience at the World Economic Forum in Davos (WEF) on Monday.
For that reason, the focus of US President Joe Biden and his team is on content provenance and the administration will work on this with the technical community, Prabhakar added.
The gathering of the WEF this year is mainly concerned with AI and most events have some aspects of AI discussed.
The WEF gathering will last from January 15-19 and more than 2,800 participants from some 120 countries are expected to attend.
The participants are mainly from business, political and academic circles and have said they seek to advance their enterprises, network or broaden and deepen their knowledge about discussed subject matter.

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No US Facilities Have Been Damaged By Missile Attacks in Erbil - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 16 (Sputnik) - No US facilities have been damaged by a missile attack in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, Reuters reported citing a US official.
Earlier on Monday, media reports said several explosions occurred on Tuesday in Iraqi Kurdistan's capital of Erbil near the US Consulate General and Erbil International Airport.

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World Economic Forum Opens in Davos With Blinken, Zelenskyy to Attend

DAVOS, Switzerland, January 15 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The 54th annual meeting of the World Economic Forum has kicked off in the Swiss ski resort of Davos with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken leading the US delegation, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Monday.
Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is on the guest list as well, but it is still unclear whether and when he will meet with the US delegation on the sidelines of the forum. Israeli President Isaac Herzog is also expected to attend but his participation has not been officially confirmed yet.
Most of the events in Davos are held along one of the town's long streets, where companies and government offices rent houses to attract visitors to find out more about their products or initiatives.
The World Economic Forum is known for its focus on a sustainability- and climate-oriented agenda. This year, however, there is much emphasis on artificial intelligence, and numerous events are AI-related.

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In terms of countries, India has a large representation, boasting several houses in Davos. Other countries that have set up spaces to promote themselves include Saudi Arabia and Greece.

No special security measures seem to have been taken in the town, with the Sputnik correspondent seeing not a single security check or a walk-through detector the whole day, apart from a group of four military personnel. Some guests are accompanied by their bodyguards, such as US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry who had two of them following him.

The 2024 edition of the World Economic Forum is taking place from January 15–19 and is expected to attract over 2,800 participants from over 120 countries, including prominent figures from business, political and academic circles who come to advance their enterprises, network or learn something new.

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Austin Released From Hospital, Will Perform Duties Remotely for Some Time - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has been released from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and will continue to perform his duties remotely while he recuperates following the prostate cancer treatment, the Pentagon said on Monday.

"Following consultation with medical staff, Secretary Austin was released from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center today. The Secretary continues to recover well and, on the advice of doctors, will recuperate and perform his duties remotely for a period of time before returning full-time to the Pentagon," the Pentagon said in a statement.

Austin is expected to make a full recovery and there is no plan for any additional treatment for his cancer except for regular post-post-prostatectomy surveillance, the statement cited Dr. John Maddox, Trauma Medical Director, and Dr. Gregory Chesnut, Director of the Center for Prostate Disease Research at the Murtha Cancer Center, of Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, as saying.

Later on Monday, Austin issued a statement saying that he is grateful for the excellent care he received at the medical center. He also thanked the doctors and nurses for their professionalism and support.

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PREVIEW - US State of Iowa Readies for First Republican Nominating Contest of 2024 Presidential Race

WASHINGTON, January 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is preparing for the first Republican Party nominating contest of the 2024 presidential election cycle on Monday, in the form of

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caucus elections in the state of Iowa.

Supporters of Republican presidential hopefuls, including former US President Donald Trump, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley and businessman Vivek Ramaswamy, will gather to give their input on who ought to serve as the party's 2024 nominee.

The caucus sets the stage for the remainder of the nominating cycle, particularly the New Hampshire primary elections on January 23, where candidates will again attempt to build momentum before other races, including so-called "Super Tuesday" on March 5.

WHAT'S A CAUCUS?

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"The first thing I would concentrate upon is voter turnout compared to 2020 and to 2016," former hedge fund manager and political commentator Charles Ortel said in a statement to Sputnik. "Next in importance will be Trump's margin of victory… Third to watch is who drops out after the caucuses."

Anything other than an overwhelming Trump victory in Iowa will fuel narratives that Trump is a "past his prime" candidate, Ortel said.

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"So much is going to happen between now and election day that will decide who will win," former hedge fund manager and publisher Gerald Celente said in a statement to Sputnik. "None of this means anything."

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Regardless, campaign staff and political analysts will be closely watching the Iowa Republican caucus on Monday in an effort to glean insight into the trajectory of the presidential race.

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RPT: PREVIEW - US State of Iowa Readies for First Republican Nominating Contest of 2024 Presidential Race

WASHINGTON, January 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is preparing for the first Republican Party nominating contest of the 2024 presidential election cycle on Monday, in the form of caucus elections in the state of Iowa.

Supporters of Republican presidential hopefuls, including former US President Donald Trump, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley and businessman Vivek Ramaswamy, will gather to give their input on who ought to serve as the party's 2024 nominee.

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US Conducts No Strikes on Houthi Positions in Yemen on Sunday - Defense Official

WASHINGTON, January 14 (Sputnik) - The United States and its coalition partners did not conduct any strikes on Houthi positions in Yemen on Sunday, a US defense official told Sputnik.

Earlier in the day, a Yemeni military source told Sputnik that the US and UK military had launched another series of airstrikes on Houthi targets.

"There have been no US or coalition strikes today," the official said.

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US Lawmakers Reach Deal on Stopgap Bill to Keep US Gov't Open Until March - Source

WASHINGTON, January 14 (Sputnik) - Leadership in the US House of Representatives and Senate reached an agreement on another stopgap bill to keep the US government funded until March, a source familiar with the matter told Sputnik on Sunday.

"Can confirm," the source said when asked about reports of the House and Senate reaching a deal.

A draft text of the measure is expected to be rolled out later on Sunday and votes should take place in the coming week, media reported.

This measure will give US lawmakers time to continue work on a bipartisan spending package that provides some $1.6 trillion in spending for the next fiscal year, with $886 billion of it going to defense.

In November, US Congress passed a so-called "laddered" government funding measure, which temporarily funded separate portions of the government through January 19 and February 2.

In order to avoid a partial or total government shutdown, lawmakers must pass appropriations bills on areas including agriculture and transportation by the first date, and on areas including defense, homeland security and foreign operations by the latter date.

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White House Claims Texas Officials Blocked Border Patrol From Saving Migrants That Drowned

WASHINGTON, January 14 (Sputnik) - Texas officials allegedly prevented US Border Patrol from saving a migrant family that drowned in the Rio Grande river on the US-Mexico border, the White House said in a statement obtained by CBS News.

"A woman and two children drowned near Eagle Pass, and Texas officials blocked US Border Patrol from attempting to provide emergency assistance," the statement said on Saturday.

The White House said Texas Governor Greg Abbott's "political stunts" are inhumane and dangerous, and US Border Patrol must have access to the border to enforce US laws. The US government continues to investigate the incident, the statement added.

The Texas Military Department (TMD), in response to the accusation, said it had been contacted by Border Patrol about a migrant distress situation, but did not observe any migrants drowning.

"At no time did TMD security personnel along the river observe any distressed migrants, nor did TMD turn back any illegal immigrants from the US during this period. Also, at no point was TMD made aware of any bodies in the area of Shelby Park nor was TMD made aware of any bodies being discovered on the US side of the border regarding this situation," the TMD said.

On Friday, the US Justice Department in a court filing asked the US Supreme Court to take action to prevent Texas officials, including state National Guard units, from blocking US Border Patrol agent's access to a stretch of land along the southern border so that they can carry out

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their duties.

The Texas Military Department said this action was taken to "prepare for future illegal immigrant surges and to restrict access to organizations that perpetuate illegal immigrant crossings in the park and greater Eagle Pass area."

The state of Texas and the US Justice Department are currently in the middle of at least two legal battles over differences on their handling of the immigration crisis on the US southern border. Earlier this month, US media reported that border security officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded. The Biden administration has also experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the southern border.

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RFK Jr. Supports Secure Border to End Crisis, Cutting Off Funding For Ukraine - Press Team

WASHINGTON, January 14 (Sputnik) - Independent US presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. supports efforts to end the immigration crisis on the US southern border as well as cutting off aid to Ukraine, his campaign press team told Sputnik.

Kennedy's comment is in light of ongoing negotiations between the White House and Senate Republicans on a supplemental bill to address US national security concerns. The White House has asked Congress to provide more than $100 billion in supplemental funds including more than $60 billion for Ukraine, but Republican lawmakers have refused to approve the request without meaningful measures to end the border crisis.

"Mr. Kennedy's position differs from both President Biden's and the Republicans'," the press team said on Saturday. "He supports a secure border to put an end to the humanitarian crisis of uncontrolled illegal immigration. And he also supports cutting off funding for the Ukraine war."

