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Attacks Against American Troops in Iraq, Syria Shows US' Lost 'Aura of Invincibility'

Last week while speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani reiterated his call for US troops to leave the country. "[T]he end of the US-led coalition mission is a necessity for the security and stability of Iraq," he said.
That call was backed up by Brigadier General Yahya Rasool, the spokesman for Iraq's Joint Operations Command, on Sunday, a day after several rockets and missiles were fired at the al-Assad Airbase, which houses US troops, injuring some troops.
"The Iraqi government is resolute to put an end to the deployment of foreign forces in the country," Rasool said. The attack was one in a series of attacks that have continued to plague US forces in Syria and Iraq.
Dr. Seyed Mohammad Marandi, a professor of English literature and Orientalism at the University of Tehran, told Sputnik's Critical Hour that "the American government has taken the Iraqi government hostage," noting that Iraqi oil sales go through bank accounts in the US and "when [the US] wants something, they don't give the money," until they get "what they want from Iraq."
However, the continued attacks on US forces and its inability to prevent them have changed the perception of America worldwide. "[T]hat they are regularly targeting American positions, the Americans have lost that aura, if you know what I mean." Co-host Wilmer Leon, clarified "[Do you mean] the aura of invincibility?" he asked. "Yes, exactly," Dr. Mirandi replied. "If you can just every day lob a few rockets or fire a few missiles, then it shows they … are not a real power. They're vulnerable. They're weak."
Earlier in the interview, Dr. Mirandi argued that "The United States thinks it's winning this way, but it's only losing. … It's not going to get better, it's going to get worse." He explained that the actions of the US government make it despised across the world, and said the US "is seen as a thug, a thug that you have to deal with … You know you have to treat him with respect, but you hate him." He compared that to China and Russia who he says don't treat countries in the same way. "Therefore, their soft power, their economic power, their economic interest are able to expand much more easily," he explained. "When it comes to the Americans, everyone wants to have the minimum amount they can have that will keep the Americans quiet, but when it comes to other potential … partners, they want as much as possible."
Marandi also spoke about the US government's diminishing desire to be critical of Israel in public and noted how interesting it is that Daesh*, ostensibly the reason the US had to remain in the Middle East for so long, has not been targeting US bases and even attacked Iran.
"Why isn't [Daesh*] bombing the United States," he asked. "Because you don't bite the hand that feeds you," Leon replied.
"Exactly," Marandi concluded.

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Future of Military Warfare to 'Absolutely' Take Page From 'Black Mirror' Scripts

Modern warfare is changing faster than any time since the introduction of the machine gun. Largely brought on by drone and AI technologies, inexpensive and small weapons have evened the battlefield, making even poorly equipped forces a threat to the 20th century's greatest war machines.

In about 10 year's time, if the state of global conflicts maintains its current course, the wider public will have gained a front-row ticket to "a lot of military and geopolitical upheaval," foreign relations and security expert Mark Sleboda told Sputnik.

Sleboda joined Sputnik's Fault Lines on Wednesday to discuss the latest in world events and break down the effects of intertwining artificial intelligence with military weapons and the global shift away from US hegemony.

While speaking about drones and AI in warfare, Sleboda explained that new technologies are rapidly changing the battlefield.

"This is all going to compound and steamroll going forward," Sleboda explained. "Underwater drones, maritime drones, [they are] changing not only ground warfare and air warfare, but changing naval warfare as well, all very rapidly, and [control is] slipping out of [major world powers]."

"It absolutely is 'Black Mirror' stuff," he added, having previously invoked the "Terminator" movie franchise as a comparison point.

Drones have been among the most effective weapons in Ukraine for both sides of the conflict. Both Russia and Ukraine have also been utilizing AI, including in some drones. Furthermore, as Sleboda notes, drones were used very effectively by Hamas during the October 7 attack against a far better-equipped and funded Israeli military.

The changing military battlefield, along with "global shifts of capital from the West to the East, the rising of China and the resurgence of Russia [and] Iran emerging as a serious regional power, mostly due to the US taking out Iraq," has made the US realize its global hegemony "is fading out of its grip," Sleboda argued.

"They realize they have a very limited window of military opportunity before those changing economic patterns result in changing military realities as well," Sleboda said, adding that this explains why "they want to provoke conflicts with their potential hegemonic rivals."

This, Sleboda warned, will be seen as the start of the next World War.

"We've already seen this World War start, and it's not starting with a big bang and two sides, but it's starting with a series of local and proxy wars. And those wars aren't really dying down. They're just piling on top of each other," he said, pointing to Yemen and Syria as examples, as well as rising tensions in Korea and the Taiwan Strait.

"There's so much possibility for insanity," Sleboda lamented.

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Central Idiot Agency - Cartoon

On Tuesday, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) released a video on X (formerly Twitter) intended to encourage Russians to become double agents for the US government.
Unfortunately, the USA's multi-billion dollar intelligence agency was apparently unaware that X is not available inside Russia, greatly limiting the reach of their highly produced propaganda video.
The video, widely mocked online and by Russian officials, called for Russians to "fight the enemy within" and to contact the CIA. The video depicts Russia as a dark place where people have to resort to bribery to find work. Russia's soldiers eat "rotten potatoes" and use "prehistoric weapons" the video claims.
But, if the CIA had enough intelligence to look at the reality, they would know that Russia has become Europe's largest economy by purchasing power despite the West's sanctions and its "prehistoric" weapons are dominating their NATO equivalents on the battlefield.
Not that anything the video shows matters, considering most Russians were unable to view it.
Perhaps, they should listen to Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov, who advised that "Someone needs to inform the CIA that Vkontakte is much more popular in our country than the banned X."
The future of warfare will resemble an episode of "Black Mirror" or the "Terminator" movie franchise, Mark Sleboda, a foreign relations and security expert told Radio Sputnik's Fault Lines on Wednesday.

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"This is all going to compound and steamroll going forward," Sleboda explained. "Underwater drones, maritime drones, [they are] changing not only ground warfare and air warfare, but changing naval warfare as well, all very rapidly, and [control is] slipping out of [major world powers]."

Additionally, the changing military battlefield, along with "global shifts of capital from the West to the East, the rising of China and the resurgence of Russia [and] Iran emerging as a serious regional power, mostly due to the US taking out Iraq," has made the US realize its global hegemony "is fading out of its grip," Sleboda argued. He added that has pushed the US "to provoke conflicts with their potential hegemonic rivals."

He warned that this could be the start of the next World War.

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“We've already seen this World War start, and it's not starting with a big bang and two sides, but it's starting with a series of local and proxy wars. And those wars aren't really dying down. They're just piling on top of each other,” he said, pointing to Yemen and Syria as examples, as well as rising tensions in Korea and the Taiwan Strait.

“There’s so much possibility for insanity,” Sebola lamented.

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Continued attacks on the US in Iraq and Syria highlight the US’ vulnerability, Dr. Seyed Mohammad Marandi told Radio Sputnik’s Critical Hour on Wednesday.

The comments come after another attack on the al-Assad Airbase, during which some US troops were injured. The attack also renewed calls from the Iraqi government for US troops to leave the country.

“The American government has taken the Iraqi government hostage,” Dr. Marandi explained. “The United States is despised because of these policies. And if the United States had treated Iraq as a friend, if it had treated the government with respect, then US interests in Iraq would be a much higher priority for everyone.”

He explained that a softer approach, like that taken by Russia and China, has been much more effective, allowing them to expand their economic interests. “When it comes to the Americans, everyone wants to have the minimum amount that they can have, that will keep the Americans quiet,” Dr. Marandi explained, saying that the US government is seen as a thug around the world. “ But when it comes to [Russia and China] … they want as much as is possible.”

But it's the US’ inability to stop the attacks that change the perception of the US around the world.

“Now that they're regularly targeting American positions, the Americans have lost that aura,” he explained. “If you can just every day lob a few rockets or fire a few missiles, then it shows they're not a real power. They're vulnerable. They're weak,” he added.

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US Sanctions Four Yemenis, Including Houthi Defense Minister – Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury announced sanctions on Thursday on four Yemeni nationals, including Houthi defense chief Mohamed Al-Atifi, according to its registry.

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The other sanctioned individuals include Muhammad Fadl Abd Al-Nabi; Muhammad Ali Al-Qadiri; and Muhammad Ahmad Al-Talibi.

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Canada to Send About 1,000 Troops to NATO 'Steadfast Defender' Exercise - National Defense

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) - Canada will dispatch about 1,000 military personnel to participate in Steadfast Defender 2024, NATO's largest military drills in decades, National Defense said on Thursday.

