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1/19/24 Friday

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Another Boeing Incident: FAA Finds 'Softball-Sized Hole' in Plane That Was on Fire

The plane was reportedly seen aflame shortly after take off. During an inspection, a large sized hole was found above one of its engines.

A Boeing 747 cargo plane had to divert its flight and return to Miami International Airport on Thursday night after an engine failed shortly after takeoff, said the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

After the administration inspected the plane, they found a "softball size hole" above the plane's #2 engine: "Post flight inspection revealed a softball size hole above #2 engine," said the FAA according to a data entry on Friday.

In addition to the large hole that was found, the airplane was also reported to be shooting flames shortly after takeoff. This all happened to an Atlas Air Boeing 747-8 cargo plane.

"Mayday, mayday...We have an engine fire," an audio recording to air traffic controllers said. "Request access back to the airport. No, we'll go ahead and land. We have five souls onboard."

Atlas Air Flight 95 was heading to Luis Muñoz Marin International Airport in Puerto Rico. Nobody was injured in the incident and the plane was able to make a safe landing at around 10:30 PM.

"We can confirm that Flight 5Y095, a 747-8 cargo aircraft… landed safely after experiencing an engine malfunction soon after departure from Miami International Airport (MIA)," an Atlas Air spokesperson said in an emailed statement. "The crew followed all standard procedures and safely returned to MIA. At Atlas, safety is always our top priority and we will be conducting a thorough inspection."

A Boeing spokesperson said that Boeing is "supporting our customer and will support the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation into this incident".

This most recent incident could bring Boeing down into further scrutiny. In 2018 and 2019, two deadly crashes caused by a software issue forced the company to ground their entire 737 Max fleet. Last month, Boeing told airlines to inspect all 737 Max aircrafts for loose bolts in the rudder-control systems. And just earlier this month, a door plug blew out during an Alaska Airlines flight on a 737 Max 9, forcing the plane to make an emergency landing.

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More Than 50 Dead Following Winter Storm in US

During the ice storm a power line fell onto a parked car in Portland, Oregon which resulted in the death of three people.

At least 51 people in the US have died following a weeklong Arctic cold that has gripped the nation in terrifyingly low temperatures, according to one report. On Friday, more than 66 million Americans remained under winter weather warnings.

Of the cold-related deaths that have occurred since last Friday: 17 happened in Tennessee, nine in Oregon, six in Illinois, five in Washington state and Mississippi, three in New York, two in Louisiana and one each in Arkansas, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and New Hampshire, according to a report based on information from local and state officials.

Dangerous temperatures are expected to continue, even in regions of the US which are known for their typically warm climates. Temperatures will drop into the low 20s or teens on Friday night and early on Saturday. Some cities in the US states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, can expect to see such temperatures.

In Pennsylvania, five people were hit and killed by a tractor-trailer on Interstate 81 after they left their vehicles following a prior crash on the icy road. And in Kansas on Wednesday, an 18-year-old boy's body was found in a ditch just under a mile from where his car had become stuck in the snow. Authorities are investigating his death.

Those who died in Tennessee include: a box truck driver who reportedly slid into a tractor-trailer on the interstate, a man who fell through a skylight while trying to clean a roof, and a women who died of hypothermia after being found unresponsive in her home.

Nashville, which rarely sees high accumulations of snow, experienced more than 9 inches of snow since Sunday.

On Friday afternoon, wind chill alerts stretched from Montana to Florida and freeze alerts remained in effect across the South and Gulf Coast. Meanwhile, those living in western New York have been buried under snow for several days, and those in the stretch between Western Virginia and southern New England could get 1 to 5 inches of snow on Friday.

The National Weather Service also warned on Friday of freezing rain and strong winds of up to 40 mph for parts of Oregon. Many schools in the state's city of Portland canceled classes for a third straight day because of icy roads and water damage caused by frozen pipes.

The eastern US will experience low winter temperatures throughout the weekend that should grow warmer by Monday. New York City, for example, will experience a low temperature of 20 degrees on Saturday with a high of 24 degrees, but should see a high of 36 degrees by Monday which will grow to 46 degrees by Thursday. Boston will experience even colder temperatures with high temperatures in the low 20s on Saturday, but will see temperatures of 35 degrees by Thursday.

Temperatures in the Midwest US will not climb higher than the teens on Saturday, but will also warm up by the end of next week.

In Oregon, a teenager is being haled a hero after she rescued a baby from a downed powerline incident. Three people were killed by a collapsed powerline that landed on a car during a winter storm in Portland on Wednesday. A couple had been trying to put their baby into an SUV when a downed powerline fell on top of the vehicle, according to the heroic teenager who witnessed the incident.

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The father had grabbed the baby when the powerline first fell and tried to work his way up the icy driveway, but he slipped and his foot touched the live wire. The mother, who was six-months pregnant, tried to reach her baby but she also slipped and was electrocuted. The mother's 15-year-old brother tried to help as well, and he was also electrocuted and died.
The teenager, somehow, managed to rescue the baby without being electrocuted herself.
"We do have fortunately with us a [child] that is going to be able to thrive and do what they possibly can as they move forward," said Rick Graves, a Portland fire and Rescue spokesman, on Thursday. "And they are here, in part, because of the heroic acts of a member of our community."

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'It Really Is a Mess': Fani Willis Accusations Play Into Trump's Hands, Hearing Set for February

The accusation appears to be backed by credit card statements that show Nathan Wade, the special prosecutor appointed by Willis, paid for her plane tickets. Those statements were included in a court filing on Friday, and were attached to a filing by Wade's estranged wife in the couple's divorce case which is ongoing.
Fani Willis, the Fulton County District Attorney in Atlanta, Georgia is embroiled in alleged controversy. Willis was tasked with prosecuting former President Donald Trump over his efforts to overturn the 2020 election in Georgia. She is now facing accusations of engaging in an improper relationship with her lead prosecutor and of mishandling public money. The allegation that she had a romantic relationship with Wade was made in a filing by Mike Roman, one of Trump's co-defendants in the criminal case. Roman had no evidence at the time of the filing.
Nearly a week after she was first accused of these allegations, she made a roughly 30 minute speech before the Big Bethel AME Church in which she suggested race had played a role in the criticism of her. But throughout her speech she repeatedly referred to herself as a "flawed" and "imperfect" public servant who is "hardheaded". Writer and journalist Daniel Lazare spoke to Sputnik's Political Misfits on Friday and said that the allegations are "playing right into Trump's hands".
"It really is a mess, but it's amazing," said Lazare of the recent allegations. "I mean, it's playing right into Trump's hands. Trump is very lucky in his choice of enemies, and Fani Willis is just ideal from this point of view. It just shows the incredible corruption at the heart of the democratic judicial regime. It's amazing."
"We should wait until the process works itself out. No question about it," said Lazare, who pointed out that the allegations against Willis have not yet been proven to be true.
"But the facts seem to be pretty clear. I mean, they apparently are in a relationship. They were taking vacations together. She gave him this lucrative job, fed him thousands of dollars, which they then use to take vacations together. So essentially what they're doing is tapping into public funds for their own private entertainment. This is corrupt. It's absolutely corrupt," he added.
Sputnik's Ben Zinevich then pointed out what seems like Trump's ability to escape unscathed from the 91 criminal charges he faces. And up until this most recent controversy, the Georgia

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election case appeared to be the strongest case made against Trump. But despite his inability to keep his mouth shut when being interviewed—as well as his continuation of making inflammatory remarks—he seems to have persevered and appears on track to winning the GOP primaries.

“Well, I think it's very possible they'll wind up taking a case away from Fani Willis and her boyfriend Wade and give it to somebody else,” said Lazare. “And the case will then go forward. But it'll be much delayed. I presume it won't be heard until next year after the election. So it has kind of been canceled."

A hearing has been set by the Fulton County judge who is overseeing the Georgia case against Trump. On February 15—one day after Valentine’s Day—the judge will reportedly hear evidence for the allegations made against Willis. Roman’s attorney alleged in her 127-page filing that Wade has a “lack of relevant experience” but has been paid $650,000 in legal fees since he was brought on to his position. The Fulton County DA’s office has not filed any response to the allegations. Roman is hoping his case will lead to the dismissal of his indictment and disqualify Willis from the case.

“But it just goes to show how the Democrats put it all on Trump but they never consider their own role in the debacle. And it is a debacle, by the way. Having a second Trump term will be extraordinarily destructive,” said Lazare, who said the path to a second Trump presidency is being made possible by the Democrats.

“And it exposes the Democrats as corrupt, which is what Trump has been saying all along,” he added. “So it's completely self-destructive and completely reactionary, too. It further undermines democracy.”

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US Ballot Scanners So Old Even Weather Could Cause Malfunction

The policy and strategy director of a voter advocacy group suggested that the voting machines could be called “primitive technology”.

American voters will be casting their ballots on Tuesday in the New Hampshire primaries. There’s just a small problem: the ballot scanners being used are at least 15 years old, and some may even date back to the Bill Clinton administration, claimed a recent report.

Former President Donald Trump and his allies have encouraged conspiracy theories that attack the validity of voting machines in the US following his election loss in 2020 to US President Joe Biden. After about two years of investigating, there has been no evidence that the voting machines were tampered with.

But it isn’t manipulation that is affecting the health of the machines—it’s the fact that they are too old. The AccuVote ballot tabulators in use across approximately half of the US states' towns and cities are just too old to perform their job without the risk of a breakdown. And the supply of replacement parts for those breakdowns is dwindling.

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“You could say it’s primitive technology. You could say it’s simple and reliable technology. Both of those things can be true,” said Mark Lindeman, the policy and strategy director of Coalition for Open Democracy.

Typically, when these machines do malfunction the ballots must be counted by hand. This process creates a headache for local election officials and can delay the results’ reports. This pause in the reporting would be enough time to make conspiracy theorists suspicious and lead to doubts about the results, a voting advocacy group member said.

“We have three machines and three polling places. That’s it, no backup,” said Olivia Zink, a member of the Franklin City Council and the executive director of Coalition for Open Democracy. “If one goes down, we hand count.”

Zink adds that if the weather is poor, a damp ballot could cause the ballot scanner to malfunction.

“If it’s a sunny, beautiful day, we’re in great shape,” Zink said.