Earlier in the day, according to the White House press pool, President Joe Biden told reporters major changes are needed on the US southern border and he's prepared to make those significant alterations.

On Thursday, US Senator Kyrsten Sinema said the negotiating parties are very close to reaching a deal on a supplemental bill and hopes a draft text of the legislation may be available for other lawmakers to see soon.

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State Dept. Confirms to Sputnik US Citizen Gonzalo Lira Died in Ukrainian Prison

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) – A State Department spokesperson confirmed to Sputnik that US citizen Gonzalo Lira died in a Ukrainian prison following his long detainment and offered condolences to his family.

"We can confirm the death of a U.S. citizen in Ukraine. We offer our sincerest condolences to the family on their loss," the spokesperson said in a statement on Friday when asked to confirm Lira's death.

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

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CORRECTION - Musk Says Hopes SpaceX Will Land Spacecraft on Mars, Send Humans to Moon in Next 8 Years

(Updates with correction in headline)

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - SpaceX founder Elon Musk said he hopes his company will land the Starship spacecraft on Mars and send humans to the Moon within the next eight years.

"What will things be like eight years from now...I think we will have landed on Mars and I think we will have sent people to the Moon," Musk said on Friday.

Musk added that a lot of work will be required to live on Mars.

Moreover, Musk said he hopes the third Starship flight test this year will reach orbit and prove the spacecraft can reliably deorbit.

Regarding the Moon, Musk said the next step to think about is building a base on it.

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Blinken, Chinese Official Discuss Stability on Taiwan Strait, Other Issues - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and China's Minister of the International Liaison Department Liu Jianchao had a constructive discussion on issues related to stability on the Taiwan Strait among other bilateral and global issues, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a press release.

The meeting took place ahead of Taiwan's elections on Saturday, which is causing a bit of tension between both sides as they monitor the situation closely.

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"Blinken reiterated the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea," Miller said on Friday.

Miller said Blinken and Liu had a "constructive" discussion on areas of potential cooperation and areas of difference.

Both sides highlighted the importance of continuing to maintain open channels of communication between the United States and China, Miller added.

The two sides exchanged views on matters concerning Ukraine, North Korea, and the Middle East.

Moreover, both sides reaffirmed the importance of continuing to implement the progress made on key issues, particularly counter-narcotics cooperation and military-to-military communications, according to Miller.

Blinken also emphasized the importance of resolving the cases of American citizens who are "wrongfully" detained or subject to exit bans in China, Miller said.

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Lockheed Says X-59 Hypersonic Aircraft to Begin Flight Tests Late Spring, Early Summer

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - NASA and Lockheed Martin expect the X-59 quiet hypersonic aircraft will begin flight tests by late spring or early summer of this year, Lockheed Martin X-59 Program Director David Richardson told reporters.

"We will start taxi tests in the late spring, early summer, so that's about when we expect to have first flight, is in that timeframe late spring, early summer of this year," Richardson said in a conference call on Friday.

NASA and Lockheed officials said they are working on selecting a few eligible airports that will be used to conduct flight tests of the X-59 hypersonic aircraft in order to see how it affects communities.

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"We're introducing a new sound that people don't hear on a regular basis," NASA Quesst Mission Integration Manager Peter Coen said.

Coen added that each test will last about a month and consist of about 60 flights. It's possible the hypersonic aircraft will have multiple flight tests per day, he added.

The X-59 hypersonic aircraft uses a General Electric F414 engine, similar to what's used in the F-18 Super Hornet fighter jet.

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Trump Slammed Biden For Attacks On Houthis With Austin Running War From Hospital - Post

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - Former President Trump, in a social media post, criticized President Biden for overseeing military actions in the Middle East while Secretary of Defense Austin managed operations remotely from a hospital room.

"So, let me get this straight. We're dropping bombs all over the Middle East, AGAIN (where I defeated ISIS!), and our Secretary of Defence, who just went missing for five days, is running the war from his laptop in a hospital room. Remember, this is the same gang that "surrendered" in Afghanistan, where no one was held accountable or FIRED. It was the most embarrassing "moment" in the history of the United States. Now we have wars in Ukraine, Israel, and Yemen, but no "war" on our Southern Border. Oh, that makes a lot of sense. Crooked Joe Biden is the worst President in the history of the United States," Trump said on Friday.

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin was hospitalized in early January due to an infection, following cancer surgery in late December. The Defense Department failed to communicate Austin's hospitalization to the White House for several days, prompting bipartisan calls for him to leave his leadership role.

In the early hours of Friday, the US and the UK carried out airstrikes against Houthi positions in retaliation for attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea. The strikes hit more than 60 targets in 16 different locations, US Air Forces Central said.

Russia has condemned the airstrikes on Yemen conducted in absence of a UN mandate, calling them a direct threat to global peace and security.

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Northrop Completes Depleted Uranium 120mm Shell Production for Abrams Tanks - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman has completed production of 120mm heavy artillery shells for the Abrams M1A2 C Version 3 main battle tank, the company announced in a press release.

"Northrop Grumman Corporation announced ...it successfully completed production of the M829A4 120mm cartridge to the US Army," the release said on Friday.

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The company described the M829A4 as a line-of-sight kinetic-energy cartridge designed specifically for the Abrams M1A2 System Enhancement Program version 3 Main Battle Tank.
"It provides the Abrams the ability to defeat threat vehicles equipped with third-generation explosive reactive armor," the release said.
With production of that line of ammunition completed in December 2023, the company is no longer producing depleted uranium ammunition, the release added.

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BAE Systems Delivers New Amphibious Command Control Vehicle to US Marines - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - BAE Systems has delivered the first of a new line of amphibious command and control vehicles to the US Marines Corps, the company announced in a press release.
"BAE Systems delivered the first Amphibious Combat Vehicle Command and Control (ACV-C) variant under the full-rate production contract to the US Marine Corps," the release said on Friday.
The ACV-C will provide Marines with a mobile command center which will offer them situational awareness and operations planning in the battlespace, the release said.
"ACV-C provides true open-ocean and ship-to-objective amphibious capability, land mobility, survivability and ample growth capacity and flexibility to incorporate and adapt future technologies," the release said.
BAE Systems says the ACV is truly customizable and has the built-in growth capacity to integrate future mission critical technologies, including new battle management capabilities, advanced communications, multi-domain targeting management, beyond-line-of-sight sensors and manned-unmanned teaming with autonomous and unmanned systems, the release added.

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Biden Says US Not in De Facto Proxy War With Iran Amid Mideast Attacks

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters he does not think the United States is in a de facto proxy war with Iran as it deals with violence in the Middle East.
"No," Biden said on Friday when asked if the United States is in a de facto proxy war with Iran.
Biden also said Iran does not want a war with the United States.
Iran has already rejected accusations from Western countries over Tehran's alleged involvement in the Houthi attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea. In addition, Iran emphasized that resistance groups in the Middle East, such as the Houthis, do not receive any instructions from Iran.
The United States and the United Kingdom carried out strikes against Houthi positions in

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Yemen in response to attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea. US officials said these strikes were meant to degrade the Houthis' capability to launch attacks.

The US military said it hit more than 60 targets at 16 Houthi locations, including command and control nodes, munitions depots, launching systems, production facilities and air defense radar systems.

The Houthis threatened that the United States and the United Kingdom would pay a "high price" for the attack. The group previously announced their plans to prevent the passage of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea until the country stops military actions in the Gaza Strip.

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Missile Agency Approves $271Mln Contract Boost to Lockheed on AEGIS Systems - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has awarded Lockheed Martin a more than $271 million extension on a previous $646 million contract to develop and integrate new software and hardware for the AEGIS destroyer and cruiser-carried anti missile and air defense system, the Department of Defense announce in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Rotary and Mission Systems [of] Moorestown, New Jersey is being awarded a $271,286,879 modification ...contract," the release said on Friday. "The total value of the contract is increased by $271,856,809, from $674,477,035 to $946,333,844," the Defense Department said.

Under the contract, Lockheed Martin will develop, test and integrate equipment, material, software and hardware end items in support of the Aegis System Equipped Vessel program, the release explained.

Work on the contract will be carried out in Moorestown, New Jersey over the next 11 months from January 1, 2024, through November 30, 2024, the Defense Department said.

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Pentagon Says Still Has No Date for Austin’s Discharge From Hospital

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin remains at Walter Reed Medical Center and the date of his release from the hospital is unknown, Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said in a statement.

“Secretary Austin continues to be hospitalized at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and remains in good condition,” the statement said on Friday. “We do not have a specific date for Secretary Austin’s release from the hospital at this time but will continue to provide daily updates until then.”