The drills will run from the end of January until the end of May. The exercise will take place in the Atlantic and Europe, involving some 90,000 troops from 31 NATO allies and Sweden.

"Approximately 1,000 CAF sailors, soldiers, aviators, and special forces members, will demonstrate NATO's ability to conduct sustained, multi-domain defensive operations over a period of several months, simulating an Article 5 attack by an adversary with similar capabilities," the ministry said in a statement.

The first part of the exercise will be largely maritime based and will focus on North Atlantic and Arctic waters, while the second part will test the alliance's ability to rapidly deploy reinforcements across all domains in defense of Central and Eastern Europe, according to the Canadian ministry.

As part of the drills, Canada will deploy the HMCS Charlottetown patrol frigate from the Royal Canadian Navy with an embarked CH-148 Cyclone helicopter. The Canadian-led enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group stationed in Latvia will also participate.

A Canadian Leopard 2 Main Battle Tank squadron will take part in the drills for the first time, the statement said.

Last week, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko told Sputnik that the scale of Steadfast Defender 2024 marks the final and irrevocable return of the alliance to the Cold War schemes to counter Russia. These exercises are another element of the hybrid war unleashed by the West against Russia, he said.

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US Economy Grew at 3.3% in Q4 2023 – Bureau of Economic Analysis

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) – The United States' inflation-adjusted GDP increased at an estimated annual rate of 3.3% in the fourth quarter of 2023, marking a fall from the 4.9% recorded the previous quarter, according to a release from the Bureau of Economic Analysis on Thursday.

"Compared to the third quarter of 2023, the deceleration in real GDP in the fourth quarter primarily reflected slowdowns in private inventory investment, federal government spending,

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residential fixed investment, and consumer spending. Imports decelerated," the release stated.
Still, real GDP in 2023 increased overall by 2.5%, compared with the 1.9% growth in 2022.
This primarily reflected increases in consumer spending (health care and recreational goods and vehicles); non-residential fixed investment (structures and intellectual property products); state and local government spending (structures and employee compensation); exports; and federal government spending. They were partly offset by decreases in residential fixed investment (new single-family homes) and inventory investment (wholesale trade). Imports, mostly goods, also decreased.
A second estimate for the Q4 2023 GDP, based on more complete data, will be released on February 28.

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White House Announces Measures to Promote Safe Firearms Storage

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) – The White House announced on Thursday new actions to promote the safe storage of firearms to reduce gun violence, according to a release.
"Today, the Biden-Harris Administration is announcing new executive actions to help promote safe storage of firearms that implement President Biden's Executive Order on promoting safe gun storage in order to reduce gun violence and make our communities safer," the release stated.
It noted that gun violence is the leading cause of death among American children. About 4.6 million children live in homes with unsecured firearms, which are closely associated with school shootings, youth suicide, unintentional shootings, and theft of firearms.
The new measures include the Department of Education sending a letter to school principals across the country and issuing a communication template they can use to engage with families about the issue, and the Department of Justice releasing a comprehensive guide to safe storage of firearms.

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Biden Notified US Lawmakers of Plans to Formally Approve F-16 Sale to Turkey - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden notified congressional leaders that he plans to formally notify Congress of the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey as soon as Ankara completes the NATO ratification process for Sweden, Reuters reported citing a US official.
The report said on Wednesday that Biden in a letter to lawmakers urged them to approve the $20 billion sale.
US law requires the US president to formally notify Congress 30 days before the US government can take the final steps to complete certain foreign military sales of high value.

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The White House and US House Speaker Mike Johnson's office did not immediately respond to Sputnik's request for comment on this matter.

Turkey has long waited for the United States to approve the F-16 deal.

On Tuesday, the Turkish parliament ratified the protocol on Sweden's accession to NATO in a 287-to-55 vote with four abstentions after 20 months of delay. The decision will go into effect once Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signs a corresponding decree. Erdogan has 15 days to consider the possibility of signing the document.

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McConnell Says Trump Republican 'Nominee,' Cautions Lawmakers Not to Undermine Him

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell in a private meeting with Republican colleagues on Wednesday referred to former President Donald Trump as the Republican primary party "nominee" for the upcoming US presidential election, Punchbowl News reported citing sources.

McConnell has put off publicly endorsing Trump for the Republican primary nomination, but appears to be backing him after he easily won the Republican primary nomination in the states of Iowa and New Hampshire.

The report said on Wednesday that McConnell told his colleagues that Trump wants to run his 2024 campaign centered on immigration, so they should not "do anything to undermine him."

Republicans lawmakers wanted to add stronger measures in the supplemental bill that would bolster security on the southern border as a means to put an end to the record levels of illegal migration seen under President Joe Biden's tenure in the White House.

According to the report, McConnell said the Senate is in a "quandary" on the Ukraine aid-border security negotiations that are part of Biden's supplemental request.

McConnell, the report said, stated that the politics on the supplemental bill have changed and there's now doubt that lawmakers will be able to link Ukraine aid and border security in the legislation to fund Biden's supplemental request, which includes more than $60 billion for Ukraine.

Last week, President Joe Biden said he expected that the Senate would be ready to finalize a deal on the supplemental bill this week. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell also said over the last several days that White House and Senate negotiators were making significant progress on the bill.

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US Concerned By Reports Of Strikes At UNRWA, Says Israel Responsible to Protect Civilians

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WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) – The United States is “gravely concerned” by reports of strikes at the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) facility in Gaza and, while gathering details, considers Israel responsible for protecting civilians, National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said on Wednesday.

“We are gravely concerned by reports today of strikes hitting a UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) facility — with subsequent reports of fires in the building—in a neighborhood in southern Gaza where more than 30,000 displaced Palestinians had reportedly been sheltering,” Watson said in a statement.

The US still does not have enough details about the incidents, she pointed out, adding that every loss of innocent life is a tragedy.

Watson confirmed Washington’s “unwavering support” of Israel but urged it to be careful in conducting strikes. “Israel retains a responsibility to protect civilians, including, humanitarian personnel and sites,” she added.

Earlier on Wednesday, UNRWA Director Thomas White wrote on X that a Training Centre sheltering tens of thousands of displaced people had been hit, setting the buildings ablaze and causing mass casualties.

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Arizona Republican Party Chairman Says Resigning Role After Leaked Audio Scandal

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) - Arizona Republican Party Chairman Jeff DeWit said in a statement that he is resigning from his leadership role, after he seemingly offered US Senate candidate Kari Lake money to drop out of the race in a leaked audio recording.

“This morning, I was determined to fight for my position. However, a few hours ago, I received an ultimatum from Lake’s team: resign today or face the release of a new, more damaging recording,” the statement said on Wednesday. “I am resigning as Lake requested, in the hope that she will honor her commitment to cease her attacks, allowing me to return to the business sector—a field I find much more logical and prefer over politics.”

DeWit is unsure of the contents of the second recording but decided not to take the risk, due to having had numerous open conversations with Lake as friends, the statement said.

The first recording released by Lake was “selectively edited,” the statement said. The conversation was recorded while Lake worked for DeWit’s private company, raising serious legal and moral concerns, the statement said.

Arizona Republican Party first vice chair Jill Norgaard will now serve as acting head of the party in the state, Lake’s campaign said in a statement.

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US Lawmakers Call on Biden to Take Control of Texas National Guard Activities on Border

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) - Democratic US lawmakers are calling on President Joe Biden to take control of the Texas National Guard to prevent it from placing razor wire fencing along the US-Mexico border intended to keep migrants from crossing into the United States illegally.

Earlier this week, the US Supreme Court ruled that federal agents can cut the razor wire fencing Texas installed on the US-Mexico border, but it does not require the state to remove it.

"If Abbott is defying...Supreme Court ruling, @POTUS [Biden] needs to establish sole federal control of the Texas National Guard," Casar said on Wednesday.

Congressman Joaquin Castro also called on Biden to take control of the Texas National Guard.

According to the Texas Military Department, the branch consists of Texas Army and Air National Guard, which has a "federal duty when called upon by the president as well as a state defense force, the volunteer Texas State Guard, which serves the state and cannot be called into federal service."

The Biden administration also recently asked the Supreme Court to prevent the Texas National Guard from blocking federal Border Patrol agents from accessing a stretch of land along the US southern border town Eagle Pass, Texas. The border town has been a hot spot for illegal migration since Biden came into office in 2021.

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US Navy Orders Upgrades to 10 Boeing Anti-Submarine Poseidon Aircraft - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) - Boeing is awarded a $102.7 million US Navy modification order to upgrade ten Poseidon P-8A long-range anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft, the Defense Department announced.

