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1/26/24 Friday

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US NSA Purchasing Web Browser Data Without Warrant - Letter

Amid rising concerns that foreign governments may be purchasing the personal data of citizens, this recent disclosure is the latest evidence of the US government doing such.

The US National Security Agency is buying Americans' internet browning information from commercial brokers without a warrant, according to a letter between US Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) and the Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines.

Wyden, who made the letter from Thursday public, called for US intelligence officials to cease purchasing Americans' data unless it has been obtained in a "lawful manner".

"As you know, U.S. intelligence agencies are purchasing personal data about Americans that would require a court order if the government demanded it from communications companies," writes Wyden.

"Such location data is collected from Americans smartphones by app developers, sold to data brokers, resold to defense contractors, and then resold again to the government. In addition; the National Security Agency (NSA) is buying Americans' domestic internet metadata," he continues.

He added that "until recently, the data broker industry and the intelligence community's (IC) purchase of data from these shady companies has existed in a legal gray area". And that app and advertising companies did not disclose their sale and sharing of personal data with brokers nor did they "obtain informed consent".

"The secrecy around data purchases was amplified because intelligence agencies have sought to keep the American people in the dark. It took me nearly three years to clear the public release of information revealing the NSA's purchase of domestic internet metadata," the senator emphasized.

The senator then points out that the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) brought an action against the data broker X-Mod Social earlier this month. Wyden says that lawyers for the company admitted that they were selling data collected from phones in the US to "US military customers, via defense contractors".

The FTC then emphasized that the sales of location data is dangerous as it can be used to track people to "sensitive locations, including medical facilities, places of religious worship, places that may be used to infer an LGBTQ+ identification, domestic abuse shelters, and welfare and homeless shelters". They add that consumers should be made aware that their data is being sold to "government contractors for national security purposes".

Under Secretary of Defense Ronald S. Moultrie defended the methods of government data collecting in a separate letter released by Wyden.

"I am not aware of any requirement in U.S. law or judicial opinion… that DOD obtain a court order in order to acquire, access or use information, such as CAI, that is equally available for

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purchase to foreign adversaries, U.S. companies and private persons as it is to the U.S. government," he wrote.

Army General Paul M. Nakasone, the director of the NSA, also justified the agency's actions by explaining that the NSA acquires "commercially available information" but that those acquisitions are limited. Adding that they don't include location data from phones "known to be used in the US", and that the "non-content" data they do buy is located abroad and is critical for the US Defense Industrial base, according to a separate letter.

"NSA understands and greatly values the congressional and public trust it has been granted to carry out its critical foreign intelligence and cybersecurity missions on behalf of the American people," Gen. Nakasone wrote.

In the end of his letter, Wyden wrote that the US government should not be "funding and legitimizing shady industry whose flagrant violations of Americans' privacy are not just unethical, but illegal". He then requested that Haines direct each IC element to take on a list of actions he outlined, including taking an inventory of the information they have already collected and to discard any information that does not meet consent laws.

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Biden Administration Has the 'Upper Hand' in Ongoing Border Dispute - Attorney

In the ongoing border control debacle between Texas and the White House, the federal government has the "upper hand", said Jonathan Turley, a George Washington University law professor.

Turley's comments follow a decision made last month in which a federal appeals court issued a temporary order limiting the Biden administration's authority to remove barbed wire along the US-Mexico border. However, on Monday SCOTUS ruled against that decision.

"I don't think anyone can honestly look at the southern border and say that the federal government has fulfilled its pledge. This is an unprecedented crisis brought about, I believe, by President Biden's policies," said Turley, who spoke to an American conservative news channel on Friday.

"The problem is that federal courts are unlikely to agree that this is the invasion referenced in the Constitution. There's also a reference to imminent danger. And certainly looking at hundreds of thousands of people crossing and effectively open border presents an imminent danger. But the courts are likely to define that in the context of that provision, in the context of an invasion by it, as with a foreign state. So I think Texas is going to have a hard time making that constitutional argument in court," the law professor continued.

"I think that many judges would be sympathetic to Texas, that they have a right to do something. They're being overwhelmed," he continued. " And so the idea of the federal government removing barriers, at this time is really otherworldly. But it's – you have to keep in mind on this fight, the federal government has the upper hand, legally. They tend to get a lot of deference along the border."

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Tension has continued to escalate between US President Joe Biden's administration and Texas Governor Greg Abbott. On Friday, the governor said he was "prepared" for a conflict with federal authorities over a legal dispute that was recently settled by the US Supreme Court (SCOTUS) on Monday; SCOTUS issued a temporary order allowing federal Border Patrol agents to remove border wire along the US-Mexico border.

But Abbott is determined to pursue his argument that Texas has the constitutional authority to protect its borders, and that the federal government has failed to address the amount of illegal immigrants entering the US. He recently issued a "Statement on Texas' Constitutional Right to Self-Defense" in which he emphasized the state's right to defend itself against an "invasion" of immigrants.