Earlier on Friday, Austin conducted phone calls with House Armed Services Committee

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Chairman Rep. Mike Rogers, Senate Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Sen. Roger Wicker, and House Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Rep. Adam Smith who have been critical of the Pentagon Chief's failure to disclose his hospitalization to Congress.

Austin was hospitalized in early January due to an infection, following cancer surgery in late December. The Defense Department failed to communicate Austin's hospitalization to the White House for several days, prompting bipartisan calls for him to leave his leadership role.

The White House and the Pentagon itself continue to insist that Austin's hospitalization has had no impact on US defenses and that he continues to provide effective leadership of the military, including ordering strikes on Houthi positions in Yemen last night.

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US Arbitrarily Defines 'Threats,' Its Respond Without Regard to Int'l Law–Russian UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, January 13 (Sputnik) - In the situation with the illegal bombing of Yemen, the United States has once again shown that Washington is going to continue its practice of arbitrarily determining what is a threat to its interests and choose ways to respond to them without regard to international law, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said during an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council.

"Actions of the so-called 'coalitions' are a flagrant violation of Article 2 of the UN Charter. This is yet another military aggression by the collective West in a long list of its "raids" on the suffering Middle East," Nebenzia said on Friday. "One does not need to be a rocket scientist to understand that these "threats" and the measures to respond to them will be arbitrarily determined by the United States without the slightest regard for international law."

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US Coalition Strikes on Yemen Destabilize Regional Security, Normalization - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS January 13 (Sputnik) - The United States-led strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen are further destabilizing the Middle East and are undermining the normalization of relations in the region, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said.

"Such rash and short-sighted steps destabilize the security situation and undermine the emerging normalization of regional conditions," Nebenzia said during a meeting of the UN Security Council on Friday.

The Russian ambassador warned that if the escalation continues, then the entire Middle East may face a catastrophe in comparison to which the events thus far may look like "flowers."

Russia calls on the international community to strongly condemn the strikes on Yemen, which occurred without a United Nations mandate, Nebenzia said.

Russia shares the concerns of regional partners on the matter and calls for increased

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international efforts to prevent an escalation of violence in the Middle East, Nebenzia added.

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Skunk Works Displays X-Jet to Cut Sonic Boom in Atmospheric Flights - Lockheed Martin

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin Skunk Works has put on public display the X-59, a new experimental aircraft designed to reduce the sonic boom in atmospheric flights, especially of commercial aircraft, the company announced in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Skunk Works rolled out the X-59, a unique experimental aircraft designed to quiet the sonic boom, at a ceremony in Palmdale, California," the release said on Friday.

The ceremony marked a significant milestone in Lockheed Martin's and NASA's decades-long journey to try and reduce the impacts of one of the most persistent challenges of supersonic flight - the sonic boom, the release said.

The X-59 is powered by a top-mounted engine to prevent supersonic air shock and its pilot sees ahead through a television screen as there is no forward-facing window to again reduce the likelihood of any sonic boom, NASA officials said.

Skunk Works is an official pseudonym for Lockheed Martin's Advanced Development Programs, formerly called Lockheed Advanced Development Projects. It is responsible for a number of aircraft designs, highly classified research and development programs, and exotic aircraft platforms.

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US House to Move Forward With Hunter Biden Contempt Vote Despite Request for New Subpoena

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will move forward on a full vote next week to hold Hunter Biden in contempt of Congress for defying subpoenas issued in November, the House Oversight and Judiciary committees said in a joint statement.

Earlier on Friday, Biden's attorney said in a letter to the committees that his client would appear for a deposition if they issued a new subpoena, arguing that the previous subpoenas were legally invalid.

"For now, the House of Representatives will move forward with holding Hunter Biden in contempt of Congress until such time that Hunter Biden confirms a date to appear for a private deposition in accordance with his legal obligation," the statement said on Friday.

House Judiciary Chairman Jim Jordan and House Oversight Chairman James Comer said in the statement that they will not tolerate any additional stunts or delay from Biden.

Earlier this week, the House Oversight and Judiciary panels scheduled hearings to consider a resolution and accompanying report recommending contempt of Congress charges against

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Biden. The US president's son unexpectedly showed up at the Capitol during the hearings, but left shortly after arriving.

On December 13, Biden was set to provide testimony to the panels as part of their probe into alleged criminal activity by the Biden family. However, he instead held a press conference, where he said he would only answer questions in an open hearing.

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State Dept. Confirms to Sputnik US Citizen Gonzalo Lira Died in Ukrainian Prison

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) – A State Department spokesperson confirmed to Sputnik that US citizen Gonzalo Lira died in a Ukrainian prison following his long detainment and offered condolences to his family.

"We can confirm the death of a U.S. citizen in Ukraine. We offer our sincerest condolences to the family on their loss," the spokesperson said in a statement on Friday when asked to confirm Lira's death.

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

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Biden in Letter to Congress Explains His Decision to Strike Yemen's Houthis

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden in a letter to the House of Representatives and Senate has formally notified Congress of and explained his decision to strike Houthi position in Yemen.

In the early hours of Friday, the US and the UK carried out airstrikes against Houthi positions in retaliation for attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea. The strikes hit more than 60 targets in 16 different locations, US Air Forces Central said.

"I am providing this report as part of my efforts to keep the Congress fully informed, consistent with the War Powers Resolution. I appreciate the support of the Congress in this action," Biden's letter said on Friday.

In his letter, Biden explained that his decision to strike the Houthis in Yemen was consistent with his responsibility to protect United States citizens both at home and abroad and in furtherance of United States national security and foreign policy interests.

He also said the military action against the Houthis was "necessary and proportionate," adding that Washington stands ready to take further action, as necessary and appropriate, to address

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further threats or attacks.

Following the strikes, a bipartisan group of Republican and Democratic members of the US Congress expressed concerns about the attack on Yemen by a United States-led coalition of countries, while US House Speaker Mike Johnson and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell both expressed support for Biden's decision.

The Houthis said the United States and the United Kingdom would pay a "high price" for the strikes. The group previously announced their plans to prevent the passage of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until the country stops its military actions in the Gaza Strip.

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Advocacy Group Says Glad Trudeau Rejects Premise of South Africa's Case Against Israel

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) – Canada's Center for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) said on Friday that it was glad Prime Minister Justin Trudeau rejected the premise of South Africa's case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) which alleges that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians.

Earlier on Friday, Trudeau stated that despite respecting the ICJ and its processes, as well as being currently involved in some five active cases at the Court, Canada does not support the premise of the case brought forward by South Africa.

The Prime Minister said that further details aimed at clarifying Ottawa's position regarding the court proceedings against Israel would be shared later on Friday.

"We are glad to see that PM @JustnTrudeau has publicly stated that #Canada does not support the "premise of the case brought forward by South Africa." We look forward to seeing the Government's clear rejection of the libelous genocide allegation against #Israel reflected in its anticipated statement later today," CIJA said via X (formerly twitter).

From January 11-12, the ICJ is holding public hearings on a genocide case brought forward by South Africa against Israel.

South Africa brought the claim in response to the surging civilian death toll in the Gaza Strip and seeks to prove that Israel's military campaign in the Palestinian enclave is genocidal in nature and targets the Palestinians as a national, racial and ethnic group.

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Pentagon Chief Austin Overseeing Response to Houthi Attack in Phone Conference - Ryder

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin alongside the chairman and CENTCOM commander, conducted a phone conference to closely track the Tuesday Houthi attack, Pentagon press secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said on Friday.

"Secretary Austin conducted a phone conference with the chairman and the CENTCOM

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commander to monitor [Houthis attack on Tuesday]," Ryder said during a press briefing.
On Tuesday, the US Central Command said the United States and its allies shot down 18 attack drones, two anti-ship cruise missiles, and one anti-ship ballistic missile launched by Houthi rebels in Yemen into the southern Red Sea where commercial vessels were transiting.
The Houthis vowed they would continue to prevent the passage in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until the latter's military actions in the Gaza Strip end. The Houthis also vowed to attack any ships that join the US-led maritime security coalition.
In the early hours of Friday, the US and the UK carried out airstrikes against Houthi positions in retaliation for attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea. The strikes hit more than 60 targets in 16 different locations, US Air Forces Central said.
Russia has condemned the airstrikes on Yemen conducted in absence of a UN mandate, calling them a direct threat to global peace and security.

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US, Allies Widened Israel-Gaza Conflict With Yemen Strikes - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies widened the conflict between Israel and Hamas militants in Gaza by launching strikes in Yemen, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday.
"The US and its allies have single-handedly triggered a spillover of the conflict to the entire region, having attacked yesterday — in violation of Article 2 of the UN Charter — the people of Yemen," Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting.