Donald Trump is expected to win the votes of Republicans in New Hampshire by wide margin, Nikki Haley is projected to win undeclared voters by about 10 points, according to recent polls. However, the former UN ambassador and former governor needs to win independent voters by an even wider margin if she hopes to break into Trump’s stride.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and the Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines told lawmakers that Ukraine will lose NATO’s proxy war against Russia in the coming weeks, months at most, if it does not receive more aid soon.

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The assessment, described as “incredibly stark” was given to the lawmakers in a private meeting on Wednesday, US media reported on Friday, citing two people familiar with the meeting.

Sullivan and Haines, two of the highest-ranking aides to US President Joe Biden, blamed a lack of artillery shells and air defense missiles as the most pressing needs. However, Russia has already demonstrated its capability to hit targets all over Ukraine earlier this month.

Biden requested that Congress pass an additional $60 billion in aid for the Zelensky regime, but it has been stalled in Congress for months. House Republicans are demanding significant concessions on border security that Democrats would have difficulty justifying to their base since many of the measures were promoted by former US President Donald Trump and decried as racist by many Democratic politicians.

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The US military has called off the search and rescue for two US Navy SEALs who were lost at sea after attempting to board an unflagged ship allegedly shipping Iranian arms to Houthi rebels.

US Central Command said in a statement that the two SEALs are presumed dead and the search continues for their bodies. Japan and Spain also assisted in the search, which covered 21,000 square miles.

On January 11, the US Navy boarded the ship, but one of the SEALs fell into the water and another attempted to rescue him. Both are now presumed dead. Their names have not yet been released as the families have yet to be notified.

“We mourn the loss of our two Naval Special Warfare warriors, and we will forever honor their sacrifice and example,” said Gen. Erik Kurilla, head of U.S. Central Command in a statement. “Our prayers are with the SEALs’ families, friends, the US Navy and the entire Special Operations community during this time.”

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Top Biden Aides: Ukraine Will Lose in Weeks or Months Without Aid

The United States has already spent more than $113 billion providing military and other aid to Ukraine. Russia has repeatedly warned that aid will only serve to prolong the conflict and any cargo entering Ukraine will be considered a legitimate military target.

National Security adviser Jake Sullivan and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines told lawmakers during a private meeting that Russia could win the conflict in Ukraine in a matter of weeks or months if Congress does not approve additional aid for the Kiev regime, US media reported on Friday.

According to two people familiar with the meeting, via US media, the two high-ranking aides said that Ukraine will soon run out of air defense missiles and lose its artillery capabilities. One White House official described the description as “incredibly stark.”

In December, the US announced that it had allocated the last tranche of aid to Ukraine that has been approved by Congress.

"We have given now Ukraine the last security assistance package that we have funds to support right before New Year's, right after Christmas. And we've got to get support from Congress so we can continue to do that," Sullivan told reporters at the time.

Ukraine is facing more than a funding crisis, it is also facing a lack of personnel on the frontline. It was reported in Western media outlets last fall that the average age of a Ukrainian soldier had increased to 43 years. It also lifted restrictions on female soldiers, putting them into machine gunner, tank commander and other frontline roles.

Even with its air defense operational, Russia has shown its capability to hit targets all over the country.

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Still, an influx of military aid for Ukraine could prolong the conflict longer, resulting in more deaths. For months, US President Joe Biden has demanded that Congress pass an additional $60 billion in aid, which would be the largest single package sent to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation.

While the US Senate has at times seemed ready to pass a compromise funding bill that would include Biden's request, House Republicans have steadfastly blocked it, demanding significant border security reforms that most Democrats would have difficulty selling to their voter base. House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) is insisting that a border bill include stronger border barriers and reforms to make it easier to arrest and deport asylum seekers and undocumented migrants already living in the United States.

"We're not insistent upon a particular name of a piece of legislation, but we are insistent that the elements have to be meaningful," Speaker Johnson told reporters after the White House and Senate Democrats said they planned to reject a House-passed border bill.

"We understand that there's concern about the safety, security, sovereignty of Ukraine, but the American people have those same concerns about our own domestic sovereignty, and our safety and our security," he added.

There have also been signs of cracks behind the scenes between Ukraine and its biggest benefactor. In December, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky skipped a planned speech to the US Senate during which he was scheduled to make his pitch to lawmakers on why they should authorize more aid. When he finally did deliver a speech to lawmakers, on December 22, only 86 of 213 House Republicans showed for the speech and it was reported that those who did attend and were against the aid did not appear convinced.

Biden pledged that the United States would support Ukraine for as long as it took. But in the end, the choice could be taken out of his hands. Congress has turned against it, at least without major concessions on the border. NATO allies have openly opposed further aid. And with dozens – if not hundreds – of videos of Ukrainian Armed Forces forcing men into vans to be shipped to the front line, it's not clear how many Ukrainians are still willing to fight for the Zelensky regime.

"People are being thrown out, thrown from the streets, the buses," former Ukrainian diplomat Andrii Telizhenko told Sputnik's Fault Lines on Wednesday. "Ukrainians don't want to fight. And their laws are being broken by throwing them to military camps and then throwing them to the front lines right away, without any tactical experience at all."

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New Hampshire: The Last Stand of Trump's GOP Opposition?

After former US President Donald Trump's historically large win in Iowa, all eyes are turning to New Hampshire. The famously independent state may be the last best hope for Trump's opponents.

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On Tuesday, the first primary in the Nation will go a long way to deciding if any candidate has a chance of making the Republican primary a real contest with frontrunner former US President Donald Trump.

While Iowa allocated its delegates last week, that state uses a caucus system, which is a set meeting and open, ranked voting system. New Hampshire is the first state with a real primary, including a secret ballot.

Where Things Stand

Aside from Trump, former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis remain on the ballot. Entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy dropped out after coming in fourth in Iowa, choosing to endorse Trump.

The two debates that were scheduled before the contest have been canceled. Trump has declined to participate in any of the Republican debates and Nikki Haley, who came in third in Iowa, said she would only debate Trump or current US President Joe Biden. That left DeSantis as the only qualified candidate willing to participate.

Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, the first three states to vote, are largely considered to be the most important dates in the primary season before Super Tuesday. The three early states typically separate the contenders from the pretenders. With Trump's massive national lead, Haley or DeSantis will need a victory to show voters that they are worth coming out to the polls for when their state holds its primary.

The latest polls are not good news for anyone hoping Haley or DeSantis will pull off an upset in New Hampshire. The most recent Suffolk University poll, held January 18-19, showed Trump with a large and growing lead with 53% support in the state. Haley came in second with 36% and DeSantis was a distant third, pulling 7%.

A previous Suffolk University poll from January 16-17 showed Trump with 50%.

Haley supporters had reason to hope earlier this week when an American Research Group poll showed the former UN Ambassador in a dead heat with Trump, but that poll now appears to be an aberration. Polls taken before the American Research Group poll also showed Trump with a significant lead, as did a recently taken Saint Anselm College poll.

After Trump's historically large win in Iowa and a disappointing performance by Haley, she will need to massively outperform the current polls to continue anything resembling a competitive campaign going into South Carolina and then onto Super Tuesday.

What About The Independents and Democrats?

Some Democratic figures, most prominently Bill Kristol, have been encouraging Independents and Democrats to switch their party affiliation and vote for Haley in an attempt to prevent Trump from winning the nomination.

"We only care about damaging Donald Trump," Robert Schwartz, cofounder of PrimaryPivot, a SuperPAC which is encouraging voters in the state to vote against Trump told US media. "For better or for worse, the only thing you can do if you really want to stop Trump is to vote for Haley."

Trump referenced this tactic during a recent campaign stop in Portsmouth on Wednesday. "Nikki Haley is counting on Democrats and liberals to infiltrate your Republican primary," Trump said.

While it is too late for Democrats in New Hampshire to switch their affiliation and vote in the Republican primary, around 3,500 already haveand independent and undeclared voters can choose to vote in either (but not both) major party primaries.

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Despite the movement, Haley will need an unprecedented percentage of independent voters to upset Trump. In the 2016 primary, Trump won the highest share of independent voters in New Hampshire.

The New Hampshire Democratic primary is also held on Tuesday, but the DNC has declared that its delegates will not be counted after the state refused to move the date to comply with a national party's plan to make South Carolina the first state to vote.

South Carolina and Beyond

DeSantis has seemingly chalked New Hampshire up as a lost cause and is spending the weekend campaigning in South Carolina where he hopes the state's heavy evangelical presence will help him revive his flagging campaign.

While New Hampshire has been described as the last stand for DeSantis and Haley, that is not entirely true. Even if they get trounced in New Hampshire, a turnaround in South Carolina could change the makeup of the race. However, a poor performance in New Hampshire makes that much less likely.

But DeSantis is pinning his hopes on that exact scenario and it is Haley's home state so typically, she should perform relatively well there. But the polls have yet to bear that out. Every recent poll has Trump with a massive lead, averaging out to a 36-point according to a poll aggregator.

To make matters worse for Trump's opponents, South Carolina Senator Tim Scott endorsed Trump in the state, solidifying his hold there.

This may be why New Hampshire is being portrayed as the last possible state where Trump's nomination could be derailed. Despite DeSantis' focus and Haley's roots there, Trump has seemingly sewed up the state, unless New Hampshire upends the race's narrative.

Haley and DeSantis have until Tuesday to make that happen.

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Palestinian-American Teenager Killed in West Bank

Israel has been waging a war on Gaza since a Hamas surprise attack on October 7 resulted in the deaths of more than 1000 Israelis. Since then, the violence in the West Bank has been increasing.

A teenage Palestinian-American with US citizenship was killed, reportedly by either Israeli troops or settlers in the occupied West Bank on Friday.

Tawfiq Ajaq, 17, was shot twice before succumbing to his injuries. He is one of at least 358 people killed by Israeli forces or settlers in the West Bank since October 7, according to the UN.

The killing comes amid Israel's war on Gaza, which has killed more than 25,000 Palestinians, the majority of whom were women or children.

A funeral was held in al-Mazraa Asharqiya village, where Tawfiq and his four siblings were brought to last year so they could reconnect with their Palestinian heritage, according to his family members.

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Another vigil was held at Masjid Omar mosque in New Orleans. It was standing room only, according to local media. Tawfiq was born and raised in Gretna, Louisiana.