"The federal government has broken the compact between the United States and the States," said Abbott in a statement. "The Executive Branch of the United States has a constitutional duty to enforce federal laws protecting states, including immigration laws on the books right now. President Biden has refused to enforce those laws and has even violated them."

At least 25 GOP governors across the US have also shown their support for Abbott over the issue. And on Friday, the National Border Patrol Union said that their federal agents would not arrest Texas National Guard members for following their orders.

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Airplane-Sized Asteroid Will Fly Between Earth & Moon Over Weekend

Though asteroid 2024 BJ will fly just 220,000 miles from Earth, it poses no threat to our planet.

An airplane-sized asteroid is predicted to sail between Earth and the Moon on January 27.

Asteroid 2024 BJ was detected earlier this month, and will come within 220,000 miles (354,000 kilometers) of Earth tomorrow—about 92% of the average distance from Earth to the Moon.

The asteroid, believed to be 82 feet across (25 meters) was first detected on January 17.

According to one report, the asteroid will fly close to the moon at about 9 AM EST before it passes Earth three to four hours later, traveling at 14,200 miles per hour (22,850 km/h). It will reach its closest point to Earth at 12:30 PM EST, according to NASA. And viewing the spectacle will be available on a Virtual Telescope Project live feed at 12:15 PM EST.

Asteroid 2024 BJ is an Apollo type asteroid which are "near-earth asteroids" and make up a majority of the meteorites that occasionally fall to earth.

There are over 1,600 currently known Apollo asteroids that make up the majority of asteroids that cross Earth's orbit. These asteroids—the ones that are more than 0.6 miles (1 km) across---are potentially hazardous as a collision with Earth would be deadly. But luckily, Earth seems to be safe from any of these truly deadly asteroids for the next 1,000 years.

According to an online map, the asteroid's location at the time of this article's publication was in the constellation of Auriga—about 241,996 miles (389,456 kilometers) from Earth.

Auriga neighbors Gemini and Taurus and is visible in the northern hemisphere during the winter months. This charioteer is often depicted holding a female goat with her kits as well as the reins of a chariot. In finding Auriga, using the constellation Orion as a guide can be helpful—above

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Orion is Taurus and above that is a shape of stars that look like a pentagons which is actually Auriga.

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US Navy Reportedly Failed to Warn Veterans of Radiation Exposure

According to an NBC News report, over a 20-year period about 3,000 gallons of chemical waste leaked out of damaged storage drums and poisoned the groundwater.
For more than 20 years the US Navy has been aware of multiple environmental contaminants at one of their bases, the news agency said. One seemingly healthy veteran recently died last month after being diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia which can be caused by radiation exposure, the National Cancer Institute said.
Gilbert Wyand, the veteran, had lived and worked at the Long Beach Naval Shipyard in California in the 1980s. After Wyand's cancer diagnosis, his son found a Navy report published in June of 2023 that shows the Navy has been aware of radiation at the shipyard for at least two decades.
Initial contamination at the shipyard occurred from the 1940s to the 1960s due to workers disposing of toxic waste, according to the Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command (NAVFAC) report that Wyand's son found. Following that, between the 1960s and until 1980 about 3,000 gallons of chemical waste leaked out of damaged storage drums into the ground. That chemical waste poisoned the groundwater with high levels of dichloroethene, trichloroethylene, vinyl chloride and benzene, according to a Navy report from 2000. In 2008, Navy officials confirmed that the levels of radium and strontium far exceeded the remediation goals set for public safety.
The Navy veteran could have been exposed to radium-226 and strontium-90, which are radionuclides that have been linked to leukemia and other cancers. But Wyand and other veterans were not alerted about the potential risk of exposure because there is no system in place to notify veterans of potential exposure after a base closes, Navy spokesperson Lt. Cmdr. Joe Keiley said.
The fact that there is no outreach system in place means that tens of thousands of veterans who worked at the shipyard could have been exposed to deadly radiation and are unaware, American news report adds.
"We encourage any veteran who believes they were exposed to toxins during their military service to coordinate with their local Veterans Affairs office," the spokesperson highlighted.

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Record Number of People in US Are Homeless Amid Continuing Surge in Rent Costs - Report

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The US recently recorded an unprecedented increase in homelessness, as well as the oldest age for the median renter.

Housing costs have continued to soar in the US following the COVID-19 pandemic, and the wages in the US have not been able to keep up with those costs. As a result, the US is experiencing an unprecedented percentage of homelessness.

Rates of homelessness have increased in the US by 12% from the year 2022 to 2023, and have increased by 48% since 2015, according to a January 25 report from Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies. About 653,000 people reported experiencing homelessness in January of 2023. That is the highest single year increase for rates of homelessness in the US.