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UN Humanitarian Aid Supplies to Gaza Will Not Sustain 2.3Mln Residents - Official

UNITED NATIONS, January 12 (Sputnik) - The volume of humanitarian aid the United Nations is delivering to the Gaza Strip falls well short of the needs of more than 2 million people there, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths said on Friday.
"While we have seen some minor increase in the number of trucks entering via Rafah and Kerem Shalom, humanitarian supplies alone will not be able to sustain more than 2 million people," Griffiths said during a meeting of the UN Security Council on Palestine.
The Under-Secretary-General pointed out that the United Nations supplies cannot replace Gaza's commercial sector.
"Commercial goods must be let in, at scale," Griffith said.
In addition, there is a growing list of humanitarian supplies and items the United Nations is

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unable to deliver, Griffiths added.

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Biden Says He Thinks Yemen's Houthis Are Terrorist Group

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Bdien on Friday told reporters he thinks the Houthis are terrorists, signaling a potential shift in his administration's policy toward the Yemeni rebel group.

"I think they are," Biden said when asked whether he was willing to call the Houthis a terrorist group.

The Biden administration in February 2021 revoked the US terrorist designation of the Houthis over concerns that sanctions would worsen Yemen's humanitarian crisis.

Earlier this week, the White House said the United States was still conducting a review of whether to re-designate the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization following the group's ongoing attacks against commercial vessels in the Red Sea.

The United States and the United Kingdom carried out strikes overnight into Friday on dozens of Houthis targets in Yemen in response to the group's attacks on commercial vessels in the region.

The Houthis had said in November that they would target Israeli-linked and Israeli-bound ships in response to its military campaign in Gaza.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 13 (Sputnik) -

US STRIKES ON YEMEN

* The United States is not seeking a conflict with Yemen, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Friday.

* The United States is still evaluating the damage its strikes caused to the Houthis' capabilities in Yemen and this process may take "some hours," Kirby said.

* The Houthi's missiles arsenal and other weapons have not been damaged in the US and UK strikes, Houthi official Muhammad Ali Al Bukhaiti told Sputnik.

* NATO considers airstrikes on Yemen conducted by the United States and the United Kingdom to be "defensive" in nature, AFP reported, citing the alliance.

* Russia condemns the strikes on Yemen conducted by the United States and the United Kingdom as there has been no UN Security Council resolutions permitting such actions, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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HOUTHIS ATTACKS IN THE RED SEA

* The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) said it received information about a missile fired toward a ship about 90 nautical miles southeast of the Yemeni port of Aden.

* More than 200 vessels are sailing in the waters of the Red Sea on Friday, shipping through the Suez Canal also continues, according to data published by the MarineTraffic ship tracker.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* A total of 48 Ukrainian soldiers surrendered to Russia in the past week, including 35 in the Kupyansk direction, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday.

* Russia has repelled six Ukrainian attacks in the Donetsk direction in the past week, where Kiev lost more than 1,785 soldiers and five tanks, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* An increasing number of officials in the United States are asking whether the astronomical sums of money to support Ukraine were spent effectively, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

RUSSIAN ECONOMY

* Inflation in Russia in 2023 amounted to 7.42% and it slowed to 0.73% in December compared to 1.11% in November, the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) said on Friday.

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UPDATE - Over 2,500 Tractors Gather in Nuremberg to Protest Diesel Subsidy Phaseout - Correspondent

(Adds quotes from farmer in paras 5-8)

NUREMBERG, January 12 (Sputnik), Lenka White - German farmers gathered in downtown Nuremberg on Friday for a tractor rally as part of a nationwide week of protests against a planned diesel subsidy phaseout by the Scholz government, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

Several thousand farmers from across Germany drove with their tractors to the center of the Bavarian city. Tractors were parked all over and around the historical Volksfestplatz square.

Many arrived in groups representing several generations of farmers. The participants of the rally held banners demanding a change or with slogans like "Stop leftist ideology madness" and "Agriculture feeds everyone, including those who oppose it."

Some attendees, a minority, were not farmers themselves but came to the protest to express their solidarity.

Farmer Kai told Sputnik that he came to protest not just the latest subsidy cut but the overall government policy toward the sector.

"The government should leave. The SPD, the green ones and FDP, they should leave. The best thing is that they leave Germany," Kai said.

They should leave to a place where they spent the money, he added.

"The government is too much on the left side, I think, and people who think normally are immediately labeled as ‘right wing.’ That’s not correct," the farmer said.

Another farmer, Paul, said many of them have participated in other farmer protests across

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Germany this week and are heading to Berlin on Monday, where a final rally is going to be held.
In December, the German government announced plans to abolish diesel subsidies for farmers amid a budget crisis, which would bring 440 million euros ($481 million) to the federal budget. The government also planned to end tax breaks on vehicles for forestry and agriculture, gaining an additional 480 million euros. The announcement triggered multiple farmer protests nationwide.
German government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit said last week that instead of canceling diesel subsidies all at once, their amounts would be cut gradually, and vehicle tax breaks for forestry and agriculture would remain in place. However, farmers have continued to protest and strike across the country.
In response to the protests, the German ruling coalition's leaders invited farmers' associations to talks scheduled for next Monday. There is hope that negotiations will help find a way out, otherwise protests might continue, Henrik Wendorff, the president of the Brandenburg State Farmers' Association, said on Friday.

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UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Says Concerned by Regional Spread of Gaza Conflict

UNITED NATIONS, January 12 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths said on Friday that he remains concerned by the regional spread of the conflict between Israel and Hamas militants in Gaza.
"I remain extremely concerned by the further regional spread of this conflict," Griffiths said during a UN Security Council meeting.
Griffiths pointed to hostilities in the West Bank, military activity in Lebanon and conflict in Yemen.
He also reiterated his call for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.
On October 7, Hamas launched an attack on Israel, which killed more than 1,200 people. 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 and rescuing the hostages. Over 23,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza.
On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a truce and the exchange of some prisoners and hostages, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into Gaza. The ceasefire was extended several times and expired on December 1.
Tensions in the region escalated overnight when the United States and its allies struck Houthi rebel positions in Yemen in retaliation for attacks against commercial shipping in the Red Sea. The Houthis had said in November that they would target Israeli-linked and Israeli-bound ships in response to its military campaign in Gaza.

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

Acting Chief of Defense Staff to Retire After 40 Years in Canadian Military - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Canada's Chief of the Defense Staff General Wayne Eyre will retire in the summer after serving 40 years in the Canadian military, the Office of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a statement on Friday.

"The Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, today announced that General Wayne Eyre, after 40 years of service, will retire this summer as Chief of the Defense Staff, a position he has held since 2021," the statement said.

During his tenure, Eyre assisted in the stabilization of the military at a time when it was going through turmoil, leading the armed forces' response to several domestic and international security crises, the statement said.

Eyre is credited for his efforts to modernize Canada's military capabilities and readiness while transforming the institution into a more inclusive and respectful organization, the statement said.

Eyre will remain in office over the transition period until a successor is appointed, the statement also said.

"A selection process will be initiated to appoint the next Chief of the Defense Staff. General Eyre will continue to serve in his role until the appointment of his successor and the completion of a deliberate transition period," the statement added.

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Biden Admin. Asks USSC to Prevent Texas From Barring Feds' Access to Border - Filing

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is asking the US Supreme Court to prevent Texas officials from blocking US Border Patrol agents' access to a stretch of land along the United States' border with Mexico so that they can carry out their duties, US Justice Department Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar said in a court filing on Friday.

Texas National Guard units are currently blocking federal Border Patrol agents from patrolling a park in the border town of Eagle Pass, which has been a hot spot for illegal immigration under the Biden administration.

"This Court should vacate the injunction pending appeal in order to restore Border Patrol's access to the border it is charged with patrolling and the migrants it is responsible for apprehending, inspecting, and processing," Prelogar said.

Border Patrol agents have not been able to conduct their duties due to Texas' actions, Prelogar said.

Border Patrol is legally required to process migrants who step on US soil.

The Texas Military Department said this action was taken to "prepare for future illegal immigrant surges and to restrict access to organizations that perpetuate illegal immigrant crossings in the park and greater Eagle Pass area."

The state of Texas and the US Justice Department are currently in the middle of at least two

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legal battles over differences on their handling of the immigration crisis on the US southern border.

US media reported that border security officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded.

The Biden administration has also experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the US southern border.

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UN Resolution Calling on Houthis to End Attacks Was Immediately Abused - Russian Envoy

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The UN resolution calling on the Houthis to end its attacks on commercial vessels was immediately abused, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday.

"The resolution adopted was immediately abused," Nebenzia told reporters.