"They are using our tax dollars in the US to support the weapons to kill our own children," Tawfiq's father, Hafez Ajaq said. "How many fathers and mothers have to say goodbye to their children? How many more?"

Hafez Ajaq implored people to travel to the West Bank and see the conditions Palestinians live under for themselves.

Another relative, Tawfiq's uncle, told media outlets that he arrived at the scene shortly after the shooting. He said Israeli forces temporarily detained him and other Palestinians. He eventually was able to help load Tawfiq into an ambulance where he died, the uncle said.

The US State Department issued a statement to US media on Saturday, confirming the US citizen's death.

"We extend our deepest condolences to the family. We are working to understand the circumstances of the incident and have asked the Government of Israel for further information. Out of respect to the family during this difficult time, we have no further comment."

On Friday, national security spokesperson John Kirby said during a White House briefing that the US was trying to get more information. "We don't have perfect context about exactly what happened, but we're seriously concerned about it."

The circumstances leading up to Tawfiq's killing, including who fired the shots, remain unclear. Israel has not claimed responsibility for the killing. The police department did admit that an incident was reported on Friday about a "firearm discharge, ostensibly involving an off-duty law enforcement officer, a soldier and a civilian." They did not specify who fired the shot but said it was targeting people "purportedly engaged in rock-throwing activities."

In its daily update on Friday, the UN humanitarian agency OCHA reported that "Israeli forces and settlers shot live ammunition towards a group of Palestinians who were reportedly throwing stones at Israeli vehicles driving on Road 60 near the village," the report read. "It is not clear yet whether the boy was shot by Israeli forces or settlers," it added.

According to OCHA figures, 358 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank by Israelis since October 7, 348 of them by Israeli military or police forces. Eight were killed by Israeli settlers and two were killed "by either Israeli forces or settlers."

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"The prisons are not run by the police, they're not run by the government, they're not run by prison authorities, they're run by the gangs," journalist Esteban Carrillo joined Sputnik's Fault Lines program Friday to offer his insight on gang violence in Ecuador after the killing of the prosecutor pursuing charges against the perpetrators of a raid on a television station earlier this month.

Carrillo blamed failed neoliberal economic policy for the Ecuadoran state's powerlessness to thwart the powerful drug cartels.

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"It's all under this idea of shrinking the state," Carillo explained.

Ecuador underwent a radical change in course in 2017, with the country's ex foreign minister concluding former President Lenin Moreno had been blackmailed by the CIA.

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US home sales decline to lowest in 30 years as Americans cite economic 'suffering'

Sales for 2023 came in at 4.09 million homes for the year, the lowest level since 1995. Median home prices for 2023 rose to $389,800, a new record, demonstrating the effect of investors in the market.

On another measure of economic security, Gallup found a record high number of Americans responding that they were "suffering" in their annual Health and Well-Being survey. The polling organization found a greater percentage of Americans describing their status as "suffering" than during 2008's Great Recession, continuing a trend from 2022.

Meanwhile China has made efforts to stabilize housing prices with President Xi Jinping remarking that "houses are built to be inhabited, not for speculation," but the maxim is unlikely to gain support from either major US political party given the power of the banking sector in the strongly capitalist country.

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Gang Violence, Bad Economics & CIA Asset as President? What's Behind Ecuador's Crisis

Sputnik's Fault Lines program looks at the political and economic failures behind the rise of gang violence in the South American country.

Ecuador made world headlines earlier this month with reports of a shocking outbreak of gang violence in the small South American nation. Armed men commandeered a state broadcasting headquarters, taking the host hostage on live television in a brazen display of lawlessness. Coming just months after the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, the event cemented the impression of a country held captive by drug cartel brutality.

How did Ecuador go from a nation with a thriving economy and impressive progress in poverty reduction to a haven for organized crime in just a few short years? Journalist Esteban Carrillo joined Sputnik's Fault Lines program Friday to offer his insight.

"It is the gangs who have all of the leverage here because they have accumulated so much power, to the point that they can do these things and almost face no retaliation," said the Ecuador-born reporter. "These raids, these arrest campaigns, everything that the government is

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attempting to do – it looks good on camera and it might work for a couple of weeks. But what is going to happen next?"

"The prisons are not run by the police, they're not run by the government, they're not run by prison authorities, they're run by the gangs. And this has been the case in Ecuador since at least 2018, when the gangs were handed over control to the prisons and inside the prisons, inmates were no longer divided amongst the severity of their crimes but their gang affiliation. So the prisons became the source of the violence that we're seeing now on the street."

Carrillo laid the blame for the prison violence and rise of gangs in the country on Ecuador's failed neoliberal economic policy under a succession of presidential administrations.

"It's all under this idea of shrinking the state," Carillo explained. "That means if there's a ministry or a secretariat that is in charge of the prisons, then you fold that into another ministry, and then you fold those two into another ministry, and all of a sudden you have mass layoffs and you have this state that shrinks to the point of disappearing… We are a narco state because the government has absolutely lost all of the control that it has."

The journalist explained that Ecuador's wealthy elite were eager to change the country's course after former President Rafael Correa's presidency, pushing for major cuts in government spending. Observers believed Correa's populist "Citizen's Revolution" was in safe hands when his predecessor Lenin Moreno was elected in 2017. But Moreno radically altered government policy, even criminally persecuting Correa's supporters.

Moreno's dramatic 180 caused many, including the country's former foreign minister, to conclude Moreno had become an asset of the US Central Intelligence Agency.

"Moreno became a CIA insider due to blackmailing," said ex Foreign Minister Ricardo Patiño to Sputnik in 2019. "We are absolutely sure that while Moreno was in Geneva [working as a UN envoy] he established a very close relationship with the CIA and the US administration because they may have found his secret bank accounts in Panama, opened by his brother to save money from corruption."

The discovery of Moreno's hidden assets with the release of the Panama Papers solidified the impression the former president was being extorted.

Carrillo also pointed to the precarious employment and rising poverty in Ecuador creating fertile ground for the growth of the cartels. "About seven out of every 10 people in Ecuador do not have what is considered proper employment," he noted. "They don't have Social Security, they don't have a signed contract, they have casual employment. And then you have poverty on the rise and migration levels are through the roof."

The economic instability creates an environment for organized crime to fill the void, as in other Latin American countries where US-backed neoliberal policy has resulted in the same consequences.

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New Poll Reveals 'Puppet Master' Behind Aging President Biden

The survey examined claims that US President Joe Biden isn't "running the show" in Washington.

Polling has consistently shown a majority of US voters believe President Joe Biden is too old to serve as commander-in-chief. Now, a new surveyprovides insight into Americans' perceptions of who is running things behind the scenes.

Conservative pollster Rasmussen Reports asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement "Joe Biden is not 'running the show' at the White House. He's a puppet for a progressive left committee… headed by Obama." Thirty-seven percent of people polled said they agreed "strongly" with the statement, while 16% said they "somewhat" agreed.

The result comes despite the fact the former president has only visited the Biden White House a handful of times since his inauguration in 2021.

Respondents were also asked a similar question about how likely they believe it is that former US President Barack Obama is "influencing the policies of the Biden administration." Some 63% responded it was "very" or "somewhat" likely the former president has influence, with 53% of Democrats agreeing with the statement.

However, if Obama is helping to shape White House policy, the former president's council doesn't seem to be benefiting Biden's approval rating.

Somewhat conversely, only 45% of respondents said they view the current president favorably while former President Obama's approval rating remains above water at 52%, according to the same polling firm.

Former President Donald Trump has frequently alleged Biden is "controlled" by Obama, a widely reviled figure among political conservatives in the United States. "It's never been worse than it is now under crooked Joe Biden, and frankly, his boss, Barack Hussein Obama," Trump seethed at an event in New Hampshire last year. Last November, he seemed to confuse the two figures in an apparent verbal flub that drew ridicule from the Ron DeSantis campaign.

Trump is said to despise Obama, with some observers speculating the real estate mogul decided to enter politics after being lambasted by Obama during a comedy routine at the annual White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2011.

Despite the polarization of American politics and its attendant vilification of party figureheads, a 2014 study found that no single person exerts primary control over government policy in the United States. Rather, researchers found that the desires of "economic elites and organized groups representing business interests" were most correlated with legislative outcomes, while "average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence."

The researchers asserted that the United States would be more accurately described as an "oligarchy" than a "democracy."

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Replacement of 70-Year-Old US Minuteman Nuke Silos Blasts Through $96B Budget

The massive cost overrun was blamed on inflation and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The US Department of Defense, historically criticized for overspending and a lack of financial accountability, announced it was launching a review of efforts to replace aging Minuteman nuclear missile infrastructure after a “critical” cost overrun. The Air Force made the announcement Thursday.

A spokesperson for the air service branch informed Congress the so-called “Sentinel” upgrade program “has exceeded its initial cost projections” by at least 37% percent, triggering a necessary notification of lawmakers under the 1982 Nunn-McCurdy Act. The law was intended to respond to recurrent cost overruns at the Pentagon, requiring the military to cancel projects entirely if they exceed original spending estimates by 50% or more.

The US’ ground-based nuclear missile system has seen some upgrades over the years, with the Minuteman III representing the latest iteration of the technology, but the silos used to house the missiles are decades old.

“It's been over 70 years since we did the ground piece of this,” said Andrew Hunter, the Air Force’s assistant secretary for acquisition, technology, and logistics. “We didn't estimate it well.”

The program’s cost is now estimated to be over $131 billion but it was warned the price tag could balloon further as the US Secretary of Defense conducts a required review in coming months.

The missile silos and adjoining command infrastructure are said to date back to the 1950s. Their upgrade is being handled by the weapons contractor Northrop Grumman.

The US’s ground-based Minuteman nuclear missiles represent one prong of the country’s so-called “nuclear triad” which boasts the capability to launch nukes from air, sea, and land.

The United States signed nuclear arms reduction agreements with the Soviet Union in the waning days of the Cold War, but many of those treaties have been allowed to lapse as relations have deteriorated between Russia and the West. Observers worry about the prospect of armed confrontation in the wake of Western funding of a proxy conflict against Russia in the Donbass region. Recently the UK’s secretary of defense predicted Western powers would find themselves at war with Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran within five years.