"The Boeing Company [of] Seattle, Washington is awarded a $102,729,951 ... modification order for the production and delivery of ten P-8A increment three retrofit A-kits and provides for three retrofit kit A-kit installs," the Defense Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

The upgrades will be carried out in support of anti-submarine warfare capabilities upgrades on the aircraft for the Navy, the release said.

Most of the work on the program will be carried out in Jacksonville, Florida (79.6%) with the remainder done in St. Louis, Missouri (10.9%); and Mesa, Arizona (9.5%), the release added.

Work on the project will be carried out over the coming three years and is expected to be completed in November 2026, according to the release.

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Ex-Washington Council Member Convicted of Bribery Will Run for US Congress - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) - Former Washington, DC Council member Michael Brown, who has been convicted of taking bribes, said he intends to run to become a nonvoting delegate of the District of Columbia (DC) to the US House of Representatives.

Brown said in an interview with the Washington Post on Wednesday that he has begun collecting the 2,000 signatures necessary to be placed on the ballot and promised to be more aggressive in defending the interests of DC residents on Capitol Hill.

"We are under attack," Brown said. "Not just on Capitol Hill, but from the surrounding jurisdictions outwardly trying to take our businesses. And we have to put up a fight."

In 2013, Brown pleaded guilty to taking $55,000 in bribes from undercover FBI agents in exchange for helping a company run a business in Washington. Brown was sentenced to 39 months in prison and released in 2016.

Brown will be Washington's seventh candidate for delegate to Congress along with Greg Maye, LaQueda Tate, Kymone Freeman, Rico Dancy and Kelly Mikel Williams, who will try to unseat incumbent Eleanor Holmes Norton during the June Democratic primary. Norton has been occupying the delegate position since 1991.

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US Anti-Semitism Envoy Says Netanyahu's Hamas Funding Policy 'Very Bad' Decision

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) - Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's policy of allowing Qatar to transfer funds to Hamas was a poor foreign policy decision, US Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism Deborah Lipstadt said during a Council on Foreign Relations event.

"I don't think that Bibi Netanyahu funded Hamas… he did let Qatar transfer quite exceptional amounts of money to them, on the supposition — now proven entirely wrong — that this was a way of sort of redirecting Hamas away from its terrorism to other activities," Lipstadt said on Wednesday. "I think that that was, as now is obvious… a very bad foreign policy decision."

The policy was also intended to divide Palestinian groups to prevent the formation of a Palestinian state, Lipstadt said. Many Israelis criticized the policy for preventing a long-term solution to the Israel-Palestine challenge, Lipstadt added.

However, criticism of Netanyahu and his policies should not be used to explain Hamas' actions, Lipstadt said.

On October 7, Hamas launched a large-scale attack against Israel, sparking an Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip. The conflict has left thousands of Israelis and Palestinians dead, injured or displaced, as well as fueled broader tensions in the Middle East.

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Belgium Signs on to US Artemis Accords to Shape Peaceful Use of Outer Space - NASA

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) - Belgium joined the US-crafted and led Artemis Accords to govern peaceful cooperation and development of outer space at a ceremony in Brussels, Belgium, NASA announced.

"[O]n Tuesday, Belgium became the 34th country to sign the Artemis Accords," NASA said in a press release on Wednesday.

The accords establish a practical set of principles to guide space exploration cooperation among nations, including those participating in NASA's Artemis campaign, the release said.

NASA established the Artemis Accords in 2020 together with seven other nations. Belgium is the 34th nation to join them, the release added.

According to NASA, the Artemis Accords reinforce and implement key obligations in the 1967 Outer Space Treaty.

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PREVIEW - US State of Alabama Set to Conduct First Nitrogen Gas Execution, Despite UN Concerns

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) - The US state of Alabama is set to conduct its first execution of a prisoner using nitrogen gas this week, despite concerns from human rights officials at the United Nations.

Alabama is scheduled to execute convicted murderer Kenneth Smith sometime during a 30-hour window on Thursday or Friday, although the details of the execution remain unclear.

The states of Alabama, Oklahoma and Mississippi all approve of nitrogen gas executions, but the method has yet to be tested in the United States.

Earlier this month, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said that it is alarmed by the planned execution and urged Alabama authorities to reconsider the action.

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

Nitrogen gas has never been used to execute human beings in the US, the statement said. The American Veterinary Medical Association recommends sedating animals euthanized with the method, although Alabama's human execution protocol has no such provision, the statement said.

The UN office has serious concerns that Smith's execution could violate prohibitions on torture and cruel punishment, the statement said. The death penalty is inconsistent with the

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“fundamental right to life,” the statement said, adding that there is no evidence capital punishment deters crime.

The World Coalition Against the Death Penalty said in a statement to Sputnik that it opposes the death penalty in all cases and supports the universal abolition of capital punishment.

Smith has been on death row for more than three decades, following his murder conviction in 1988. Smith was scheduled for execution by lethal injection in 2022, but officials could not initiate the execution before the execution warrant expired.

Earlier this month, a US judge rejected an effort to block Smith’s pending execution. On Wednesday, the US Supreme Court also declined to halt the execution.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 25 (Sputnik) –

IL-76 AIRPLANE CRASH IN RUSSIA

* An IL-76 transport plane of the Russian air forces with 65 Ukrainian prisoners who were being transported for exchange, the crew and accompanying persons crashed in Russia's Belgorod region, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Wednesday.

* All people on board of an Il-76 transport plane that crashed in the Belgorod Region of Russia were killed, Vyacheslav Gladkov, the region's head, said.

* The Il-76 plane carrying Ukrainian prisoners of war was shot down by Ukraine at about 11:15 Moscow time (08:15 GMT), the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* The US Department of Defense has nothing to share on the Il-76 plane crash in Russia’s Belgorod region and refers all inquiries to Ukraine, a Pentagon spokesman told Sputnik.

* Russia is trying to establish the facts about the downing of the Ilyshin-76 transport aircraft in the Belgorod region and the reasons behind Ukraine undertaking this criminal act, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

* Russia is not worried about whether Western countries believe that Ukrainian forces downed an Il-76 transport plane carrying 65 prisoners of war, Lavrov said.

* The US State Department encourages both Russian and Ukrainian authorities to conduct their own investigations to establish facts surrounding the crash of an Il-76 plane in Russia's Belgorod region, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said.

* The French presidency rejected Moscow’s request to call an urgent UN Security Council meeting today in the wake of the downing of an Il-76 jet, Russia's Deputy Representative to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

GREAT POWER COMPETITION

* Russia is inclined to believe in the "reasonableness of US leadership," Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday.

* The US military is not ready for a great power competition but it is prepared for counterinsurgency warfare, US Defense Department Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs Richard Moore Jr. said.

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CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Russia is doubtful that Ukraine will agree to any kind of proposed settlement despite former US President Donald Trump's assurances that he would resolve the Ukraine conflict, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday.

* Lavrov said that Ukraine's genocide case against Russia at the International Court of Justice will be "extremely politicized."

* The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee advanced a bill to authorize the transfer of seized Russian assets to Ukraine, Bloomberg reported.

* The Ukrainian armed forces have lost approximately 430 servicepeople in Kupyansk and Lyman directions in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Moscow insists it has reliable information that suggests there are French mercenaries in Ukraine, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

DEVELOPMENTS IN SYRIA

* The delegation of Syria's opposition at Astana format talks will meet with Russian diplomats on Thursday to discuss the Syrian Constitutional Committee issues, the delegation's head, Ahmed Tomeh, told Sputnik on Wednesday.

* Reports that the United States is considering withdrawing troops from Syria and proposing to have Syrian Democratic Forces partner with the Syrian government to fight the Islamic State terrorist group (IS, banned in Russia) are inaccurate, a US defense official told Sputnik.

* A Shia militant alliance known as the Islamic Resistance in Iraq said on Wednesday it had attacked three US bases in Iraq and Syria in one day.

CONFLICT IN GAZA

* Proposals between Hamas and the Israeli government to reach a ceasefire only distract attention from the "essence of the problem," which is to actually establish an immediate ceasefire, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

* The International Court of Justice (ICJ) said that it will deliver its order on the request for the indication of provisional measures in the case against Israel over alleged genocide in the Gaza Strip on Friday.

* It is necessary to avoid any reflections of the situation in the Gaza Strip to Syria, Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmet Yildiz, who heads his country's delegation at the Astana format talks on Syria, said.

ATTACKS IN RED SEA

* A US Navy warship shot down two Houthi missiles fired at two commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in a press briefing that those who are carrying out an illegal aggression in the Red Sea are lying that it is done in self-defense in accordance with the UN Charter, when they are actually engaged in pillaging.

* The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO), part of the country's navy, said that it had received information about an explosion near a ship off Yemen's coast, adding that the vessel and its crew are safe.