On Wednesday, the UN Security Council adopted a US-led resolution calling on Yemen's Houthis to immediately halt their attacks in the Red Sea. In the early hours of Friday, the United States and the United Kingdom carried out strikes on dozens of Houthis targets in Yemen in response to the group's attacks on commercial vessels in the region.

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Pentagon Hopes Houthis Do Not Retaliate But Prepared if They Do - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department hopes the Houthis refrain from retaliating for the strikes conducted by the United States and the United Kingdom on Yemen, but is prepared to respond in case they do, Joint Chiefs of Staff Director of Operations Lt. Gen. Douglas Sims II said.

"I would hope that they don't retaliate, but we're prepared in the event that they do," Sims said during a press briefing on Friday.

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US, UK Used Just Over 150 Various Munitions in Airstrikes on Yemen - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The United States and the United Kingdom used more than 150 different munitions in the airstrikes on Yemen, Director of the Joint Staff Lieutenant General Douglas A. Sims II said on Friday.

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“There were just over 150 Various munitions used,” Sims shared. “Those munitions came from both maritime platforms as well as air platforms, either British or US in the air."

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Maritime Security Firm Says Houthi Counter-Attacks Expected in Coming Days

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Houthi counter-attacks in the Red Sea are expected in the coming days in response to US and allied strikes in Yemen and commercial vessels should avoid the region during the weekend, maritime domain intelligence and information firm Dryad Global told Sputnik.

The United States and the United Kingdom carried out strikes against Houthi positions in Yemen overnight into Friday. US officials said the strikes were meant to degrade the Houthis' capability to launch attacks against commercial vessels.

"Due to the attacks on the Houthi positions we have sent a recommendation to all of our clients to avoid the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden for at least the next 72 hours," the company said. "The Houthis are unpredictable and we expect to see counter-attacks within this region in the coming days."

The London-based company said it confirmed one attempted missile attack earlier on Friday about 90 miles east of the port of Aden and is working to confirm information of a second potential attack.

The US military said it hit more than 60 targets at 16 locations in Yemen, including command and control nodes, munitions depots, launching systems, production facilities and air defense radar systems.

The Houthis said the United States and United Kingdom would pay a "high price" for the strikes. The group previously announced their plans to prevent the passage of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until the country stops its military actions in the Gaza Strip.

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US Saw One Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile Fired by Houthis on Friday, No Ships Hit - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The US Defense Department saw one anti-ship ballistic missile fired by Houthis today in retaliation for the overnight US-UK airstrikes on Yemen, but it did not hit any vessels in the Red Sea, Director of the Joint Staff Lt. Gen. Douglas A. Sims II said on Friday.

"We did see one anti-ship ballistic missile that was fired today that did not hit any ships of any kind, and we are still working through that in particular so we know that they [the Houthis] have fired at least one missile in retaliation. My guess is that the Houthis are trying to figure out on the ground and trying to determine what capabilities still exist for them," Sims said during a

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press briefing.

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Pentagon Says Knows Where Munitions Struck in Yemen, But Has No Complete Battle Assessment

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The Defense Department is very confident about where their munitions struck during the airstrikes on Yemen , however, does not yet have a full battle assessment, Director of the Joint Staff Lieutenant General Douglas A. Sims II said on Friday.
"We feel very confident about where our munitions struck, but we don't know at this point the complete battle damage assessment and we continue to do that," Sims said.

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UN Stands Against 'All and Any' Use of Capital Punishment - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United Nations stands against any and all use of the death penalty, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.
"We stand against all and any use of capital punishment," Dujarric said during a press briefing.
Dujarric made the comment in response to a question about the UN's stance on the US state of Alabama's decision to execute an inmate with nitrogen gas for the first time in the United States.
While numerous critics characterize the new method of execution with nitrogen gas as painful and cruel, other US states - Mississippi and Oklahoma - have also allowed the use of nitrogen hypoxia to carry out the death penalty.
Earlier this week, US District Judge R. Austin Huffaker refused an appeal by convicted murderer Kenneth Eugene Smith to stop his execution, scheduled for January 25, by nitrogen hypoxia.

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US Does No Expect Number of Casualties in Yemen Airstrikes to Be Very High – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The United States does not expect a high number of casualties as a result of its overnight airstrikes against Houthis' positions in Yemen, Director of the Joint Staff Lt. Gen. Douglas A. Sims II said on Friday.
"The number of casualties we don't expect would be very high. In fact, the majority of the locations that we hit were in areas that were not built up at all… ballistic missile launchers that

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were in mountain areas, very lowly populated areas. So, the number of casualties will likely not be very high," Sims said during a press briefing.

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US Environmental Authorities Propose Fines on Large Emitters of Methane - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said on Friday that it is proposing a new rule that would fine large emitters of methane in the energy sector.

"This proposed rule will assess a charge on certain large emitters of waste methane from the oil and gas sector that exceed emissions intensity levels set by Congress," the EPA said in a statement.

The fines would encourage the early deployment of technologies and practices to reduce methane emissions and other air pollutants, the statement said.

Methane is a "super pollutant" that is responsible for approximately one-third of warming from greenhouse gasses, the statement said. The oil and natural gas sector is the largest industrial source of methane emissions in the United States, the statement said.

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Over 2,500 Tractors Gather in Nuremberg to Protest Diesel Subsidy Phaseout - Correspondent

NUREMBERG, January 12 (Sputnik), Lenka White - German farmers gathered in downtown Nuremberg on Friday for a tractor rally as part of a nationwide week of protests against a planned subsidy phaseout by the Scholz government, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

Several thousand farmers from across Germany drove with their tractors to the center of the Bavarian city. Tractors were parked all over and around the historical Volksfestplatz square.

Many arrived in groups representing several generations of farmers. The participants of the rally held banners demanding a change or with slogans like "Stop leftist ideology madness" and "Agriculture feeds everyone, including those who oppose it."

Some attendees, a minority, were not farmers themselves but came to the protest to express their solidarity.

One of the farmers told Sputnik that he came to protest not just the latest subsidy cuts but the overall government policy toward the sector. Another farmer said many of them have participated in other farmer protests across Germany this week and are heading to Berlin on Monday, where a final rally is going to be held.

In December, the German government announced plans to abolish diesel subsidies for farmers amid a budget crisis, which would bring 440 million euros ($481 million) to the federal budget. The government also planned to end tax breaks on vehicles for forestry and agriculture, gaining

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an additional 480 million euros. The announcement triggered multiple farmer protests nationwide.

German government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit said last week that instead of canceling diesel subsidies all at once, their amounts would be cut gradually, and vehicle tax breaks for forestry and agriculture would remain in place. However, farmers have continued to protest and strike across the country.

In response to the protests, the German ruling coalition's leaders invited farmers' associations to talks scheduled for next Monday. There is hope that negotiations will help find a way out, otherwise protests might continue, Henrik Wendorff, the president of the Brandenburg State Farmers' Association, said on Friday.

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US Demand for High-Assay Low-Enriched Uranium Supply Reflects Desperation - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States' demand for establishing domestic supply of high-assay low-enriched uranium (HALEU) is artificial in nature and reflects desperation in the US nuclear energy research and development community, former US Assistant Director for National Security in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy Frank Von Hippel told Sputnik.

Earlier this week, the Department of Energy said that it is looking for bids from companies to help establish a reliable domestic supply of HALEU for use in advanced US nuclear reactors given that Russia remains the only global commercial supplier of such fuel for the world's nuclear power stations.

"This reflects desperation in the US nuclear-energy R&D [research and development] community because of the failure of the Department of Energy's efforts during the Obama Administration to encourage the building of conventional large water-cooled reactors fueled with ~5% enriched uranium," Von Hippel said.

Von Hippel said he is very skeptical about the claimed US demand for domestic supply of HALEU. He explained it is an artificial request created by the Department of Energy to pour government funds into startups proposing so-called advanced small modular reactors that are actually old reactor designs who failed to compete with water-cooled reactors decades ago.

At present, HALEU is not commercially available from suppliers based in the United States as Russia remains the world's only commercial producer of this type of fuel.

The demand for HALEU is small and mostly from research reactors around the world and for any small modular HALEU-fueled reactors that were actually built, Von Hippel said.

This supply can be satisfied either by blending down more excess Cold War weapon-grade uranium or by small production initiatives, Von Hippel said.

Moreover, this desperation in the US nuclear energy research and development community is coupled with ideological support for nuclear power in a large sector of Congress and the Biden administration's policy of supporting so-called climate friendly electricity-production

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technologies, including nuclear power, despite the fact that it is not currently competitive with wind and photovoltaics, he said.

Von Hippel noted that only four out of dozens of proposed reactors started construction as a result of the failed effort from the Obama administration, but two were abandoned and there are no plans for construction of new conventional power reactors in the United States.