The United States devotes more money to military spending than the next 10 countries combined, although many observers question the effectiveness of the country’s largely privatized arms manufacturing industry. Meanwhile drone warfare has allowed smaller countries and even non-state groups to expand their capabilities cheaply.

Late last year it was announced the Pentagon had failed its sixth independent audit in a row, a process initiated by US lawmakers amidst concern over the agency’s financial accountability. In 2007 a story emerged about $9 billion dollars that had gone missing in Iraq in the form of palettes of shrink wrapped $100 bills.

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US Home Sales Decline to Lowest in 30 Years as Americans Cite Economic 'Suffering'

Home prices reached record levels amidst other indicators that Americans struggled in 2023.
US home sales declined to the lowest level in almost three decades last year as prices rose to a record high.
Sales for 2023 came in at 4.09 million homes for the year, the lowest level since 1995.
Additionally, sales in December declined by a full 6.2% versus December 2022.
On a month-to-month basis, sales declined in December in the South, Northeast, and Midwestern United States. Year-to-year sales experienced a decline in all regions of the country including the West.
Median home prices for 2023 rose to $389,800, a new record, demonstrating the effect of investors in the market. Such buyers represented 16% of home sales in December as institutions like Blackrock drove up housing prices in the country. Historically, first-time homebuyers make up 40% of the housing market but this number declined to just 29% in December.
On another measure of economic security, Gallup found a record high number of Americans responding that they were "suffering" in their annual Health and Well-Being survey. The polling organization found a greater percentage of Americans describing their status as "suffering" than during 2008's Great Recession, continuing a trend from 2022.
Such respondents are "more likely to report lacking food and shelter, more likely to have physical pain, stress, worry, sadness, and anger" according to the firm.
Meanwhile China has made efforts to stabilize housing prices with President Xi Jinping remarking that "houses are built to be inhabited, not for speculation," but the maxim is unlikely to gain support from either major US political party given the power of the banking sector in the strongly capitalist country.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Hamas, Kataib Hizbollah, IRGC Quds Force – Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) – The United States announced new sanctions on Monday targeting individuals and entities linked to Hamas, Kataib Hizbollah, and the IRGC Quds Force, according to a Treasury notice.
It sanctioned 13 individuals, six entities, and two aircraft.

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American Ratings of Ethical Standards Drop Across Professions – Poll

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WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) – American ratings of nearly 23 professions surveyed by Gallup in its annual honesty and ethics poll dropped in 2023, according to the results released Monday.

Nurses remained the most trusted profession for the 22nd consecutive year, with 78% of respondents rating their honesty and ethics as either "very high" or "high." However, their rating still fell 11 percentage points from its 2020 peak.

Ratings for the clergy (32%), Congress members (6%), senators (8%), pharmacists (55%), and journalists (19%) fell to new lows.

Only the rating for labor union leaders did not fall, although just 25% of respondents rated their honesty and ethics as either "very high" or "high."

The poll of about 800 American adults was conducted from December 1-20 last year.

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White House Launches Reproductive Healthcare Measures to Mark Roe v. Wade Anniversary

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) – The White House announced on Monday new measures to promote reproductive healthcare on the 51st anniversary of the Supreme Court's landmark Roe v. Wade ruling, according to a release.

"In the face of the continued threats to reproductive freedom, President Biden will convene the fourth meeting of the Task Force on Reproductive Healthcare Access, where agencies will announce new actions to protect access to reproductive health care," the release stated.

The task force is expected to announce various new steps to strengthen contraception access and affordability for women with private health insurance; protect access to abortion, including medication abortion; support women's ability to travel for healthcare; safeguard health data privacy; reinforce federal non-discrimination protections; provide access to accurate legal information and resources; and promote research and data collection.

Vice President Kamala Harris is also launching a nationwide Fight for Reproductive Freedoms tour Monday.

In June 2022, the US Supreme Court overruled the precedent established by the Roe v. Wade and ruled that states may regulate the practice of abortion. The Roe v. Wade decision upheld pregnant women's right to seek an abortion without government restrictions.

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DeSantis Drops Out of 2024 US Presidential Race, Endorses Trump

(Adds details in paras 5, 6)

MOSCOW, January 21 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis announced on Sunday he chose to drop out of the 2024 US presidential race and endorse Republican frontrunner Donald

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Trump in his bid for reelection.

"Nobody worked harder and we left it all on the field... If there was anything I could do to produce a favorable outcome – more campaign stops, more interviews – I would do it, but I can't ask our supporters to volunteer their time and donate their resources if we don't have a clear path to victory. Accordingly, I am today suspending my campaign," he said in a social media post.

DeSantis added it was clear to him that a majority of Republican primary voters wanted to give Trump another chance and, while he had disagreements with the former president in the past, he believed that Trump was superior to the current incumbent, Joe Biden.

"I signed a pledge to support the Republican nominee and I will honor that pledge. He has my endorsement because we can't go back to the old Republican Guard of yesteryear, a repackaged form of warmed-over corporatism that Nikki Haley represents," he said.

DeSantis quit just days before a Republican primary in New Hampshire, where opinion polls show him lagging far behind Trump and Nikki Haley, the Republican governor of South Carolina and a former UN ambassador.

The Republican party will hold the primary election in New Hampshire on January 23, followed by a caucus in Nevada on February 8 and then a primary in South Carolina on February 24.

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DeSantis Drops Out of 2024 Presidential Race, Endorses Trump

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State Department Confirms Death of US Citizen in West Bank on Friday

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - A US State Department spokesperson confirmed to Sputnik the death of an American citizen in the West Bank on Friday.

Earlier in the day, media reported that a Palestinian-American teenager was killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank according to Palestinian officials.

"We can confirm the death of a US citizen civilian in the West Bank on January 19, 2024," the spokesperson said.

The State Department is working to understand the circumstances of the incident and has asked the Israeli government for more information, the spokesperson added.

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US Lawmakers Blame Biden For Failing to Modernize US Nuclear Arsenal

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has failed to take responsibility to modernize the US nuclear arsenal, which has currently run into shambles, Senate Armed Services Committee leaders Roger Wicker and Deb Fischer wrote in the Wall Street Journal.

Earlier in the day, Bloomberg reported that the US Sentinel Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) program to replace the Minuteman III missiles is estimated to cost nearly $131.5 billion or 37% more than the original cost.

"We must hold the administration accountable for its failures," the senators wrote in the op-ed published on Friday. "But to make up for decades of neglect, our colleagues in Congress must also commit to restoring US industrial health and developing the workforce required to keep America's nuclear forces armed and ready for any challenge."

The Republican senators vowed to us all congressional oversight tools to maximize taxpayer investment in the Sentinel program, including expanding training for skilled workers, applying the Defense Production Act to broaden construction commodity availability and stabilizing inflation.

The senators added that they believe these efforts to hasten the modernization of the US nuclear arsenal would receive bipartisan backing in Congress.

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US House Republicans Could Derail Deal on Border Security, Ukraine Aid - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Republican members of the US House of Representatives could end up derailing a deal on border security and Ukraine aid by opposing a bipartisan deal from the US Senate, the New York Times reported.

Although Republican Senator James Lankford has characterized the deal he helped negotiate

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as "the most conservative border security bill in four decades," House Republicans, including Speaker Mike Johnson, have spoken out against the agreement, the report said on Friday.

The Biden administration requested more than $100 billion dollars in supplemental funding for Ukraine and Israel aid, as well as border security. However, Republican members of Congress have insisted on the inclusion of more stringent border security measures in the legislation.

US House Freedom Caucus Chair Bob Good described the deal as a "sham" bill that does not actually secure the border, according to the report.

Moreover, US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene reportedly said that she has made clear to Johnson that Ukraine aid is a "redline" for the lawmaker that should not be considered on the House floor.

Earlier on Friday, President Joe Biden said that he thinks the Senate will complete work on a bipartisan deal next week.

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Biden Says He Believes Netanyahu Will Support Two-State Solution If It's 'Right One'

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters he thinks Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will support a two-state solution with the Palestinians if it's the right deal.

Earlier this week, media reported that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the United States that he opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state as part of any post-war scenario in Gaza.

"Yes, given the right one," Biden said on Friday when asked if he thinks Netanyahu can change his mind on his opposition to a two-state solution.

Biden also said he thinks he can persuade Netanyahu to support a two-state solution.

Earlier in the day, the White House said Biden and Netanyahu had a telephone call where the US president discussed his vision of a two state-solution that also guarantees Israel’s security.

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Biden Says US Southern Border Not Secure - White House Press Pool

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters that the US southern border is not secure, according to the White House press pool.

"No," Biden said on Friday when asked if the US southern border is secure.

Biden also rejected the notion that his policies created the current crisis on the southern border, the press pool said.

Earlier in the day, Biden said that he's willing to make significant policy changes at the US southern border, including changes in the US asylum system, in order to control the border

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crisis.

Biden's statements mark a change of tone from the White House on the situation at the southern border after it previously made repeated claims that the situation was under control.

Current and former Border Patrol officials have told Sputnik that Biden's lax border policies have played a big part in fueling the surge of migrants heading to the US-Mexico border. Under the Biden administration, the United States gone through three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal immigration at the US southern border.

Republican Senators are in the middle of negotiations with the White House and Senate Democrats on Biden's national security supplemental request that includes more than $60 billion for Ukraine, additional aid for Israel and additional funding for US border security. Republican lawmakers want the legislation for Biden's supplemental request to include provisions that will crack down on illegal immigration to the United States, including tightening restrictions on the US asylum system to prevent migrants from abusing loopholes in it.

Biden said he thinks the Senate will reach a deal next week on the supplemental bill for Ukraine aid, border security, among other priorities. However, he added that it remains to be seen if House Speaker Mike Johnson and his Republican colleagues support the legislation.

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US Envoy to Visit London, Madrid for Talks on Women Empowerment Efforts - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Geeta Rao Gupta will visit the UNited Kingdom, Belgium and Spain to discuss with government officials ongoing efforts to to promote women's rights and empowerment, the State Department said.

"US Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Dr. Geeta Rao Gupta will travel to Madrid, Spain; London, United Kingdom; and Brussels, Belgium January 20-27," the State Department said in a statement on Friday.

Gupta will engage in bilateral meetings with government counterparts to discuss shared efforts to promote the rights and empowerment of women and girls in the region and across the globe, the statement said.