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

Biden's Failure to Secure US Border Grants Texas Right to Protect Itself - Governor Abbott

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's failure to secure the United States' border with Mexico grants the state of Texas constitutional authority to protect itself, Texas Governor Greg Abbott said on Wednesday.

Article IV, Section 4 of the US Constitution requires the federal government to protect each state against invasion. Article 1, Section 10, Clause 3 of the US Constitution allows states to engage in self-defense in cases of invasion or imminent danger.

"The failure of the Biden administration to fulfill the duties imposed by Article IV, Section 4 has triggered Article I, Section 10, Clause 3, which reserves to this State the right of self-defense," Abbott said in a statement.

On Monday, the US Supreme Court issued a temporary order allowing federal Border Patrol agents to remove razor wire barriers placed by Texas on its portion of the United States' border with Mexico.

Texas' constitutional authority to protect itself supersedes any federal statutes to the contrary, the statement said.

The Texas National Guard, Department of Public Safety and other officials are acting on that authority to secure the state's border, the statement said.

President Joe Biden has violated his oath to faithfully execute immigration laws, leading to more than 6 million illegal entries into the United States through the southern border since he took office, the statement added.

The Biden administration has "broken the compact" between the federal government and the states, according to the statement.

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US Senator Says Biden 'Greatest Friend' of Mexican Cartels After Mishandling Border Crisis

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US Sen. Ted Cruz told reporters on Wednesday that President Joe Biden is the "greatest friend" of Mexican drug cartels because of his open border policies that benefit criminal organizations.

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.

"Joe Biden is litigating against the state of Texas to try to stop Texas from securing the border," Cruz said during a press conference. "Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. is the greatest friend the Mexican drug cartels have ever had. He is the greatest financial benefactor the Mexican drug cartels have ever had. He is the single largest human trafficker in history."

The US Justice Department has taken legal action to stop several efforts the state of Texas has

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taken to deter the record levels of migrants crossing into the United States illegally over the last three years.

The Justice Department argues that Texas' actions prevent federal Border Patrol agents from carrying out their duties, which includes processing migrants once they cross into US soil as required by US law.

US National Border Patrol Council Vice President Art Del Cueto told Sputnik earlier this month that the Biden administration's lax border security policies benefit criminal organizations seeking to expand their enterprises in the United States.

According to the US House Homeland Security Committee, criminal organizations in Mexico made an estimated $13 billion in 2021 from human smuggling on the US southern border. A CBP official previously said migrants pay cartels about $8,000 to $12,000 to smuggle them into the United States.

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Senator Cruz Says 'Kamikaze' Supplemental Bill is Train Wreck, No Chance of Passing House

(Updates with correction in para changed Tim Scott to Rick Scott, details in para 7)

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US Senator Ted Cruz said on Wednesday that the Ukraine aid-border security supplemental bill is a train wreck and has no chance of passing the US House of Representatives.

The White House and Senate have been involved in weeks-long negotiations to reach a deal on President Joe Biden's national security supplemental request that includes more than $60 billion for Ukraine. Republican lawmakers want the supplemental bill to include meaningful policy changes that will end the crisis on the US southern border.

"This supplemental bill is a kamikaze plane in a box canyon, with no exit headed for a train wreck," Cruz said during a press conference. "The chances of this bill passing the house are 0.000%. It ain't gonna pass."

Senator Rick Scott also said at the press conference that the supplemental bill will be "dead on arrival" if it reaches the House of Representatives.

Cruz said the supplemental bill does nothing to secure the border and urged his Republican colleagues to reject support for the legislation until it includes measures that will secure the southern border.

Moreover, Cruz and other Republican senators expressed concerns that they will not have enough time to review the draft text of the bill once a deal is finalized regardless of assurances from Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.

Cruz also accused Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of having the same objectives as Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer in the supplemental negotiations, which is having a bill that gives Ukraine a "blank check" and "pretends" to have strong border security measures.

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

Syrian Kurds Wrong to Trust US 'Umbrella,' Protection - Lavrov

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) - Syrian Kurds who rely on US security protection are pursuing a politically and morally flawed policy, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday.

When asked to comment on media reports of a possible US withdrawal from Syria, Lavrov said: "It's not a matter of them [the US] withdrawing or not, their presence there is illegal."

"And those political forces among the Syrian Kurds who expect to have the US 'umbrella' and their protection, their bet is morally and politically wrong," Lavrov stated during his press conference at the UN.

Lavrov pointed out that the US had already claimed in the past that it would withdraw its forces from Syria, which did not happen.

"When Donald Trump, then the president, mentioned that they are leaving Syria, right away the leader of Syrian Democratic Forces asked us and our military servicemen to help them establish connection with Damascus," Lavrov said. "In several days, the US reconsidered and the representatives of the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Kurds stopped asking for our facilitation of contacts with Damascus. They returned right away under the West's wing."

Al-Monitor reported, citing sources, that a US interagency meeting took place last week regarding a proposal to withdraw US forces from Syria and have the Syrian Kurdish forces partner with the Syrian government to fight the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia).

A US defense official told Sputnik on Wednesday that the reports are inaccurate.

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Proud Boy Bru Receives Six-Year Prison Sentence for Role in Jan. 6 Attack - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Marc Anthony Bru was sentenced to six years in prison after being found guilty of felony and misdemeanor charges related to his actions during and after the January 6 attack, the Justice Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

"A Washington state man was sentenced to prison today after he was found guilty of multiple felony and misdemeanor charges related to his conduct during and after the breach of the US Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 ," the statement said.

According to the statement, on June 26, 2023, Bru, a member of the Proud Boys, failed to appear for a scheduled pretrial conference related to his federal charges in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia.

In addition, he failed to attend a second District Court hearing on June 30, 2023 and was arrested on warrant on July 23, in Montana.

During the sentencing hearing, Bru continued to express no remorse, telling Chief Judge Boasberg, "You could give me 100 years and I would still do it all over again," the statement said.

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

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

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US Supreme Court Declines to Halt First Execution by Nitrogen Gas - Order

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court will not halt the execution of an Alabama death row inmate by nitrogen gas, the court said in an order on Wednesday.

The order denied an application to stay the execution — the first in the United States to use nitrogen gas — and also rejected a petition for a writ of certiorari.

The state of Alabama is set to execute convicted murderer Kenneth Smith on Thursday or Friday, although the details of the execution remain unclear. Alabama will move forward with the

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execution despite calls by UN human rights officials to halt the action.
Earlier this month, a US judge rejected an effort to block Smith's pending execution. Smith has been on death row for more than three decades, following his murder conviction in 1988.

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Russia Does Not Have Discussions With US on Middle East - Lavrov

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) - Russia does not engage in discussions with the US on the Middle East, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday during a press briefing.
"We have no discussions with the US on the Middle East," Lavrov said when responding to questions about the status of the Quartet on the Middle East and reports of potential US forces withdrawal from Syria.
Last year, Palestinian Ambassador to the UN Riyad Mansour told Sputnik that ongoing consultations with Quartet members aimed at resolving the conflict, ending the occupation, and establishing an independent Palestinian state were hindered by negative relations between the United States and Russia.
The Quartet, which consists of the UN, US, EU, and Russia, was established in 2022 to help mediate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Last month, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said that Moscow was ready for consultations within the Quartet on the Israel-Palestine conflict, but the United States clearly did not want this.
Furthermore, Russia has repeatedly called on both parties to stop hostilities, stating that the two-state solution approved by the UN Security Council, which provides for the creation of an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with its capital in East Jerusalem, is the only way to end the conflict.
On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip, while its fighters breached the border, opening fire on the military and civilians. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 20,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of Israeli strikes, local authorities said.
On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the prisoners and hostages, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The ceasefire was extended several times and expired on December 1.

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France Refuses to Schedule UNSC Meeting Over Downed Il-76 for Wednesday - Russian Mission

(Adds background in paras 4-5)
UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) – The French presidency has rejected Moscow's request to call an urgent UN Security Council meeting in the wake of the downing of an Il-76 jet for Wednesday, Russia's First Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy said.
"We have a shocking development in the Security Council today - the French Presidency @franceonu declined our request for an urgent Council meeting … today for 3 pm (20:00 GMT). In a clear attempt to shield their Kiev regime clients it agrees to schedule the meeting only for tomorrow for 5 pm," Polyanskiy said on X.
Earlier in the day, the Russian Defense Ministry said that an Il-76 military transport plane with 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war being transported for exchange, six crew members and three accompanying persons crashed in the Belgorod region. The ministry said that the plane was destroyed by Ukrainian missiles launched from the Kharkiv region.
The general staff of the Ukrainian armed forces said after the crash that it intended to "take further steps" aimed at destroying Russian "means of arms delivery."
The Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ukrainian Defense Ministry claimed that its staff was not aware of the fact that Russia's Il-76 was transporting Ukrainian war prisoners for a planned prisoner swap. However, Ukrainian news portal Strana.ua reported that the directorate had confirmed that a prisoner exchange between Moscow and Kiev was to take place on Wednesday.