One nuclear reactor, Vogtle-3, came online in July 2023 but its cost and construction time were both twice those estimated when the Georgia regulators approved the project, Von Hippel said. The second project, Vogtle-4, has similarly suffered cost and schedule overruns, he added.

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Red Sea Attacks May Further Escalate Situation in Middle East - UN Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 12 (Sputnik) - Attacks against commercial vessels in the Red Sea could lead to further escalation in the entire Middle East region, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"It definitely risks further escalating and making the situation in the region worse," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

The spokesperson urged Yemen's Houthis to fully respect UN Security Council Resolution 2722, which calls on them to cease all attacks on commercial shipping immediately.

"They endanger the safety and security of global supply chains and have a negative impact on the economic and humanitarian situation around the world," Dujarric said.

On Thursday, the US Central Command said the Houthis had attacked commercial ships in the Red Sea 27 times since November 19. The Houthis had previously pledged to prevent the passage of ships they believe to be linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until the country ends its military actions in the Gaza Strip.

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New Russian Cathedral in Florida to Become Home for All Orthodox Christians - Project Head

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The Russian diaspora in the United States is planning to build a new large Orthodox cathedral and cultural center that will become a spiritual home for all Orthodox Christians, the project's Development Director Tatiana Geringer told Sputnik.

"We see the cathedral to home 400, 500, or even 600 parishioners during regular services. That is how quickly interest in our faith in Florida is growing," Geringer said.

With the blessing of the First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR), Metropolitan Nicholas (Olhovsky), the new cathedral will be dedicated to the Resurrection of Christ.

"All Orthodox Christians celebrate the Resurrection on the same day, regardless of the

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calendar. It is the feast of feasts, the ultimate feast for all Orthodox," Geringer explained.

In addition, Florida has a large Russian-speaking population, with many of them seeking a place to fulfill their spiritual needs. There are also Americans who have converted to Orthodox Christianity and are interested in the faith, Geringer continued.

The project will be realized under the auspices of St. Luke the Blessed Surgeon Russian Orthodox Church, which grew from just a few families four years ago to over a hundred people attending regular services now. Geringer said the parish is developing rapidly, adding that over 300 believers participated in the Easter night service last year.

"We see this parish is growing, and growing, and growing. And, of course, the next step will be to build a large cathedral so that people are able to fill their spiritual void," she said.

The Cathedral Advisory Board expects the first services to occur roughly within a year.

"God willing, we will close on a property in the next few months. Then, of course, it will have time to make church alterations. So, again, God willing, with all our prayers, we will be able to have our first church services either at the end of this year or in 2025. That is our vision, our dream," Geringer said.

The Advisory Board expects the new cathedral to become "a true nexus for all of Orthodoxy," coupled with a large cultural center that will be open to different cultures and different types of arts.

"We also envision having a large parish hall where we will have all kinds of performances, lectures, and gatherings. We imagine housing for the clergy, school facilities, an enormous center where people gather for all things, for all moments of their lives: for baptisms, weddings, for all our fest celebrations, but also a beautiful parish hall where people can gather to see concerts," Geringer said.

The center will also include a book and music library.

Geringer admitted that all Orthodox Christian denominations are very different and have their own tradition. However, she stressed that all of them would be respected in the new community.

"It would be interesting, for example, to have a concert of all sorts of music from all the different jurisdictions of Orthodoxy. That is a dream that I personally have. I would love to hear the music of the Greek Church, of the Ukrainian Church, of the Serbian Church, of the Russian Church, of course," she added.

The new complex would also include two chapels dedicated to St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco and St. Luke The Blessed Surgeon, who both lived in the first half of the 20th century. The Russian diaspora in the US has always considered St. John its shepherd, while St. Luke treats people's souls, Geringer explained.

She also stressed that a cathedral dedicated to the Resurrection of Christ is of particular importance amid the current uncertainty in the world.

"We feel that this is the critical time to build a Russian Orthodox cathedral. We should never hide from our faith, from our culture. People are learning to be a part of the Russian Orthodox Church," she said.

Geringer, who grew up in the United States during the Cold War, recalled how her parents taught her not to hide her heritage. "We are actually children of two cultures, the Russian culture and the American culture. And we should be proud of what we are and never hide from our heritage," she added.

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IMF Not Ruling Out Funds Transferred to Ukraine Will be Used for Defense Purposes

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The use of budget support that Ukraine receives from the International Monetary Fund remains at the discretion of the Ukrainian authorities, an IMF spokesperson told Sputnik, when asked if Kiev could use it to fund its defense needs.

In March, the IMF executive board approved a four-year EFF loan program worth $15.6 billion for Ukraine. The IMF also released a list of 19 structural benchmarks Kiev promised to implement as part of the program.

"The IMF provides its resources to help members resolve balance of payments problems. Under Ukraine's EFF arrangement, IMF resources are directed as budget support to the Ministry of Finance; the use of these funds is not earmarked for any specific expenditures," the spokesperson said.

The budget deficit of the Ukrainian Defense Ministry for 2024 is 36% or 430 billion hryvnias ($11.33 billion), Ukrainian lawmaker Oleksiy Goncharenko said on Saturday.

The head of the Ukrainian parliament's tax committee, Danylo Hetmantsev, said in November that Ukraine's state budget was critically dependent on external assistance and that Kiev needed to raise about $9.5 billion in financial support in the form of grants and soft loans by the end of the year.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said Ukraine expected to receive over $30 billion in financial aid from the European Union, the United States, allied states and the IMF to compensate for the state budget deficit.

The IMF expects that Ukraine will need financing of about $42 billion this year, including official donor support of about $32 billion, spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

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US Not Interested in War With Yemen - White House's Kirby

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The United States is not seeking a conflict with Yemen, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Friday after US military struck Houthis' positions in the country earlier in the day.

"We are not interested in a war with Yemen," Kirby said at a briefing. "We are not interested in a conflict of any kind here."

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US Still Assessing Damage After Conducting Strikes on Yemen - Kirby

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is still evaluating the damage its strikes caused to the Houthis' capabilities in Yemen and this process may take "some hours," US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"We're still doing that assessment right now," Kirby said during a press briefing. "That's ongoing and it could take some hours before we can have a better sense of, clear sense of the actual damage done."

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US Justice Dept. Seeks Death Penalty for Buffalo Supermarket Shooter - Court Document

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department is seeking the death penalty for the gunman responsible for killing 10 people at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York in May 2022, a court document filed on Friday showed.

"The United States believes the circumstances in counts 11-20 of the indictment are such that, in the event of a conviction, a sentence of death is justified," the Justice Department said in the filing.

Federal prosecutors argued in the filing that Payton Gendron, 20, intentionally killed his vicitims and that the killings were racially motivated.

"Gendron expressed bias, hatred, and contempt toward Black persons and his animus toward Black persons played a role," the filing said.

In July 2022, Gendron, 20, was sentenced to life in prison without parole on state charges after pleading guilty to 15 charges, including domestic terrorism motivated by hate, murder and attempted murder.

He was the first defendant to be charged under the New York State's new law on domestic terrorism motivated by hate that was approved in 2020 under then-Governor Andrew Cuomo, and the penalty is a mandatory sentence of life in prison.

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Canada Does Not Support Premise of S. Africa's Case Against Israel Before ICJ - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Canada does not support the premise of the case brought forward by South Africa before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which alleges that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

From January 11-12, the ICJ is holding public hearings in a genocide case brought by South

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Africa against Israel.

South Africa brought the claim in response to the surging civilian death toll in the Gaza Strip and seeks to prove that Israel's military campaign in the Palestinian enclave is genocidal in nature and targets the Palestinians as a national, racial and ethnic group.

"Canada right now is directly engaged in at least five different cases at the ICJ because we believe in the importance of that as an institution, but our wholehearted support of the ICJ and its processes does not mean that we support the premise of the case brought forward by South Africa," Trudeau said.

When questioned whether Canada would accept an ICJ ruling in favor of South Africa, Trudeau said his government supports the court's rigorous work.

Canada has long supported the international "rules-based order," as well as the processes and structures established to ensure their enforcement worldwide, Trudeau said.

Further details aimed at clarifying Ottawa's position regarding the court proceedings against Israel will be shared later on Friday, Trudeau added.

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Oregon Supreme Court Says Will Not Hear Case Challenging Trump's 2024 Ballot Access

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The Oregon Supreme Court said on Friday that it will not take up a case that seeks to remove former President Donald Trump from the state's primary and general election ballots, citing an ongoing US Supreme Court case that may decide the issue.

"Today, the Oregon Supreme Court declined to hear, for now, a challenge by five Oregon voters seeking to preclude Donald J. Trump from appearing on the Oregon 2024 Republican primary and general election ballots," the court said in a statement.