On January 22, Gupta will participate in a conversation about the significance of women's involvement in public life at the inaugural Global Women Leader Voices Dialogue in Madrid, the statement said.

From January 23-25 in London, Gupta will engage with high-level UK officials and consult with civil society organizations on gender-related issues, including gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence, the statement added.

On January 26, Gupta will take part in a NATO meeting on women, peace and security (WPC) for discussions on the progress of the WPS agenda.

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Microsoft Says Detected, Disrupted Alleged Russian State-Sponsored Cyber Attack

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Microsoft cybersecurity personnel detected and disrupted an alleged cyber attack by a Russian state-backed actor, the Microsoft Security Response Center said in a statement.

"The Microsoft security team detected a nation-state attack on our corporate systems on January 12, 2024, and immediately activated our response process to investigate, disrupt malicious activity, mitigate the attack, and deny the threat actor further access," the statement said on Friday.

Microsoft identified the threat actor as Midnight Blizzard, also known as Nobelium, the statement said. The group is a Russian state-sponsored actor, according to the statement.

The group used a password spray attack to gain access to a small percentage of Microsoft corporate email accounts, including members of the senior leadership team, the statement said. There is no evidence the group accessed customer environments, source code or artificial intelligence systems, the statement said.

The attack highlights the continued risk posed by nation-state threat actors, the statement said.

Microsoft continues to investigate the incident and will take additional actions based on the investigation's outcomes, the statement said. Microsoft will also continue to work with law enforcement and appropriate regulators on the matter, the statement said.

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US Senator Tim Scott Expected to Endorse Trump in 2024 Presidential Race

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US Senator Tim Scott is expected to endorse former President Donald Trump's 2024 campaign ahead of the New Hampshire primary election, further consolidating support behind Trump's candidacy.

Scott will endorse Trump at an event on Friday evening in New Hampshire, according to US media reports on Friday. Scott also posted a video on the social media platform X in which he appeared in front of a Trump airplane and said he intends to speak about "four more years" at the event.

Scott represents the state of South Carolina in the US Senate, having been first appointed to the seat by then-Governor Nikki Haley, who is running against Trump in the 2024 presidential race. Scott also ran a 2024 presidential campaign but ended his bid in November.

Entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy suspended his campaign and endorsed Trump after the former president's victory in the Iowa Republican caucus vote. Trump also secured the support of the House Republican leadership team.

Haley and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis remain in the race against Trump for the Republican presidential nomination.

The Republican party will hold a primary election in New Hampshire on January 23, followed by

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a caucus in Nevada on February 8 and then a primary in South Carolina on February 24.

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Failed Peregrine Mission to Moon Breaks Up Over South Pacific - US Space Command

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The Peregrine 1 spacecraft, which had attempted to be the first private commercial unmanned mission to the Moon, burned up in the atmosphere over the South Pacific Ocean east of Australia, the US Space Command confirmed in a statement on Friday.

"US Space Com has confirmed the decay of the Peregrine which occurred on January 18," SpaceCom Track said in the statement.

The Peregrine spacecraft, built by the Astrobotic Technology company, was directed back to Earth after suffering a catastrophic propellant loss due to a faulty helium control valve shortly after it was launched on January 8.

Multiple NASA lunar rovers that had been planned to prepare for the long-delayed Artemis III US manned mission to the Moon in September 2026 - the first such mission in 54 years - were lost on the spacecraft.

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Astrobotic Pushing Ahead With Griffin Moon Mission Despite Peregrine 1 Failure - CEO

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The Astrobotic Company is planning to go ahead with its scheduled Griffin unmanned mission to the Moon despite the disastrous failure of its Peregrine 1 mission carrying five payloads for NASA earlier this week, company CEO John Thornton told a media teleconference on Friday.

"Our plan is to proceed with Griffin for later this year," Thornton said.

Thorton was speaking the day after his Pittsburgh-based company's Peregrine spacecraft crashed back to Earth, burning up over the Southern Pacific Ocean east of Australia after suffering a catastrophic propellant loss during to a faulty helium control valve shortly after it was launched on January 8. Multiple NASA lunar rovers as well as other experiments were lost in the project.

The Griffin mission is scheduled for November 2024 and also built by Astrobotic.

Griffin is a medium-class lunar lander designed to carry other unmanned lunar rovers and payloads. Like Peregrine, it is meant to prepare the way for the repeatedly-delayed NASA Artemis III manned mission to the Moon now scheduled for September 2026.

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Helium Valve Failure Doomed Peregrine 1 Moon Mission With NASA Tests - Astrobotic CEO

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The failure of a single helium valve that may have been insufficiently checked destroyed the $108 million Peregrine 1, the first fully commercial robotic mission to the Moon, with experiments to prepare the way for the repeatedly delayed Artemis III manned mission now scheduled for September 2026, Astrobotic Technology officials told a media teleconference.

"What appears to have happened is that the valve did not reseal," Astrobotic Technology CEO John Thornton said on Friday. "It was very, very fast. [The unsealed open valve] sent a rush of helium, the tank ruptured and led to a catastrophic loss of propellant and helium."

The valve was supposed to control the flow of helium to combine with oxidizer for propellant in the spacecraft's propulsion system. But that loss combined with the damage to the fuel tank meant the spacecraft was no longer capable of making any soft landing on the lunar surface, Thornton said.

Peregrine, which was launched on January 8, was the third private unmanned mission to the Moon to have failed in the past five years.

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Biden Says He Thinks Senate Will Work Out Deal Next Week on US-Mexico Border

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said he thinks the US Senate will be able to work out a deal on the Ukraine aid-US border security bill that will address the record influx of migrants.

"I think next week we're gonna be able to work out something, at least in the Senate, and hopefully it's going to be in a bipartisan package the Senate is going to pass," Biden said on Friday.

Biden also said he is on board with making significant policy changes at the US border with Mexico, including changes in the US asylum system.

White House and Senate negotiators have been in discussions for weeks on Biden's supplemental request that includes more than $60 billion for Ukraine. Republican senators have refused to support it unless Biden commits to making meaningful changes to US border policy in order to mitigate the crisis on the southern border.

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US Lawmakers Want National Security Supplemental to Replenish Weapons in Red Sea- Politico

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Lawmakers in the United States are looking to utilize a national security supplemental to replenish weapons used in the Red Sea, Politico reported on Friday.

"As American warships burn through expensive missiles against Houthi targets in the Red Sea and Yemen, lawmakers, lobbyists and the Navy are angling to use a multibillion-dollar national security supplemental to replenish the military's inventory of munitions," said the report.

According to the report, one of the members of Congress pushing for the move is Democrat Mark Kelly from Arizona, who is arguing that the aid package under negotiation in the Senate should account for replenishing the missiles used against the Houthis.

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US House Oversight Panel Probing Politicization of Gun Exports by Commerce Dept. - Letter

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The US House Oversight Committee is probing the alleged politicization of firearms exports by the US Commerce Department, Chairman James Comer said in a letter to Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo.

"The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is investigating politicization of activities at the Department of Commerce by the Biden Administration targeting the firearm industry," the letter said on Friday.

On November 28, the panel requested information from the Commerce Department on its decision to temporarily cease issuing new export licenses for certain firearm components and ammunition.

The Commerce Department has since failed to produce a single document in response to the request, the letter said. The deadline for the production of information was December 12, the letter added.

The letter reiterates the panel's request for information, setting a new deadline of January 26. The panel will consider other measures, including compulsory process, to obtain the material if the Commerce Department fails to comply, the letter said.

On October 27, the Commerce Department paused the issuance of new export licenses for certain ammunition, firearms and related components for approximately 90 days. The department is using the pause to further assess firearm export control review policies to advance US national security and foreign policy interests.

The review will enable the Commerce Department to more effectively address the risk of firearms being diverted to entities that promote regional instability, violate human rights or fuel criminal activities, the department said.

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No Injuries as Small Plane Makes Hard Landing on Highway in Virginia - State Police

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Neither of the two pilots nor any of the five passengers aboard a small airplane were injured after the aircraft made a hard emergency landing on a highway in the US state of Virginia, the state police said in a statement to Sputnik.

"The pilot, Ahmed Awais, 27, of Florida, was not injured. Nor was the co-pilot or any of the five passengers onboard the aircraft. Of the passengers, four were adults and one was a 15-year-old male," the statement said on Friday.

The pilot managed to land the single-engine Cessna 208 Caravan on the highway in Loudoun County at around 12:51 p.m. EST (17:51 GMT) without striking any vehicles, the statement said.

The Federal Aviation Administration said in a separate statement to Sputnik that it will investigate the circumstances of the incident.

The aircraft landed on the highway immediately after takeoff from Dulles International Airport near Washington. According to the plane-tracking website Flighradar24, it was a Southern Airways Express airplane that was heading to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The airplane spent a total of four minutes in the air before landing.

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Conservatives Call on Trudeau to Align With US, Designate Yemen Houthis as Terrorists

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) – The leader of the official opposition at the Canadian House of Commons, the Conservative Pierre Poilievre called on Friday for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to align with the United States and designate Yemen's Houthis as a terrorist organization.

"While Canada has made symbolic contributions to allied efforts to defend merchant vessels off the coast of Yemen, any activity in Canada must also be stopped by legally designating the group as a terrorist organization," Poilievre said in a statement shared via the social media platform X.

Canada must ensure that "Houthi terrorists" are held accountable for their actions in the Red Sea, Poilievre said, further noting that the group is currently allowed to legally operate in the country, as well as to organize, fundraise and recruit.

The Conservative leader also pointed to the Liberal government's refusal to list the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) as a terrorist organization despite the US doing so and their involvement in downing Flight PS 752 on January 8, 2020, killing all 167 passengers on board - mostly Canadian Iranian dual citizens – and nine Ukrainian crew members.

"The Trudeau Government has failed for years to call the IRGC what they are: terrorists. This failure must not be repeated," Poilievre continued.

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On Wednesday, media reported citing Public Safety Minister press secretary Jean-Sebastien Comeau, that Canada was mulling whether to follow in Washington's steps and designate Yemen's Houthis as a terrorist organization under Canadian legislation, in light of their attacks on commercial ships passing through the Red Sea.