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US Defense Innovation Official Says Soon Announcing AUKUS Electronic Warfare Challenge

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The United States will soon announce an electronic warfare challenge alongside Australia and the United Kingdom as part of AUKUS alliance efforts, US Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) Deputy Director for Strategy, Policy and National Security Partnerships Aditi Kumar said on Wednesday.
"We are about to announce an electronic warfare challenge with our AUKUS counterparts," Kumar said during remarks at the Hudson Institute.
The United States is doing similar work with India through the India-US Defense Acceleration Ecosystem, Kumar said. The effort focuses on forging connections between governments, startups and investors, Kumar said.
DIU is also supporting NATO's Defense Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic, which identifies and deploys dual-use technologies to address security challenges, Kumar added.

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US Defense Innovation Official Says Involved in Getting Ukraine Commercial Technology

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) Deputy Director for Strategy, Policy and National Security Partnerships Aditi Kumar said on Wednesday that DIU is working with the US European Command (EUCOM) to provide Ukraine with commercial capabilities for use in its conflict with Russia.

"The ways in which [the conflict in Ukraine] is unfolding is changing before our eyes, and DIU has been at the forefront of that, partnering with EUCOM to make sure that we are bringing all of the commercial technologies to bear that could make differences in that conflict," Kumar said during remarks at the Hudson Institute.

Battlefield technology needs to evolve on a three-month cycle to keep up with the pace of change, Kumar said.

DIU and EUCOM are attempting to stay ahead of the curve and bring in all relevant commercial technology, Kumar added.

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Lavrov Says OIC Ambassadors Are Resolute in Official Decision for Palestinian State

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) - Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday that the Permanent Ambassadors representing the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

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are resolute in their intention for an official decision regarding the creation of a Palestinian state

"They're [The Permanent ambassadors representatives of the organisation for Islamic Cooperation] very resolute in their intention that an official decision should be made about the creation of a Palestinian state. And negotiations should be accompanied by neutral and effective mediators," Lavrov said during a press briefing.

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

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

Russia has repeatedly called on both parties to stop hostilities, stating that the two-state solution approved by the UN Security Council, which provides for the creation of an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with its capital in East Jerusalem, is the only way to end the conflict.

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US Military Buildup in Middle East Costs $1.6Bln Since Hamas' Attacks on Israel - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The US military buildup in the Middle East since Hamas began attacking Israel on October 7 will cost $1.6 billion, Politico reported on Wednesday, citing two officials.

The Biden administration would be unable to pay because lawmakers have not approved a budget despite the Defense Department having sent the cost estimates to Congress, the report said.

The estimate includes the cost of sending additional warships, fighter jets and equipment, but it does not include the missiles used in strikes on Houthi positions in Yemen and downing drones in the Red Sea, the report said.

The full price of the war and other unplanned military operations this year could reach $2.2 billion, the report said.

Since the military has no funds it would like to fill the gap by paying with a limited amount of resources at their disposal, the report said.

Lawmakers have different options to resolve the problem, including adding a relevant amount of funds to the emergency supplemental for Ukraine and Israel, the report added.

US senators and the Biden administration have been negotiating in an attempt to reach a deal to provide the White House with more than $100 billion in supplemental funds for Ukraine, Israel and other priorities, including US border security.

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Republican lawmakers have made it clear they will only support Biden's supplemental request if it includes meaningful policy changes to stop the influx of immigrants arriving illegally via the US border with Mexico.

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Crash Near Canada's Fort Smith Leaves 6 Dead, 1 Survivor – Coroner's Office

(Adds details in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) – The crash of a BAE Jetstream aircraft in the vicinity of Fort Smith in Canada's Northwest Territories (NWT) has claimed the lives of six of the people on board, with one surviving the accident, the coroner's office for the territory said on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, the Transportation Safety Board of Canada said that it was deploying a team of investigators to probe the crash. Media reported that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the Canadian Rangers and the Royal Canadian Air Force took part in search and recovery efforts.

"The NWT Coroner Service has confirmed the death of four passengers and two Northwestern Air Lease crew members who were en route from Fort Smith to the Diavik Diamond Mine. There was one survivor, who was taken to the Fort Smith Health Center and then medevaced to Stanton Territorial Hospital in Yellowknife," the coroner's office said in a statement.

All next of kin notifications were completed by the RCMP, the statement said, adding that the Coroner Service was deployed in the community and would work with local resources to conduct the recovery process.

Rio Tinto, the owner of the Diavik Diamond Mine, issued a statement saying it had been informed by the Canadian authorities about the crash and fatalities. The company extended its condolences and full support to the victims' relatives.

Rio Tinto CEO Jakob Stausholm said the company is working closely with the authorities and "will help in any way we can with their efforts to find out exactly what has happened."

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Attacks on UNRWA Facilities in Gaza's Khan Younis 'Incredibly Concerning' – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) – Reports by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) of an attack on one of its facilities housing thousands of displaced people in Khan Yunis, causing mass casualties is "incredibly concerning", State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Wednesday.

Earlier on Wednesday, UNRWA Director Thomas White wrote on X that a Training Centre sheltering tens of thousands of displaced people had been hit, setting the buildings ablaze and causing mass casualties.

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“Incredibly concerning, incredibly concerning … We deplore today's attack on the UN's Khan Younis Training Center. You've heard the Secretary [Blinken] say it before, but civilians must be protected, and the protected nature of UN facilities must be respected,” Patel said during a press briefing when pressed on the matter.

On Tuesday, Israel Defense Forces said that they managed to encircle Khan Yunis and eliminate "dozens of terrorists". On the same day, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini said that six displaced people were killed when a UN-run shelter located in the city of Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip was hit during Israeli military operations on Monday.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip while its fighters breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted. The IDF launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 25,000 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip as a result of Israeli strikes, local authorities said.

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

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Reports US Considering Withdrawing Troops From Syria 'Inaccurate' - Defense Official

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Reports that the United States is considering withdrawing troops from Syria and proposing to have Syrian Democratic Forces partner with the Syrian government to fight the Islamic State terrorist group (IS, banned in Russia) are inaccurate, a US defense official told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"No, these reports are inaccurate," the official said.

Al-Monitor reported, citing sources, that a US interagency meeting took place last week regarding a proposal to withdraw US forces from Syria and have the Syrian Kurdish forces partner with the Syrian government to fight IS.

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UN Chief Discussed Middle East, Host Country Issues With Lavrov - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik), The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres discussed the situation in the Middle East and host country issues during his bilateral meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, UN spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

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"On on the meeting with Mr. Lavrov, a lot of the focus was on the situation in the Middle East, as well as host country issues as the Russian Mission predominates in its readout," Dujarric told a briefing.

On the other hand, during his meeting with the Iranian foreign minister, he was more focused on the escalation in the region, he added.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov came to New York to participate in two UN Security Council meetings: one on Ukraine and the second one on Gaza.

The meeting on Gaza was organized by the French mission to the UN as part of its monthly presidency. The meeting was of a ministerial level and many ministers came to New York to participate.

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Aggressors in Red Sea Pillage While Lying Their Actions Constitute Self-Defense - Lavrov

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in a press briefing on Wednesday that those who are carrying out an illegal aggression in the Red Sea are lying that it is done in self-defense in accordance with the UN Charter, when they are actually engaged in pillaging.

"There is an aggression taking place in the Red Sea, a direct illegal aggression in violation of all principles of international law," Lavrov said. "The organizers of this aggression are lying when they are saying that this is self-defense in accordance with the UN Charter."

Lavrov noted that the Russian mission in the United Nations has distributed a document providing all the arguments used by the United States and the United Kingdom, which shows they are engaged in pillaging rather than self-defense.

Members of Yemen's Ansar Allah movement, popularly known as Houths, vowed in November to attack any ships associated with Israel until that country halts military actions in the Gaza Strip.

The Houthis actions led US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to announce the creation of a multinational operation to secure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. The United States and the United Kingdom later launched repeated strikes against Houthi positions in a bid to degrade their ability to target commercial vessels.

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Lavrov Says Inclined to Believe in Reason, in 'Reasonableness of US Leadership'

(Updates with more details in paras 3, 4)

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Russia is inclined to believe in the "reasonableness of the US leadership," Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday.