The case, like several others across the United States, challenges Trump's ability to run for public office, due to a provision in the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution. Section Three of the amendment prohibits people who "engaged in insurrection" from holding public office. Trump's opponents point to the January 6 US Capitol riot as evidence of a link to a purported insurrection.

The US Supreme Court set an expedited briefing and argument schedule in the case, for which oral arguments are scheduled for February 8, the statement said.

Oregon does not need to finalize its presidential primary ballots until March 21, the statement said.

A US Supreme Court ruling regarding the Fourteenth Amendment issue may resolve one or more contentions in the Oregon case, the statement said.

The Oregon Supreme Court denied a petition for mandamus, but without prejudice to the ability to file a new petition after the US Supreme Court rules on the matter, if issues still remain, the statement added.

Trump has denied accusations of insurrection and instead made the same accusation against US President Joe Biden. Earlier this month, Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung said

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that Democrats are violating US voters' right to vote for the candidate of their choice.

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US Lifts Anti-Russia Sanctions From Business Aircraft- Treasury Department

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States has removed anti-Russia sanctions from the aircraft operated by the Maltese business aviation operator Emperor Aviation LTD, according to a Treasury document released on Friday.

"The following deletions have been made to OFAC's SDN List: 9H-OKO; Aircraft Manufacture Date 2018; Aircraft Model G650; Aircraft Manufacturer's Serial Number (MSN) 6356; Aircraft Tail Number 9H-OKO (aircraft)," the document said.

So far, there are no details on why such a decision has been made .

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Canadian Govt. Acted Within Its Authority by Supporting Strikes on Yemen – Trudeau

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday that his government acted within its authority when deciding on endorsing the strikes by the United States and the United Kingdom on Yemen.

In an overnight operation into Friday, the United States and the United Kingdom, supported by Canada and other allies, fired more than 100 missiles at Houthi positions the capital of Sanaa, the port of Al Hudaydah and in the cities of Sadah and Taizz, among other targets.

"We acted within our authorities," Trudeau expressed in French, when pressed on why he did not consult with the country's House of Commons before taking a decision on the matter.

Although stressing that no operational assets of the Canadian Armed Forces were involved in the strikes, when questioned about why Canada limited its involvement, Trudeau said that Ottawa did not have the assets in the region to get physically involved.

"We don't have the particular assets in the region. As I've said, members of the Canadian Armed Forces are within task groups working in the region," he said.

Canada has a longstanding history of stepping up for the respect of the rule of law and is actively and diversly engaged in ensuring its enforcement around the world, the Prime Minister said. Ottawa will continue to take part in responsible actions aimed at achieving peace worldwide, he added.

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Year 2023 Record Increase in Global Warming Confounds US Scientists - NASA Report

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The year 2023 was the warmest one on record on both land and sea, with temperatures overall far above the previous record-setting year of 2016, confounding the more cautious projections of scientists, a new report from NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said on Friday.

"The exceptional warming that we're experiencing is not something we've seen before in human history," NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies (GISS) Director Gavin Schmidt said. "It is driven primarily by our fossil fuel emissions, and we're seeing the impacts in heat waves, intense rainfall and coastal flooding."

Earth's average surface temperature in 2023 was the warmest on record, the NASA-NOAA analysis said. Global temperatures in 2023 were around 2.1 degrees Fahrenheit (1.2 degrees Celsius) above the average for NASA's baseline period of 1951 to 1980, the GISS scientists said.

"NASA and NOAA's global temperature report confirms what billions of people around the world experienced last year; we are facing a climate crisis," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said.

Across the world, the months from June to December were the warmest on record and the main areas of increases in global warming came in the Northern Hemisphere, on land and in the Arctic, Schmidt said.

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Hunter Biden Willing to Testify to Congress if Lawmakers Reissue Subpoena - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden is willing to cooperate with lawmakers to provide a deposition if they reissue a subpoena, his lawyer Abbe Lowell said in a letter obtained by Breitbart News on Friday.

"If you issue a new proper subpoena, now that there is a duly authorized impeachment inquiry, Mr. Biden will comply," the letter said.

The letter is addressed to US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer and Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan.

Biden's defense team argues that the subpoenas issued to him by both committees in November and the resolutions they approved to hold him in contempt for defying those subpoenas are legally invalid.

Lowell said Biden has repeatedly offered to testify before the committees at a public hearing.

On December 13, Biden was set to provide testimony to the panels as part of their probe into alleged criminal activity by the Biden family. However, he instead held a press conference, where he said he would only answer questions in an open hearing.

Earlier this week, the House Oversight and Judiciary panels scheduled hearings to consider a resolution and accompanying report recommending contempt of Congress charges against Biden. The US president's son unexpectedly showed up at the Capitol during the hearings, but left shortly after arriving.

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The House of Representatives will vote next week to hold President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, in contempt of Congress for his repeated defiance of subpoenas, according to House Majority Leader Steve Scalise.

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UPDATE-Kirby Says Has 'Every Expectation' Biden Will Speak to Netanyahu at 'Appropriate' Time

(updates to para 3-4)

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – US National Security spokesman John Kirby said on Friday that he has "every expectation" President Joe Biden will speak to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the "appropriate" time amid the ongoing military assault on Gaza following Hamas attacks in October.

"I have every expectation that President Biden will speak again to Prime Minister Netanyahu at the appropriate time," Kirby said in an interview for MSNBC.

Kirby urged not to judge the state of the American-Israeli relationship by the number of phone calls between Biden and Netanyahu, who have not spoken for about two weeks following a series of Biden's critical remarks about the Israeli government accusing Tel Aviv of being against a two-state solution.

In addition, Kirby stated that despite Biden and Netanyahu not agreeing on every issue they 'have an open mind to one another.'

The latest conversation between Biden and Netanyahu reportedly took place at the end of December. During the call, the US leader raised concerns with Netanyahu about Israel's withholding of part of the tax revenue that it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority.

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

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US Sanctions 2 Hong Kong, UAE Entities For Links With Iran, Houthis – Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration designated two companies from Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for activities related to Iran and the Houthis movement, the US Department of the Treasury said on Friday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated two companies in Hong Kong (PRC) and the United Arab Emirates for shipping Iranian commodities on behalf of the network of Iran-based, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF)-backed Houthi financial facilitator Sa'id al-Jamal. OFAC is also identifying four vessels as blocked property in which these companies have an interest," the statement said.

"The revenue from the commodity sales supports the Houthis and their continued attacks against international shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden," it added.

Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, Brian Nelson promised that Washington, along with its partners, will take all available measures to stop the destabilizing activities of the Houthis and their threats to global commerce.

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US House Speaker Says $1.59 Trillion Topline Government Spending Deal Remains

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WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Friday that he remains committed to a $1.59 trillion topline government spending agreement with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.

"Our topline agreement remains," Johnson said during a press conference.

Lawmakers look forward to a "robust" appropriations process, Johnson added.

Earlier this week, Johnson and Schumer announced a deal on $1.59 trillion topline spending for fiscal year 2024, paving the way to pass appropriations bills.

The US Congress must pass government funding legislation before shutdown deadlines on January 19 and February 2.

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Hunter Biden Faces Congressional Contempt Vote for Defying Subpoena - Scalise

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The House of Representatives will vote next week to hold President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, in contempt of Congress for his repeated defiance of subpoenas, Majority Leader Steve Scalise said on Friday.

"Next week, the House will vote to hold Hunter Biden in contempt of Congress for repeatedly defying subpoenas. Enough of his stunts. He doesn't get to play by a different set of rules. He's not above the law," Scalise said.

Hunter Biden faces contempt of Congress charges for defying a subpoena to provide testimony in the House probe into alleged criminal activity by the Biden family.

In December, prosecutors charged Hunter Biden with nine criminal offenses, including spending money on an "extravagant lifestyle" instead of paying federal taxes. He also faces tax and firearms charges in the state of Delaware.

Biden's attorney Abbe Lowell told Sputnik in December that his client was being targeted because of the connection to his father.

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US House Passes Bill to Decrease Countries' Reliance on Russian Agriculture

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday passed a bill to require the US Treasury Secretary to advocate for investments in projects that decrease countries' reliance on Russian agricultural commodities.

House lawmakers passed the legislation, dubbed the No Russian Agriculture Act, in a voice vote.

The bill directs the Treasury Secretary to use the United States' influence at international financial institutions to support projects that decrease the reliance of countries on Russia for

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agricultural commodities, specifically fertilizer and grain.

"The world cannot be reliant on Russia or other adversaries in any way but especially not to get the food we need. This legislation reduces our reliance on Russian farmers and puts the focus back on supporting America's farmers," Congressman Zach Nunn said in a statement on the bill.