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US Drone Recovered by Iraqi Security Forces After Crashing Near Balad Air Base - Official

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - A US drone was recovered by Iraq Security Forces after it crashed near Balad airbase in Iraq, a US Defense Department official said in a statement to Sputnik.

"At 7:20 p.m. (Iraq time), a US UAV [drone] crashed near Balad airbase, Iraq," the official said on Friday. "Iraqi Security Forces recovered the aircraft. There were no injuries reported. An investigation of the cause of the crash is underway."

Media reported, citing Iraqi Security Forces, that a US MQ-9 Reaper drone was shot down by militants in Iraq.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) -

IRAN-PAKISTAN TENSIONS

* Pakistan has invited Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian to visit Islamabad amid recent tensions between the two neighboring countries, Iranian senior diplomat Seyed Rasoul Mousavi said on Friday.

* Pakistan does not want an escalation of tensions with Iran and thinks that Tehran feels the same way, Pakistan Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mumtaz Zahra Baloch said.

ISRAEL INVASION OF GAZA

* The White House is seriously concerned about reports that a Palestinian-American was killed in the West Bank and will be in touch with Israeli officials to gather more information about the incident, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

* Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov held a meeting with senior member of Hamas Mousa Abu Marzouk in Moscow and highlighted the importance of releasing the hostages from the Gaza Strip, including Russian citizens, the Foreign Ministry said.

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* There are signs that the conflict in the Gaza Strip expands to the whole region, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

RED SEA ATTACKS

* The US military conducted new strikes against Houthi missile launchers in Yemen on Friday morning in response to attacks against commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.
* The United States and the United Kingdom have conducted two new strikes on the Houthi-controlled Al Hudaydah city in western Yemen, the Al-Masirah TV channel reported.
* Belgium will take part in the EU naval operation to ensure the safety of shipping in the Red Sea amid recent attacks on cargo ships by Yemen's Houthi movement, Belgian newspaper Le Soir reported.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* A missile attack alert was issued in Russia's city of Kursk and residents were advised to stay away from windows, Kursk Region Governor Roman Starovoit said on Friday.
* Ukraine has lost more than 1,880 soldiers both, killed and injured, in the Donetsk direction over the past week, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* Contacts with Paris on the issue of the destruction by the Russian military of the station of foreign fighters in Kharkiv, among whom were French citizens, are held through diplomatic channels, but there have been no requests for high-level talks, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
* There are currently no discussions in connection with the resumption of the grain agreement due to absence of grounds for it, Peskov said.

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CORRECTION- Blinken Says New Guatemala President Presents New Area of Cooperation on Migration

(Corrects place of meeting in para 3)

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that the recent inauguration of Guatemalan President Bernardo Arevalo presents a fresh opportunity of cooperation to address the surge of migration in the region.

"I think a very significant development in President Bernardo being inaugurated in Guatemala," Blinken said. "This opens an important new area for cooperation on migration between our three countries, and we will continue to work together more broadly, to develop regional solutions to the historic challenge that we face."

Blinken met with his Mexican counterpart Alicia Barcena in Washington DC, to discuss ways both sides can continue to work to mitigate the influx of migrants heading to the US-Mexico border.

A senior US administration official told reporters on Thursday that no big announcements are

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expected after the meeting.

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.

Republicans are currently trying to get the White House to agree to make meaningful changes to US border security that will end the border crisis in exchange for support of Biden's supplemental request that includes more than $60 billion for Ukraine aid. The White House is eager to get Congress to approve more funding for Ukraine, which has currently run out.

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Biden Discusses With Netanyahu His Vision of Two-State Solution - White House

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in a telephone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu discussed his vision of a two-state solution that also guarantees Israel's security, the White House said on Friday.

"The President also discussed his vision for a more durable peace and security for Israel fully integrated within the region and a two state-solution with Israel’s security guaranteed," the White House said in a press release.

The release also said Biden discussed the recent progress in ensuring the Palestinian Authority’s revenues are available to pay salaries, including for the Palestinian Security Forces in the West Bank. This issue had reportedly frustrated Biden the last time the two leaders talked about a month ago.

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Activists Urge Mexico To Reject Deal With US That Increases Expulsion Of Asylum Seekers

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) – Mexican authorities have to reject any agreement with the US that would lead to an increase in the expulsion of asylum seekers to Mexico, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said on Friday.

The human rights group addressed the issue in a letter to Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Mexican Foreign Secretary Alicia Bárcena, who is scheduled to meet with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington.

The Biden administration and US Congress are currently considering the supplemental package, which includes new immigration policies. Some of these proposed measures would contravene international human rights standards and expose thousands of migrants and asylum seekers to harm, according to HRW statement.

“President López Obrador has the opportunity to stand up for the rights of thousands of

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vulnerable mostly Latin American migrants and asylum seekers by refusing to make yet another deal to allow the US to summarily expel people to Mexico," HRW Americas director Juanita Goebertus said.

She stressed that American legislators are trying to destroy the US asylum system and urged the Mexican leader to avoid participating in this process.

HRW stressed that some of the measures require approval from the Mexican side. Goebertus warned that they would violate basic human rights and further empower the criminal. She called on López Obrador to prioritize Mexican security and to focus on the basic rights of migrants.

The Biden administration and Congress are negotiating the supplemental package that includes border security measures and additional funding for Ukraine and Israel. Republican lawmakers do not agree with the current version of the document and insist on the inclusion of more stringent measures to address migration at the United States' southern border.

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Biden Admin. Says 'Good Deal' for America in Refilling Oil Reserve at Under $80/Barrel

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Energy (DoE) said on Friday the Biden administration has been steadily refilling the heavily-drawn US oil reserve with crude purchased at under $80 per barrel, describing it as a "good deal for American taxpayers."

"To date, DOE has purchased a total of 17.03 million barrels of oil for the SPR for an average price of $75.75, as well as accelerated nearly 4 million barrels of exchange returns, pursuant to its strategy to refill the SPR," the department said in an announcement posted on the website of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR).

The latest purchase of 3.2 million barrels shows the "administration's continued success in replenishing (the) reserve at a good deal for American taxpayers," the department added.

The 3.2 million barrels, meant for April delivery, is a fulfillment of a purchase originally transacted on January 3. A total of 8 companies bid to supply the 3.2 million barrels to the DoE and five were picked for the task. ExxonMobil Oil Corp will provide 1.4 million barrels, BP Products North America Inc and Macquarie Commodities Trading US 600,000 each, and Phillips 66 Company and Sunoco Partners Marketing & Terminals LP 300,000 each.

In total, the order cost the government just over $243 million.

Individually, each barrel was purchased at an average of $75.96 — a price "well below the average of about $95 per barrel that SPR crude was sold for in 2022," the DoE said.

The Biden administration has announced various installments of crude purchases in recent months, aimed at refilling the SPR, which saw outflows totaling more than 200 million barrels over the past two years.

Crude prices had fallen sharply late last year, losing about 20% of their value in the fourth quarter. The selloff, triggered by concerns of oversupply, worked handsomely for the administration's plans to refill the SPR.

Biden leaned heavily on the SPR between late 2021 and early 2023 to offset tight crude supplies that had raised fuel costs for Americans. As of last month, the SPR's crude balance

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was at its lowest since November 1983 after the release of about 200 million barrels or more over the past 18 months.

The administration's use of the SPR has, however, been a highly-charged matter for oil bulls and Biden's political opponents. Both sides accuse him of indiscriminately releasing hundreds of millions of barrels from the stockpile to subdue crude prices and shore up his political standing with American voters - when the reserve is meant for emergency use, in times of critically short oil supply.

Biden and the Democrats are up for reelection in November.

Biden, in his defense, had said he was only acting to reduce record high pump prices of fuel, which stood at above $5 per gallon in June 2022 and has stabilized since at around $3.50. The administration had also blamed last year's high crude oil prices for US inflation getting to four-decade highs of above 9% in June 2022.

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Haley Campaign Bans UK Media Outlet From Events After Story on Candidate's Alleged Affairs

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Republican 2024 presidential candidate Nikki Haley banned United Kingdom-based media outlet Daily Mail from her campaign events, after the publication released a story on Friday about alleged affairs in Haley's past, the outlet reported on Friday.

"Daily Mail is not credentialed for any more events. I'm politely asking you to leave," Haley spokeswoman Chaney Denton reportedly told reporter and photographer for the outlet at a campaign event in New Hampshire, according to the report.

Earlier on Friday, the outlet reported on two alleged sexual affairs involving Haley, citing court affidavits from the two men purportedly involved. In 2010, Will Folks and Larry Marchant signed affidavits alleging affairs with Haley, who was serving in the South Carolina House of Representatives at the time.

Haley has denied both of the alleged affairs and claims to have remained faithful to her husband, Michael Haley, with whom she has two children.

Haley is currently vying for the 2024 Republican Party presidential nomination, for which she is competing with former US President Donald Trump and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. Haley came in third place in the Iowa Republican caucus earlier this month, behind Trump and DeSantis.

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Alec Baldwin Indicted on Two Counts of Involuntary Manslaughter - Indictment

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WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Actor Alec Baldwin has been indicted in New Mexico on two new counts of involuntary manslaughter over the shooting death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins on the set of the movie "Rust" in October 2021, a court document showed on Friday.

The first count relates to Baldwin's "negligent use of a firearm" while the second charge accuses him of involuntary manslaughter "without due caution or circumspection," according to the document filed in the First Judicial District Court of New Mexico in Santa Fe.

Last April, New Mexico prosecutors dropped manslaughter charges against the Hollywood star.

In February 2023 Baldwin pleaded not guilty to those charges.

Hutchins was killed when a gun held by Baldwin fired during a scene rehearsal on the set at the Bonanza Creek Ranch. A wrongful death lawsuit was filed against Baldwin and other important members of the movie production on February 15, 2022.

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Lifetime Cost of Canada's Cyclone Helicopters Exceeds $10.4Bln - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) – The lifetime cost of the Royal Canadian Air Force fleet of CH-148 Cyclone helicopters is set to surpass C$14 billion ($10.4 billion), CBC News reported on Friday, citing a leaked internal document from the Department of National Defense (DND).

The revised figures show that the acquisition cost for the CH-148 fleet is estimated at C$3.7 billion, whereas the cost of sustaining and operating the helicopter is pegged at C$11.17 billion until the late 2030s.