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"I'm inclined to believe in reason, in the reasonableness of the US leadership," Lavrov said in response to a question about whether the Western leaders' allegation of an expected Russian attack on NATO within the next five years is intended to prepare their populations for a possible all-out war with Russia.

Lavrov said he sees the United States' moves as an attempt to achieve their short-term objectives such as the allocation and dispersal of additional funds to Ukraine.

In addition, Lavrov said he is doubtful that Ukraine will agree to any kind of proposed settlement despite former US President Donald Trump's assurances that he would resolve the Ukraine conflict soon after reclaiming the presidency in the 2024 election.

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Lavrov Says Russian Embassy in Kabul Functions, Moscow in Contact With Taliban

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in a press briefing on Wednesday that the Russian embassy in Afghanistan continues to operate and that Moscow is in contact with the Taliban, although does it not officially recognize the group.

"We've never evacuated our embassy in Kabul, it continues to function," Lavrov said in New York. "We keep in touch with the Taliban. They are people who have the real power in the country, but we as the rest of the UN members do not officially recognize Taliban."

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

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UN Ready to Provide Briefer For UNSC Meeting on Downed IL-76 if Requested- Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik)- The United Nations Secretariat is ready to find a briefer for the Russia-requested UN Security Council meeting on downed IL-76 if asked to do so, UN spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"If we are asked to provide a briefer, we will as we always do," Dujarric told a briefing. "As for the International Civil Aviation Organization [ICAO], it will be up to the member states of the ICAO and the Secretary of the ICAO to it invoke itself or not."

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US State Dept. Encourages Russia, Ukraine to Establish Facts Surrounding Il-76 Plane Crash

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The US State Department encourages both Russian and Ukrainian authorities to conduct their own investigations to establish facts surrounding the crash of an Il-76 plane in Russia's Belgorord region, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Wednesday.

"I would just encourage both Russian and Ukrainian authorities to undertake their own respective investigation to establish facts," Patel said during a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, the Russian Defense Ministry said that an Il-76 transport plane of the Russian air force with 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war being transported for exchange, six crew members and three accompanying persons crashed in the Belgorod Region. The Russian Foreign Ministry called the crash a deliberate attack by Ukraine.

The Russian Defense Ministry said that the plane was destroyed by Ukrainian missiles launched from the Kharkiv region.

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US Not Ready for Great Power Competition But for Counterinsurgency Warfare - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The US military is not ready for a great power competition but it is prepared for counterinsurgency warfare, US Defense Department Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs Richard Moore Jr. said on Wednesday.

"We're ready not for great power competition, but for counterinsurgency warfare," Moore said during a discussion hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Moore noted that the United States was ready for great power competition with Russia at the time of Operation Desert Storm in the 1990s.

The Defense Department recently outlined challenges in the US defense industrial complex that impede the United States' production capability of military equipment.

US officials have also previously expressed concern about China modernizing its military and especially about the size of its naval force.

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Lavrov Says Inclined to Believe in Reason, in 'Reasonableness of US Leadership'

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Russia is inclined to believe in the "reasonableness of US leadership," Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday.

"Im inclined to believe in reason, in the reasonableness of the US leadership," Lavrov said in response to a question about whether the Western leaders' allegation of an expected Russian attack on NATO within the next five years are intended to prepare their populations for a

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possible all-out war with Russia.

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Russia Doubtful Ukraine to Agree to 'Any Kind of Settlement' Despite Trump Claims - Lavrov

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) - Russia is doubtful that Ukraine will agree to any kind of proposed settlement despite former US President Donald Trump's assurances that he would resolve the Ukraine conflict, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday.
"I doubt that the Ukrainians will be prepared to agree to any kind of settlement," Lavrov said.
Trump has repeatedly said that he his intention is to resolve the ongoing conflict in Ukraine shortly after securing the presidency in the 2024 election.

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Crash Near Canada's N.W.T Fort Smith Leaves Six Dead, One Survivor – Coroner's Office

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) – Six people died and only one survived the crash of a BAE Jetstream aircraft in the vicinity of Fort Smith, in Canada's Northwest Territories (N.W.T) the coroner's office for the territory said on Wednesday.
On Tuesday, the Transportation Safety Board of Canada said that it was deploying a team of investigators to investigate a plane crash in the N.W.T. Media further reported that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Canadian Rangers and the Royal Canadian Airforce took part in search and recovery efforts.
"The NWT Coroner Service has confirmed the death of four passengers and two Northwestern Air Lease crew members who were en route from Fort Smith to the Diavik Diamond Mine. There was one survivor, who was taken to the Fort Smith Health Center and then medevaced to Stanton Territorial Hospital in Yellowknife," the Coroner's statement said.

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Lavrov Says Necessary to Rebuild Palestinian Unity

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in a press briefing on Wednesday that is is imperative to rebuild Palestinian unity.
"It seems absolutely necessary to make an effort to rebuild Palestinian unity for all Palestinian factions and all those who are working with them from abroad for them to get together and announce rebuilding of Palestinian unity as an important foundation for a future Palestinian

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state," Lavrov said after his visit to New York.

Lavrov went on to say that without that, no mechanisms that are currently being discussed will be viable.

In December, Lavrov told Sputnik that Russia urges Palestinian movements to unite on the platform of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and regularly warns them of the danger of division.

One of the roadblocks to the Palestinian-Israeli dialogue is the lack of unity among Palestinian movements, Lavrov said, adding that Moscow communicates to their representatives "the danger of division for the prospects of Palestinian statehood."

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Lavrov Says Russia Responded to US Proposal on New START in January, Has Nothing to Add

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday that Moscow responded last month to Washington's proposal on the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and has nothing to add to the response.

"We did respond in January. We expanded on our position. We don't have anything to say at this point ," Lavrov said after his visit to New York.

Last week, National Security Council Senior Director for Arms Control, Disarmament and Nonproliferation Pranay Vaddi said the United States has not received meaningful feedback from Russia with regard to its latest proposal on arms control.

Vaddi said the point of the proposal presented to Russia in September was to re-initiate talks on arms control.

Earlier this week, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said it is premature to say whether Russia will comply with the New START restrictions after the treaty expires in 2026.

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US to Make All Trades to Fund Sentinel ICBM Program After Sharp Surge in Cost – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) – The United States will find extra funds to continue the Sentinel Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) program and is ready to make all necessary trades for this as it remains a key element of the US nuclear posture, Lt. Gen. Richard G. Moore, Jr., the Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs, said on Wednesday.

"Sentinel will be funded. We will make the trades that it takes to make that happen," Moore said during a discussion hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). "It is funded now, and that's not going to change."

Moore noted that extending the program instead of making trades to find the money to fund the Sentinel program is not a viable option in the current world environment.

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On Tuesday, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said that the US Department of Defense notified Congress that the Sentinel program had significantly exceeded initial cost projections and requires new funding to continue. He added that the Pentagon initiated its own “robust review” to determine what caused the significant increase in the program cost.

Bloomberg reported last week that the program to replace the Minuteman III missiles is estimated to cost nearly $131.5 billion or 37% more than the original cost.

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 said.

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 report added.

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Russia Not Worried Whether International Community Believes Ukraine Downed IL-76 - Lavrov

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) - Russia is not worried about whether Western countries believe that Ukrainian forces downed an Il-76 transport plane carrying 65 prisoners of war, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said at the United Nations on Wednesday.

"I have no concern about the international community not believing us, as I've already mentioned the international community, through Western representatives and media outlets, has already proven the fact that its position is highly discredited," Lavrov said during a UN press briefing.

Earlier in the day, the Russian Defense Ministry said that an Il-76 transport plane of the Russian air forces with 65 Ukrainian prisoners who were being transported for exchange, six crew members and three accompanying persons crashed in Belgorod region.

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US Senate Panel Advanced Bill to Authorize Transfer of Russian Funds to Ukraine - Risch

(Update: edits headline, attribution, lede; adds quote in para 2, changes throughout)

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee advanced a bill to authorize the transfer of seized Russian assets to Ukraine, Ranking Member Jim Risch said on Wednesday.

“Today’s committee passage of my REPO Act was long-overdue,” Risch said in a statement. “Russia should pay to rebuild Ukraine, and U.S. leadership is essential to spur action.”

The panel advanced the bill, dubbed the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity (REPO) for Ukrainians Act, in a vote of 20-1, Bloomberg reported. US Senator Rand Paul opposed advancing the bill, the report said.

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The legislation also requires the Biden administration to work with allies and partners to take similar actions, Risch's statement said.

The US House Foreign Affairs Committee advanced their version of the bill in November. Earlier this month, the White House also reportedly backed the legislation.