Nunn introduced the legislation alongside Congresswoman Maxine Waters in July.

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US House Passes Bills Aimed at Supporting Taiwan in International Financial Organizations

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday passed a pair of bills aimed at supporting Taiwan and international financial institutions, including in the event of conflict with China.

House lawmakers passed a bill requiring the US Treasury Secretary to pursue "more equitable treatment" of Taiwan at international financial institutions in a voice vote.

The bill, dubbed the Taiwan Non-Discrimination Act, directs the Treasury Secretary, in their role as US governor of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to use the United States' influence to support Taiwan's admission as an IMF member.

The legislation also establishes as policy that the United States will not discourage or otherwise deter Taiwan from seeking admission as an IMF member.

In addition, the House of Representatives passed another bill on Friday to require the United States to push for China's exclusion from banking organizations if Beijing threatens Taiwan's security. House lawmakers passed the legislation in a voice vote.

The bill, dubbed the Pressure Regulatory Organizations To End Chinese Threats (PROTECT) to Taiwan Act, directs the US government to support China's exclusion from the Group of Twenty, Financial Stability Board, Bank for International Settlements and other financial organizations, if the US president determines that China threatened Taiwan's security or social or economic systems.

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US House Passes Bill to Push for Increased Transparency From China About Exchange Rates

WASHINGTON, January 10 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday passed a bill to require the US Executive Director at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to push for increased exchange rate policy transparency by China.

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the China Exchange Rate Transparency Act, in a vote of 379-1, with two-thirds support required for passage.

The legislation requires the US Treasury Secretary to direct the US Executive Director at the

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IMF to use the United States' influence to advocate for increased transparency from China about its exchange rates.
In November 2022, the Treasury Department said in a report that China provides "very limited" transparency about key features of its exchange rate mechanism.

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US Not Looking for Conflict With Iran, Does Not Want to Escalate Tensions – White House

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The United States is not looking for a conflict with Iran and does not want to escalate existing tensions that can lead to it, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.
"We are not looking for a conflict with Iran. We're not looking to escalate and there's no reason for it to escalate beyond what happened over the last few days by the Houthis. They are the ones that have been escalating," Kirby said in an interview for MSNBC.

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No Force Posture Changes in Middle East Following Strikes on Yemen - White House

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – The United States has not made any posture changes in the Middle East following the airstrikes on Houthis' positions in Yemen overnight, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.
"I don't have any force posture changes to speak to today. Obviously, that's an ongoing dynamic process looking at what the force posture is in the region," Kirby said in an interview for MSNBC. "We'll always take a look at the posture to make sure that it's properly designed and organized for the threats that we're facing."

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Austin Directed, Oversaw US Strikes Against Houthis From Hospital – Reports

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin directed and oversaw the US-led coalition strikes against Houthis' positions in Yemen overnight while staying in the hospital, Fox News reported on Friday, citing Pentagon press secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder.
Austin has been "actively engaged in overseeing and directing the strikes." He also talked with Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Brown and US Central Command

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(CENTCOM) Commander Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla during Houthi attacks on Tuesday, the report said.

Austin was hospitalized in early January due to an infection, following cancer surgery in late December. The Defense Department failed to communicate Austin's hospitalization to the White House for several days, prompting bipartisan calls for him to leave his leadership role.

In the early hours of Friday, the US and the UK carried out airstrikes against Houthi positions in retaliation for attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea. The strikes hit more than 60 targets in 16 different locations, US Air Forces Central said.

The US and the UK were forced to use military means after the Houthis ignored their warnings and continued to attack commercial ships in the Red Sea, UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron told NBC News.

Russia has condemned the airstrikes on Yemen conducted in absence of a UN mandate, calling them a direct threat to global peace and security.

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US, UK Strikes Against Yemen's Houthis Consistent With UN Charter - Global Affairs Canada

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The overnight missile strikes by the United States and United Kingdom on Houthi targets in Yemen are consistent with the UN Charter, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said in a statement on Friday.

In an overnight operation into Friday, the United States and the United Kingdom, supported by Canada and other allies, fired more than 100 missiles at Houthi positions the capital of Sanaa, the port of Al Hudaydah and in the cities of Sadah and Taizz, among other targets.

"These precision strikes are consistent with the UN Charter and demonstrate the international community's commitment to defending freedom of navigation and international commerce in the Red Sea," Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly and Defense Minister Bill Blair said in the statement.

Canadian military personnel deployed within the US Central Command supported the strikes, which were carried out after several unsuccessful attempts to warn against attacks on commercial ships sailing through the Red Sea, the statement said.

Canada condemns the Houthi attacks on commercial ships and crews, as they impact the flows of food, fuel, humanitarian assistance and other commodities, worldwide, the statement said.

"We call on Houthis to cease their attacks immediately … We remain committed to working with our partners in the Middle East to help advance sustainable peace and security in the region," the statement added.

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US Senator Paul Debuts Website to Oppose Haley as 2024 GOP Nominee, Cites Ukraine Support

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US Senator Rand Paul said on Friday that he launched a website to rally public opposition to former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley as the Republican Party's nominee for the 2024 presidential election, citing her support for additional Ukraine aid and other foreign policy stances.

"As I look over the field, I don't think I yet have a first choice, but I do know one thing: count me in as #NeverNikki," Paul said in a statement via X. "Based on her record and campaign, I don't see how any thoughtful or informed libertarian or conservative should vote for [Haley]."

The statement links to a website launched by Paul's campaign team, where people can join the senator and others in expressing their opposition to Haley as the Republican Party's 2024 nominee.

Haley stands with the "forever-war" crowd on continuing funding for the conflict in Ukraine, the statement said. Haley's "thirst for war" is so strong that she has proposed renaming the US Department of Defense to the Department of Offense, the statement said.

Haley received millions of dollars from arms merchants who benefit from the conflict in Ukraine - a conflict of interest that undergirds her desire for foreign military intervention, the statement said.

Moreover, Haley lacks respect for freedom of speech, the statement said, pointing to her proposal to verify the identities of people online.

"Anyone who doesn't fully believe in free speech or who wants endless wars has no business anywhere near the White House," the statement said.

Paul did not endorse any particular candidate, but said that he likes various aspects of several other Republican candidates, including former President Donald Trump, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and businessman Vivek Ramaswamy.

Paul also said that he is interested in independent presidential candidate Robert Kennedy Jr.

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Israel Says UN Should Sit on Trial in The Hague After ICJ Genocide Case

UNITED NATIONS, January 12 (Sputnik) - Israeli Ambassador to the UN Gilad Erdan claimed on Friday that the United Nations should be the one on trial at the International Court of Justice instead of Israel.

From January 11-12, the ICJ is holding public hearings in a genocide case brought by South Africa against Israel. South Africa brought the claim of Israel's genocidal intent in Gaza in response to the surging civilian death toll in the besieged Palestinian enclave. It seeks to prove that Israel's military campaign is genocidal in nature and targets Gazans as a part of the broader Palestinian national, racial and ethnic group.

"The UN is the one who should sit on trial in The Hague. The proceedings in The Hague demonstrate how the UN and its institutions have become weapons in service of terrorist

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organizations," Erdan said in a statement.

The use of the Convention on the Prevention of Genocide against Israel proves that the UN's morals cannot be at a lower point, he argued.

The 1948 Genocide Convention describes genocide as acts "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group." Both South Africa and Israel are parties to the convention. The ICJ usually takes years to issue any rulings and South Africa therefore urges the ICJ to call for a ceasefire in the meantime.

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Americans Identifying as Independents at High of 43%, Democrats at New Low - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The number of Americans identifying themselves as independents tied a 2014 record of 43%, while Democratic party identification shrank to a new low of 27%, according to a Gallup poll out Friday.

"Political independents continue to constitute the largest political bloc in the U.S., with an average of 43% of U.S. adults identifying this way in 2023, tying the record high from 2014," the pollster said.

Equal of 27% shares of US adults identify themselves as Republicans and Democrats. At the same time, slightly more independents leaned Republican than leaned Democratic.

"The Democratic figure marking a new low for that party in Gallup's trend," the poll stated.

At the same time, independent identification has been 40% or higher each year since 2011. The share was lower (39%) only twice, in 2016 and in 2020, when the US held presidential elections, according to the survey.

"Independents first outnumbered supporters of both major political parties in 1991 and have continued to do so since then, except in several years between 2004 and 2008," the poll said.

The Democrats, once the largest political group in the country, began losing supporters faster than Republicans.

"Democratic identification has now declined by one point in each of the past three years," the survey said.

These declines are likely tied to President Joe Biden's unpopularity, according to the poll.

The record low for Republican identification was 25% in 2013.

Results for the poll were based on telephone interviews from combined surveys in 2023 among of 12,145 adults from all 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

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