DND’s latest publicly available data on the helicopters procurement costs estimated the program's overall cost at more than C$9 billion, the report said.

As the Canadian government already has a C$5.8 billion in-service support contract with the manufacturer, it is unclear what accounts for the difference between that and the revised C$10 billion figure, the report said, though experts suggest that it could be for support of the fleet beyond 2038.

Amid costs increases, DND is also still waiting for the delivery of two CH-148 out of a 28 unit lot, one whose delivery is expected by the end of February, and the last one in 2025, the report said. National Defense is also yet to receive a C$41.8 million radar warning system, the report added.

The Sikorsky CH-148 Cyclone maritime helicopter was specifically developed and produced for the Canadian armed forces, who are its sole operator worldwide. Introduced in 2018, the aircraft is designed for seaborne operations such as anti-submarine warfare.

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White House Says Unable to Verify North Korean Claims of Underwater Nuclear Test

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States is unable to verify North Korean claims that the country conducted an underwater nuclear weapon test, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Friday.

"We're not in a position where we can validate those claims," Kirby said during a press briefing.

The US is in touch with South Korean partners to seek further information, Kirby added.

The North Korean Defense Ministry reportedly said that it tested an underwater nuclear weapon system in response to joint military exercises by the US, South Korea and Japan.

The test underscores continued "provocations" by North Korea, Kirby said. There is no doubt that North Korea is pursuing advanced military capabilities to threaten countries in the region, Kirby said.

UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday that the UN is very concerned about the situation on the Korean Peninsula in the wake of the test.

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White House Aware of Mexico, Chile Asking ICC to Probe Alleged War Crimes in Gaza

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware of a referral Mexico and Chile submitted to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate alleged war crimes in the Gaza conflict, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"We're aware of that report and the potential referral to the ICC ... we're still gathering more information about what this would entail, but I want to say again that we don't have any indications that there's deliberate efforts to commit war crimes by the Israel Defense Forces," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Earlier this week, the Mexican Foreign Ministry said Mexico and Chile asked the International Criminal Court to investigate alleged war crimes in the Gaza Strip.

The ministry added that Mexico and Chile are concerned over the latest escalation of violence, particularly against civilian targets, in Gaza since the October 7 Hamas attacks in Israel.

Mexico also raised concerns about the near collapse of the Palestinian national justice infrastructure, which would degrade its ability to investigate or prosecute possible crimes committed in its territory or by its nationals.

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Triple US-Russia-Israel Citizen Arrested for Exporting Sensitive Tech - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Ilya Kahn, a citizen of the United States and Russia, has been arrested for his alleged involvement in a scheme to unlawfully export sensitive technology

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for the benefit of a Russian business, the US Justice Department said on Friday.

"Ilya Kahn, 66, a citizen of the United States, Israel and Russia, and resident of Brooklyn, New York, and Los Angeles, California, was arrested yesterday in Los Angeles for his alleged involvement in a years-long scheme to secure and unlawfully export sensitive technology from the United States for the benefit of a Russian business," the Justice Department said in a statement.

The Russian business faced US sanctions in February 2022 and its clients include elements of the Russian military and the Federal Security Service (FSB), the statement said.

"Kahn is charged by criminal complaint with conspiracy to violate the Export Control Reform Act. Kahn will make his initial appearance in the Central District of California," the statement said.

If convicted, Kahn faces a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison, according to the statement.

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White House Says 'Concerned' About Reports Palestinian-American Teen Killed in West Bank

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The White House is seriously concerned about reports a Palestinian-American was killed in the West Bank and will be in touch with Israeli officials to gather more information about the incident, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"We're seriously concerned about these reports," Kirby said during a press briefing. "The information is scant at this time, we don't have perfect context about exactly what happened and we're gonna be in constant touch with counterparts in the region to to get more information, but it's it's definitely deeply concerning."

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US Forces Conduct New Strikes on Houthi Missile Launchers in Yemen - White House

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The US military conducted new strikes against Houthi missile launchers in Yemen on Friday morning in response to attacks against commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.

"This morning, US forces conducted three successful self-defense strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen," Kirby said during a press briefing. "This is the fourth preemptive action that the US military has taken in the past week against Houthi missile launchers that were ready to launch attacks, in this case anti-ship missiles."

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Plane Lands on Highway After Departing Dulles Airport - Virginia Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - A light aircraft was forced to make an emergency landing on a highway immediately after takeoff from Dulles International Airport serving the US capital Washington DC, the Virginia Transportation Department said on Friday.

"Dulles: here is in fact a small plane in the roadway and blocking all lanes of Loudoun County Pkwy at Arcola Mills Dr. Please use alternate routes," the department said in a tweet containing a picture of an aircraft on a highway.

According to the plane-tracking website Flighradar24, it was a Southern Airways Express plane that was heading to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The plane spent a total of four minutes in the air before landing on the highway.

Since Friday morning, it has been snowing in the US capital and surrounding states and counties, which has caused numerous road closures and accidents.

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House Democrats Urge Blinken to Affirm Palestinians Can Not Be Expelled From Gaza-Reports

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - A group of 60 US House Democrats sent a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken demanding he reaffirms the United States stands against Palestinians being expelled from Gaza as a result of the Israel's war on Hamas, HuffPost reported on Friday.

“We aim to prevent any confusion or misinterpretation that this funding request could in any way signal US support for the potential transfer of Palestinians out of the Gaza Strip. We ask for a clarification of the US position,” the report cited the legislators as saying in the letter. “The United States must remain committed, as you have stated on many occasions, to a future in which all Israelis and Palestinians live in peace with equal rights, dignity, and freedom.”

On Wednesday, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said that Israel has never communicated to the United States that its alleged policy is to block Palestinians from returning to the north of the Gaza Strip until a new hostage deal is struck.

The Biden administration had requested supplemental funding worth more than $100 billion from Congress to provide aid to Ukraine and Israel. The request also included some border security measures, but Republican lawmakers have insisted on the inclusion of more stringent measures to address migration at the United States’ southern border. On Wednesday, US President Joe Biden hosted congressional leaders, including Johnson, at the White House to discuss the vital need to pass his national security supplemental request.

HuffPost also reported on Thursday that House Democrats are readying to push for the

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resignation of White House Middle East advisor Brett McGurk and are preparing a letter asking President Joe Biden to let him go amid a growing toll of civilians killed in Gaza as a result of Israeli strikes and decreasing support for the administration as a result.

More than 26,000 Palestinians have so far been killed in Gaza and well over 60,000 others have been wounded during Israel's bombardments and invasion of the Palestinian enclave since October 7.

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Biden Signs Stopgap Funding Bill Into Law - White House

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has signed the Further Additional Continuing Appropriations and Other Extensions Act of 2024 into law, the White House announced.

"On Friday, January 19, 2024, the President signed into law: H.R. 2872, the 'Further Additional Continuing Appropriations and Other Extensions Act, 2024,' which provides fiscal year 2024 appropriations to federal agencies for continuing projects and activities funded in four of the 12 annual appropriations bills through March 1, 2024," the White House in a press release.

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Blinken Says New Guatemala President Presents New Area of Cooperation on Migration

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that the recent inauguration of Guatemalan President Bernardo Arevalo presents a fresh opportunity of cooperation to address the surge of migration in the region.

"I think a very significant development in President Bernardo being inaugurated in Guatemala," Blinken said during remarks in Mexico City. "This opens an important new area for cooperation on migration between our three countries, and we will continue to work together more broadly, to develop regional solutions to the historic challenge that we face."

Blinken is in Mexico City to meet with his Mexican counterpart Alicia Barcena to discuss ways both sides can continue to work to mitigate the influx of migrants heading to the US-Mexico border.

A senior US administration official told reporters on Thursday that no big announcements are expected after the meeting in Mexico City.

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.

Republicans are currently trying to get the White House to agree to make meaningful changes

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to US border security that will end the border crisis in exchange for support of Biden's supplemental request that includes more than $60 billion for Ukraine aid. The White House is eager to get Congress to approve more funding for Ukraine, which has currently run out.

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Biden, Israel's Netanyahu Discuss Latest Developments in Gaza Conflict - White House

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden had a telephone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to discuss the latest developments in the Gaza conflict, the White House said in a statement.

"President Biden spoke with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel to discuss the latest developments in Israel and Gaza," the White House said.

Biden and Netanyahu had not talked directly for nearly a month.

The last time the two leaders spoke was when Biden reportedly raised concerns with Netanyahu about Israel's withholding portions of the tax revenue that it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority.

A US official, according to Axios, described the conversation as one of the most "frustrating" exchanges between the two leaders since the start of Israel's war on Gaza.

The Palestinian Authority has refused to accept a partial transfer so far, which may cause the authority to economically collapse and further escalate the violence in the West Bank if the Palestinian Authority cannot pay the salaries of its security forces.

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UN Says 'Very Concerned' About Situation on Korean Peninsula After Pyongyang Nuclear Test

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is "very concerned" about the situation on the Korean Peninsula after North Korea conducted an underwater nuclear weapon system test, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"We have seen this development and we remain very concerned about the current situation on the Korean Peninsula," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported earlier, citing a statement by a spokesman for North Korea's Defense Ministry, that Pyongyang tested an underwater nuclear weapon system in response to the joint military exercises undertaken by South Korea, Japan and the United States.

"The Secretary-General [Antonio Guterres] reiterated his call for de-escalation and full implementation of Security Council resolutions," Dujarric said.

Guterres is insisting on creating an environment that would lead to dialogue and resumption of

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diplomatic talks as the only possible path forward, Dujarric added.

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US Rates Could Still Rise If Inflation Surprises To The Upside - Fed's Goolsbee

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US interest rates could still rise despite overwhelming market expectations for a cut this year, with a senior Federal Reserve official cautioning on Friday that stubborn inflation could tip the balance the other way.

"If inflation progress reverses, [it] could merit rate hikes," Austan Goolsbee, president of the Chicago Fed, said in an interview with CNN.

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

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

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

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

The Fed's next decision on rates would be January 31.

In his speech, Goolsbee reinforced the central bank's stance that markets should be focusing on economic data for any cue on interest rates.