Moscow has maintained that any attempt to confiscate its frozen assets would violate international law. The Russian Foreign Ministry has dismissed the freezing of Russian assets as theft.

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Israel-Hamas Proposals Distract Attention From Establishing Immediate Ceasefire - Lavrov

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Proposals between Hamas and the Israeli government to reach a ceasefire only distract attention from the "essence of the problem," which is to actually establish an immediate ceasefire, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"This is a trade that is ongoing and it distracts attention from the essence of the problem," Lavrov said after his visit to New York. "The substance needs to be an immediate ceasefire."

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US Mideast Envoy McGurk in Doha for Talks on Reaching Another Gaza Hostage Deal - Kirby

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US Middle East Envoy Brett McGurk is in Doha today for talks about the possibility of reaching another humanitarian pause in the Gaza Strip to free hostages, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"Brett McGurk is in the region as we speak. In fact, he's in Doha today, having discussions with our Qatari counterparts about the possibilities of another hostage deal," Kirby said during a press briefing.

On Tuesday, Kirby said the United States has been engaged in "sober and serious" discussions to facilitate another hostage deal between Israel and Hamas.

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Canadian Federal Commission Says to Probe India's Alleged Election Meddling

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) – Canada's Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference will look into the purported interference by India in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections and has asked the Canadian government to produce documents related to the allegation.

The request comes after media reported that the Canadian Security Intelligence Service had

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allegedly launched an investigation into a Southwestern Ontario Conservative nomination vote whose outcome could potentially be tied to Indian meddling.

"Interference Commission has requested that the Government of Canada's collection and production of document relating to paragraphs clause (a)(i)(A) and (a)(i)(B) of its Terms of Reference include information and documents relating to alleged interference by India related to the 2019 and 2021 elections," the inquiry said in a statement.

In September, Canada announced the establishment of a Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions. It is mandated to examine and assess "interference" by China, Russia and other foreign states or nonstate actors. Both Beijing and Moscow dismiss Ottawa's claim.

The inquiry is also tasked with looking into the potential impacts the alleged interference may have had on the integrity of Canada's federal and district level elections.

Quebec Court of Appeal Justice judge Marie-Josee Hogue, charged with leading the inquiry, is set to deliver a first interim report by May 3 and a definitive assessment by December 31.

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White House Says US Navy Shot Down 2 Houthi Missiles Fired at Merchant Vessels in Red Sea

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - A US Navy warship shot down two Houthi missiles fired at two commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"There were three Houthi missiles fired at two merchant vessels and in the Southern Red Sea, one missile missed by something like 200 kilometers. The other two were shut down by a US Navy destroyer," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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US Not in Position to Confirm Reports on Russian IL-76 Airplane Crash - White House

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The White House is not in a position to confirm the reports of the IL-76 Russian military transport airplane crash and is working to get more information regarding the circumstances of its downing, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We've seen the reports, but we're not in a position to confirm them. We're obviously doing the best we can to try to get more clarity and more information on it," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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

Russia Calls Ukraine's ICJ Genocide Case 'Extremely Politicized' – Lavrov

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) – Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Wednesday that Ukraine's genocide case against Russia at the International Court of Justice will be "extremely politicized."

"Ukraine is accusing Russia of violating the Genocide Convention. It has also applied to the International Court of Justice. About 40 Western countries in the violation of all precedent are on the side of Ukraine. This process will be extremely politicized. There is no doubt about it," Lavrov said in translated remarks at a press conference.

He added that the court "always enjoyed a very high standing and we hope that you will follow the letter of the international law, including the international humanitarian law."

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Lavrov on Downing of Il-76 Airplane: Russia Trying to 'Find Out Facts Right Now'

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Russia is trying to establish the facts about the downing of the Ilyshin-76 transport aircraft in the Belgorod region and the reasons behind Ukraine undertaking this criminal act, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"As for the question about the downed military transportation aircraft Il-76 and about the reasons behind the Ukrainian criminal act, we are trying to find out the facts right now " Lavrov said after his visit to New York.

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Russia Calls for Emergency UN Security Council Session on Ukraine POW Plane Crash - Lavrov

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Wednesday called for an emergency session at UN Security Council on the downing of the country's military airplane carrying 65 Ukrainian soldiers to a prisoner exchange.

"We do not want to repeat the situation of April 2022, when after the staging of Bucha, where the bodies of people were shown and we still cannot get their names… the British chairmanship that was at the helm of the Security Council in April denied calling such a session for 72 hours. I hope that our French colleague will not follow the same path and will call an emergency session as we have asked today at 3:00 p.m." Lavrov said.

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US Senate Panel Advances Bill to Authorize Transfer of Russian Funds to Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee advanced a bill to authorize the transfer of seized Russian assets to Ukraine, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday.

The panel advanced the bill, dubbed the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity (REPO) for Ukrainians Act, in a vote of 20-1, the report said. US Senator Rand Paul opposed advancing the bill, the report said.

The legislation also requires the Biden administration to certify to lawmakers that the United States coordinated with Group of Seven (G7) partners on the measure, the report said.

The US House Foreign Affairs Committee advanced their version of the bill in November. Earlier this month, the White House also reportedly backed the legislation.

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US Senator Says Pushing Measure to Require Time to Debate, Amend Supplemental Funding Bill

(Updates with more details in para 6; modifies headline)

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US Senator Mike Lee said in a statement that he is pushing a resolution to require time for the Senate to debate and amend a supplemental funding bill that includes border security measures as well as aid for Ukraine and Israel.

"Tomorrow, I will offer this resolution at the Senate GOP conference meeting: 'Resolved, the Senate Republican conference will oppose cloture on any supplemental spending bill containing border provisions without adequate time to review and offer and vote on floor amendments,'" Lee said via X on Tuesday.

The move threatens to extend a months-long stalemate over the bill; senators invoke cloture to limit debate and move to consideration of legislation on the Senate floor. Invoking cloture requires the support of at least 60 senators.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has called on his fellow Republicans to pass the supplemental bill as quickly as possible.

However, some Senate and House Republicans are insisting on the inclusion of stronger border security measures in the bill to address an increase in migration at the southern border, in exchange for their support on President Joe Biden's supplemental funding request. The initial version of the supplemental request included tens of billions of dollars in aid for Ukraine. Lawmakers continue to negotiate to reach a deal on the legislation.

The resolution to require time to publicly debate the supplemental funding bill and attached border security measures is cosponsored by nearly a dozen Republican members of the Senate, including J.D. Vance, Rand Paul, Marco Rubio, Rick Scott, and Ron Johnson, Lee said

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on Wednesday in an update to his earlier statement.

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US House Homeland Security Committee Schedules Markup Session on Mayorkas Impeachment

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) – The US House Committee on Homeland Security announced on Wednesday a markup session on January 30 to discuss articles of impeachment against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, according to a release.

"The House Committee on Homeland Security will convene on Tuesday, January 30, 2024, at 10:00 AM ET, to mark up articles of impeachment against Alejandro N. Mayorkas, Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), for high crimes and misdemeanors," the release stated.

Chairman Mark Green said that the committee's five-phase investigation indicated that Mayorkas' "abuse of power and refusal to comply with the law" greatly exacerbated the migrant crisis on the US-Mexico border.

The White House and Democrats have condemned the Republican impeachment efforts against Mayorkas as a political attack.

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US Crude Oil Stocks Shrink by 9.2Mln Barrels, Production by 1Mln Barrels on Week - EIA

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US crude oil inventories continued to decline in the week ending on January 19 and shrank by about 9.2 million barrels while crude production fell by 1 million barrels per day to 12.3 million, according to a new weekly data summary published by the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) on Wednesday.

Total US crude oil reserves (excluding the Strategic Petroleum Reserve) were at 420.7 million barrels, about 5% below the five-year average for this week, while total motor gasoline stocks jumped by 4.0 million barrels from the week before, the data showed.

Stockpiles of distillates, primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses, and ships, and also as airline fuel, lost 1.4 million barrels after a 2.370 million barrels gain the prior week, the summary said.

Propane/propylene inventories also decreased by 8.4 million barrels from last week, but were 4% above the five-year average for this time of year, the data showed.

There are 356.51 million barrels of crude oil in the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve, or 4% less than a year ago, according to the data.

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Venezuelan Foreign Minister Rejects US Warning Over Recent Arrests

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Venezuelan Foreign Minister Yvan Gil on Wednesday rejected what he called a "cynical" statement by the US Department of State with regard to recent arrests made in the Bolivarian republic and stated that they were part of anti-terrorist operations.