"If we continue to make surprising progress faster than was forecast on inflation, then we have to take that into account in determining the level of restrictiveness," Goolsbee said. As inflation comes down, "we would clearly be evaluating the responsiveness."

He singled out soaring home prices as one area of concern for the Fed, saying: "We need to see more progress on housing inflation."

US home prices hit all-time highs for a ninth month in a row in October amid chronic short supply of houses and rising interest rates.

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AI Chatbots Lean Economically Left, Socially Libertarian on Political Test - AI Tracker

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - All major artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots lean economically left-wing and socially libertarian on a test of political opinions, according to data from AI bias monitor Tracking AI.

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AI chatbots including Google's Bard, OpenAI's ChatGPT and X's Grok all tended to give left-wing responses to economic questions and libertarian responses on social questions, based on the so-called Political Compass test.

X's default Grok chatbot ranked the most economically left-wing and the Llama-2 chatbot, developed by Meta (banned in Russia), ranked the most economically right-wing. Google's Bard was the most socially libertarian and Grok's "fun mode" was the most socially authoritarian.

The fun-mode version of Grok has become more economically right-wing and more socially authoritarian in recent days, TrackingAI founder Maxim Lott said in a statement on Thursday.

Moreover the alternate version appears to be responding to serious questions with a more fun approach, as the name would suggest, the statement said. Whereas the default version of Grok strongly disagreed with astrology's ability to make accurate predictions, the fun mode strongly agreed with the premise, the statement said.

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UN on Hamas Talks in Moscow: We Back Any Discussions That Would Lead to Ceasefire

UNITED NATIONS, January 19 (Sputnik) – The United Nations supports any discussions that would lead to an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday, when asked to comment on talks that a Hamas delegation has held with Russian officials in Moscow.

"We support discussions that would lead to an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, that would lead to immediate and unconditional release of hostages. We are not involved in these discussions, but we understand that diplomatic discussions are going on in different places," Dujarric told reporters.

He stressed the need for discussions between interested parties.

"We just hope that [they] will lead to a positive outcome for the people of Gaza and for the people of Israel," the official added.

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German National Charged in Brooklyn With $150Miln Securities Fraud - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Federal prosecutors are charging a German national with a $150 million securities fraud, the Department of Justice announced in a press release on Friday.

"This morning, Horst Jicha, a German national, will be arraigned at the federal courthouse in Brooklyn on an indictment charging him with securities fraud and conspiracies to commit securities fraud, wire fraud, and money laundering for his role in a cryptocurrency scheme called USI Tech," the release stated.

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Jicha was arrested, and the charges against him were unsealed when he entered the United States on December 23, 2023 attempting to vacation in Miami, Florida, the Justice Department said.

"As alleged, in the early days of crypto, the defendant deployed a multilevel marketing scheme to defraud US investors excited about the crypto market," United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York Breon Peace said.

As alleged in the indictment, USI Tech was an online platform that began in Europe and purported to make cryptocurrency investments easy and accessible to the average retail investor. However, in reality, it was a multilevel marketing scheme that relied on investors recruiting other investors below them to buy various purported cryptocurrency investments, the Justice Department said.

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Arctic Wave in US Causes 47 Deaths, 95Mln Americans Put on Weather Alert - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US officials said that 47 people have died so far during the week-long nationwide cold storm, with 95 million Americans on the East Coast being placed under winter weather alerts, NBC News reported on Friday.

Since January 12, a total of 47 individuals have succumbed to winter and cold-related conditions, the report said.

Residents in western New York have been experiencing a substantial snowfall over the past several days, the report added.

Areas stretching from the state of West Virginia to Connecticut are anticipated to experience snowfall ranging between one to five inches today, according to the report.

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Biden in Race to Secure as Much Ukraine Aid as Possible as 2nd Trump Term Looms - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration intends to flow as much aid to Ukraine as possible before January 2025 as the possibility of a second Trump term looms, CNN reported on Friday, citing US officials.

The talks on how to channel maximum aid to Kiev during the last months of the Biden presidency began last year, the report said.

"Aside from there being a desperate need, getting as much aid in before January 2025 is on the minds of a lot of folks I've spoken to," a US official was quoted in the report. "Not only is it important that the monies get appropriated, but that they get disbursed before the election as any FY24 funds still waiting to be spent can get blocked by Trump."

There is a grim realization at the White House that Biden's $60 billion aid request for Ukraine is

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likely the last chance for any new US military funding to be sent to Kiev before the 2024 presidential election, the report said.

US and Western intelligence officials believe that the Russia-Ukraine conflict will last at least two more years, the report said, citing multiple sources familiar with the intelligence.

Some US and Western officials privately say there could be as many as five more years of fighting, the report added.

Russia has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying that they only prolong the conflict. Moscow also sees the Ukraine conflict as a hybrid war led by the United States.

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Most US Voters Believe Obama Influences White House, Biden Progressive 'Puppet' - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - A majority of likely voters in the United States believe that former US President Barack Obama influences the Biden administration and that President Joe Biden is just a puppet for a group of progressive Democrats, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll released on Friday.

A majority of respondents agree with a statement from US Congressman Greg Murphy that Biden is a "puppet for a progressive left committee" led by Obama, the poll report said.

Moreover, 63% of respondents believe it is likely that Obama continues to influence the Biden administration's policies, including 40% who believe it is very likely, the poll report said.

Twenty-nine percent (29%) of respondents do not believe it is likely that Obama is influencing the White House, the poll report said.

Biden served as vice president in the Obama administration from 2009 to 2017. Biden, 81, is the oldest US President in history and seeking reelection in 2024.

The poll surveyed 935 likely US voters from January 15-17. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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US Authorities Delay, Cancel Over 3,000 Flights Due to Snowfall on East Coast

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The snowfall in parts of the United States' East Coast has caused more than 3,000 flight delays and cancellations, the FlirghtAware.com portal reported on Friday.

"Total delays within, into, or out of the United States today: 2,245," the report said.

Over 800 flights have been canceled, the report added.

The most significant changes occurred in New York and New Jersey, where the LaGuardia and the Newark Liberty airports reported 250 flight cancellations and almost 260 delays.

In addition, 280 flights were canceled or delayed at the Reagan National Airport in Washington.

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The US government announced that it has allowed federal employees to start working later in the day and leave their offices earlier.

"Federal agencies in the Washington, DC area are open under a two-hour delayed arrival and employees have the Option for Unscheduled Leave or Unscheduled Telework," the US Office of Personnel Management said.

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Philippines-Canada MoU May Culminate in Visiting Forces Agreement - Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) – Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilbert Teodoro said on Friday that the newly signed memorandum of understanding (MoU) on defense cooperation with Canada could eventually lead to a visiting forces agreement.

Earlier in the day, media reported that the two countries had signed a MoU possibly presaging a future agreement on hosting each other's troops.

"I'm glad to hear that there is a strong intention on both sides to deepen and strengthen the relationships by forging new milestones in our defense relations to culminate, perhaps, with the Visiting Forces Agreement," Teodoro wrote on social media.

The memorandum was signed by Teodoro and Canadian Ambassador to Manila David Hartman at the Philippine Department of National Defense headquarters. The signing coincided with the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Hartman has said earlier that the MoU is meant not as a legally binding treaty but as a manifest of the Canadian government to collaborate with the Philippine government and for their armed forces to exchange experience, technologies, practices and carry out joint military training.

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US Sentinel ICBM Program to Cost $131.5Bln or 37% More Than Original Estimate - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States' Sentinel Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) program that is estimated to cost nearly $131.5 billion or 37% more than the original estimate, Bloomberg News reported on Friday.

The initial cost of the program was estimated to be $96 billion and the substantial increase has prompted the Defense Department to conduct a formal review, which can result in a decision to either scale back or terminate the project, the report said.

The new estimate sent to Congress on Thursday place the unitary cost of the missiles at $162 million, up from $118 million in 2020 dollars, which includes revisited expenditures for silo construction and launch control centers, the report said.

The US Air Force plans to acquire 660 test and operational Sentinel missiles, for which 400 new launch facilities will need to be built, the report also said.

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The Sentinel missiles are under development by the Northrop Grumman Corp., which has been tasked with replacing the existing stocks of the Minuteman missiles from the 1970s. The Sentinel program is considered to be a key component in the modernization of the US air-land-sea nuclear triad, the report added.

Northrop Grumman said it remains committed to supporting the US Air force in its assessment and update of acquisition forecasts, according to the report.

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US Aviation Authorities Say Boeing Plane Conducted Emergency Landing After Engine Failure

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - A Boeing 747 conducted an emergency landing due to engine failure after taking off from Miami International Airport on Thursday evening , the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said on Friday.

"Atlas Air Flight 95 returned safely to Miami International Airport around 10:30 p.m. local time on Thursday, Jan. 18, after the crew reported an engine failure," the FAA said in a statement shared with Sputnik.

The plane was headed to Luis Munoz Marin International Airport in Puerto Rico at the time of the incident, which the FAA will investigate, the statement said.

Post-flight inspection of the aircraft revealed a "softball size hole" above one of the engines, according to an FAA incident report.

Footage of the incident filmed from the ground and shared on social media appeared to show flames shooting from the aircraft as it flew.

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Ukraine Shifting to 'Active Defense' to Prepare for 2025 Counteroffensive – Reports

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) – Ukraine is shifting toward a new strategy of "active defense" this year to rebuild its forces after its summer counteroffensive failed and prepare for 2025, when they believe a counteroffensive could have a better chance, the Financial Times reported on Friday, citing a Western official.

An "active defense" strategy, which presupposes holding defensive lines and probing "weak spots" for attacks, would allow Kiev to "build out its forces" this year and prepare for 2025, the Western official told the newspaper.

However, the prospect depends on a number of factors, including uncertainty surrounding continued military assistance from the West, the report said. There are also open questions about the West's commitment to backing Ukraine and to what extent, the report stated.

The most significant concern is whether the US is going to continue supporting Kiev, according to the report. The Biden administration is still trying to reach an agreement with the House

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Republicans on a national security supplemental package, which includes a large portion of military assistance for Ukraine. To date, the last tranche of Ukraine aid was announced on December 27.

US President Joe Biden warned congressional leaders this week that not approving additional funding for Ukraine could possibly result in the deployment of US troops to that country, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday. Biden's supplemental request includes more than $60 billion in assistance for Ukraine.

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