On Tuesday, the State Department warned that the arrest orders and detentions against 33 Venezuelans who it said included "members of the democratic opposition" and journalists, could imperil a partial sanctions relief deal reached with Washington last year. Under the deal, the US eased certain sanctions on Venezuela's oil industry in exchange for Caracas holding a competitive, internationally monitored presidential election in 2024 and releasing so-called political prisoners.

"The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela categorically rejects the cynical statement by the State Department in relation to the recent deactivation of terrorist operations that sought to destabilize the country, and sow violent acts," Gil said on X.

The US government has lost its moral compass, the Venezuelan government said in a statement attached by Gil. It pointed out that while the US condemns Caracas for acting in line with its constitution with the aim of preserving peace, it also proceeds to detain protesters seeking an end to the "genocide" in Gaza.

Given that, Venezuela is not surprised that Washington advocates for "those behind the foiled terrorist operations in Venezuela," the statement continued.

"Defending those destabilizing actions incites violence and attempts against the normal development of the 2024 electoral process," the statement added.

On Monday, Venezuelan Prosecutor General Tarek William Saab said that the country's security forces had thwarted preparations for five terrorist attacks and conspiracies, with 27 people detained in the case. The detainees are alleged to have recruited Venezuelan military personnel and planned, in coordination with US authorities, assassination attempts on President Nicolas Maduro, Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez and Tachira governor Freddy Bernal.

Padrino has alleged that US oil giant Exxon Mobil sponsored preparations for the 2023 foiled assassination attempts on Maduro with the aim of exploiting the rich resources of the disputed Essequibo region.

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Humanitarian Coordinator Says Gaza Aid Convoys Face 25%-30% Success Rate -UN Briefing

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UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) - Humanitarian Coordinator ad interim for the Occupied Palestinian Territory James McGoldrick said on Tuesday there is a 25%-30% success rate for aid convoys attempting to enter Gaza.

"We're getting a success rate about 25% - 30% of convoys to get through," McGoldrick said during a press briefing.

The remarks were in response to a reporter's question regarding reports of a couple of dozen Israelis blocking one of the UN aid convoys attempting to enter Gaza.

On October 7, the Gaza Strip-controlling Hamas movement launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel and breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. At least 25,700 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip as a result of Israeli strikes, local authorities said.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the prisoners and hostages, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The ceasefire was extended several times and expired on December 1. More than 100 hostages are still believed to be held by Hamas in Gaza.

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Boeing CEO Calhoun Says Briefing US Lawmakers on Issues Regarding 737 MAX 9 Aircraft

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Boeing CEO Dave Calhoun told reporters on Wednesday he is on Capitol Hill to brief lawmakers on the latest safety issues regarding the 737 MAX 9 aircraft.

"We don't send planes in the air that we don't have 100% confidence in," Calhoun said. "I'm here today in the spirit of transparency to... share everything I can with our Capitol Hill interest and answer all their questions because they have a lot of them."

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ordered all 171 Boeing 737 MAX 9 airplanes in the United States grounded, following an incident with the aircraft this month. The FAA is requiring that all aircraft go through rigorous inspections to address the issue.

On January 5, Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 with 171 passengers and six crew members on board made an emergency landing in Oregon after a part of the fuselage, including one window, detached midair. No injuries were reported at the time, but several days later, some passengers filed a lawsuit against Boeing, demanding compensation for the physical and emotional harm.

This is the second incident involving the 737 MAX aircraft recently. In late December 2023, Boeing asked operators to inspect its 737 MAX airplanes for a "possible loose bolt" that is part of the rudder control system after discovering a bolt with a missing nut during routine maintenance.

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UN Chief Says Africa 'Bursting With Potential' to Tackle 21 Century Challenges

UNITED NATIONS, January 24 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday that the African continent is "bursting with potential" that can be used to address the challenges of the 21st century.

"Africa, to me, is the home of hope - a continent bursting with potential, ready to take on the challenges of the 21st century," Guterres said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

That potential, however, can only become reality if terrorism across Africa is vanquished, Guterres added.

The United Nations organizes conferences on Africa throughout the year and they mostly focus on humanitarian issues, terrorism and political peace-building.

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US Senator Urges Colleagues to Reject New Ukraine Aid, Says 'Corruption Out of Control'

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - US Senator JD Vance on Wednesday urged his Republican colleagues to reject any further aid to Ukraine after a recent Pentagon report documented failures to effectively monitor more than $1 billion worth of weapons shipped to the country

"We simply have no idea where a lot of our money to Ukraine has gone. The corruption is out of control. One more reason to reject further aid.

Vance on Wednesday sent a memo to his Republican colleagues warning of "systemic failures" in tracking US aid to Ukraine and urging them to reject any new assistance for Kiev.

"Claims of radical transparency and tracking of US weapons in Ukraine are simply not accurate," Vance said in the memo, which was first reported by Fox News.

In the memo, Vance also rejected assertions that there is no evidence of any illicit transfers of weapons provided to Ukraine, saying that a recent report from the Pentagon's Inspector General warned that the US does not have adequate mechanisms in place "to determine whether weapons have fallen into the wrong hands."

The report from the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, published in January, said the Pentagon failed to properly track more than $1 billion in weapons sent to Ukraine, and it remains unclear whether any arms were diverted.

Vance's memo comes ahead of a closed-door Republican meeting on Ukraine this afternoon during which lawmakers are set to discuss additional aid to Ukraine.

Republicans in Congress have been pressing President Joe Biden to improve oversight of billions worth of weapons that his administration gave to Kiev as the White House struggles to get Congress to approve more funding for Ukraine, which has currently run out.

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US Senators and Biden administration officials have been negotiating for weeks to reach a deal to provide the White House with more than $100 billion in supplemental funds for Ukraine, Israel, and other priorities, including US border security.

Republican lawmakers have made it clear they will only support Biden's supplemental request if it includes meaningful policy changes to stop the influx of migrants arriving at the US southern border.

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Bank of Canada Maintains Policy Rate at 5%, Remains Concerned by Inflation

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) – The Bank of Canada on Wednesday maintained its policy rate at 5% but said that it remains concerned about underlying inflation and ready to adjust upwards if necessary.

"The Bank of Canada today held its target for the overnight rate at 5%, with the Bank Rate at 5¼% and the deposit rate at 5%. The Bank is continuing its policy of quantitative tightening," the central bank said in a statement.

The announcement comes after the bank's Governing Council decided to hold the key rate at 5% and continue to normalize the bank's balance sheet, the statement said. The council, however, remains concerned about risks to the outlook for inflation, such as the persistence in underlying inflation.

The bank added that that CPI inflation is expected to remain close to 3% during the first half of the year before gradually returning to 2% in 2025. Housing costs remain the main contributor to the current "above target" 3.4% inflation.

The Bank also said that the Canadian economy has been stalled since mid-2023 and GDP growth is expected to remain close to zero through the first quarter of 2024. The central bank forecasts GDP growth of 0.8% this year, and 2.4% in 2025.

The next policy rate announcement is scheduled for March 6.

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UPDATE - Israeli Attack on Khan Younis Shelter Kills 9, Injures 75 - UNRWA

(Updates with more information throughout text; modifies headline)

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Israel's attack on a facility in southern Gaza housing about 800 displaced persons killed nine people and injured 75 others, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) announced in a statement on Wednesday.

"Update - attack on Khan Younis Training Center this afternoon. Two tank rounds hit building that shelters 800 people. Reports now nine dead and 75 injured. UNRWA and WHO team trying to reach the center agreed upon route with Israeli army, blocked with earth bank," UNRWA

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Director in Gaza Thomas White said in the statement.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Israeli military said that it had managed to encircle the city of Khan Yunis in southern Gaza.

UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini also announced that six displaced people were killed in a separate Israeli attack on Monday on yet another United Nations-run shelter in Khan Yunis.

More than 26,000 Palestinians have been killed during Israel's bombardments and invasion of Gaza since October 7 and well over 60,000 have been injured.

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Pentagon Tells Sputnik Has Nothing to Offer on Il-76 Plane Crash, Refers to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Defense has nothing to share on the Il-76 plane crash in Russia's Belgorod region and refers all inquiries to Ukraine, a Pentagon spokesman told Sputnik on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, the Russian Defense Ministry said that an Il-76 transport plane of the Russian air force carrying 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war, who were being transported for exchange; six crew members; and three accompanying persons crashed in the Belgorod region. The ministry said that the Ukrainian forces downed the plane.

"I don't have anything to offer on this, unfortunately, and refer you to Ukraine's [Ministry of Defense] to speak about their operations," the spokesman said in a statement.

He added that the Pentagon also is not aware of any planned POW swaps between Russia and Ukraine.

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