"In the first years of the pandemic, renter protections, income supports and housing assistance helped stave off a considerable rise in homelessness. However, many of these protections ended in 2022, at a time when rents were rising rapidly and increasing numbers of migrants were prohibited from working. As a result, the number of people experiencing homelessness jumped by nearly 71,000 in just one year," the report says.

Rising housing costs have contributed to the trend, as states with average housing costs have seen an accelerated growth following the COVID-19 pandemic as people fleeing overcrowded cities with high rent costs sought rural and suburban areas with lower home and rent prices—thus, ballooning the housing market.

The states of Arizona, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas have seen an increase in the number of unsheltered people in their state amid skyrocketing inflation that failed to keep up with workers' wages.

"At last measure in 2022, a record-high 22.4 million renter households spent more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities. This is an increase of 2 million households over three years and entirely offsets the modest improvements in cost-burden rates recorded between 2014 and 2019," the Harvard report says.

The Joint Center for Housing Studies found that those earning between $45,000 and $74,999 per year were hit the hardest from rising rent and were forced to—on average—spend 41% of their paycheck on rent and utilities.

"Rental markets are rapidly cooling after a period of significant overheating. Rent growth has almost completely stopped, following historically high rent increases in both 2021 and 2022," the Harvard report adds. "While the slowdown is a welcome change for renters, asking rents still remain well above pre-pandemic levels."

The median rent in the US was $1,964 in December of 2023, which is a 23% increase from before the COVID-19 pandemic. Inflation-adjusted weekly earnings for the median worker rose just 1.7% between 2019 and 2023, according to government data.

In addition, the report found that 3.9 million renter households lived in homes that did not meet "basic standards for suitability and safety" in 2021. The median age of renter-occupied homes also reached the oldest of any other recorded time in 2021 at the age of 44.

According to the Harvard report, the Biden administration has made "additional federal resources available to reduce homelessness" which includes $3.1 billion through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's Continuum of Care program. But the report adds that more affordable housing and rent subsidies will be needed to prevent further homelessness. Steve Berg, the Chief Policy Officer at the National Alliance to End Homelessness, doesn't believe politicians are doing enough to address the issue.

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"The work done by Congress just is not coming to terms with this housing problem," said Berg. "Mayors around the country are talking about this trend but then not really doing anything to make affordable housing easier to get."

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Protests 'Do Not Help': Netanyahu Wags His Finger at Families of Hostage Victims

During a press conference this week the Israeli prime minister chose not to quell the fears of those he governs, but instead criticized victims of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas.

This weekend Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu criticized the families of hostages during a press conference, telling the desperate victims that their protests were "useless and contributing to the demands of Hamas".

"I understand that it is impossible to control one's emotions" in this situation but it also "doesn't help" and only "hardens Hamas' demands and delays the results that we all want," said the prime minister.

In response, members of the Hostages and Missing Families Forum blasted the prime minister for his comments.

"We expect the prime minister to remember that he is an elected official whose job it is to correct the errors [of October 7], not scold those whose family members were kidnapped," the forum said.

"The families are meeting with world leaders, led efforts for the transfer of medicine to the hostages, brought the president of the International Criminal Court to Israel and mobilized the media and the world's most powerful influencers in support of Israel and the hostages," it added.

On October 7, Hamas took 240 hostages. During a temporary ceasefire in November, the Palestinian movement released 105 hostages from Gaza.

Netanyahu has said that he and his government are working to eliminate Hamas, and that the war between Israel and Hamas will not end until the mission is complete. In response to requests for investigations into the October 7 attack, Netanyahu has said that "investigations should be opened after the end of the war, not during its peak".

On Friday, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) made a provisional ruling that ordered Tel Aviv to prevent acts of genocide in Gaza. More than 26,000 Palestinians—mostly women and children—have been killed since the start of the war and over 64,000 have been injured, according to Palestinian health authorities. Hamas has killed around 1,200 people in Israel.

Israel's offensive has also left 85% of Gaza's population internally displaced amid shortages of food, clean water and medicine, and more than 60% of the homes there have been destroyed, according to a report from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

In response to the court's provisional ruling, Netanyahu said the court "has not made a decision to stop the war and has not forced us to end it".

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Earlier this week an audio tape of Netanyahu lambasting Qatar—which has been a key player in helping to arrange hostage releases—was leaked. Families of those held hostage by Hamas have denied leaking the audio.

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ESA Shares Detailed Photo of Mars' 'Labyrinth of Night'

The photo highlights different sections of the labyrinth including deep, interconnected canyons, sand ripples and large plateaus.
On Mars, there exists a region known as Noctis Labyrinthus or "labyrinth of night". It lies on the western edge of a system of canyons referred to as Valles Marineris, according to the European Space Agency (ESA).
In fall of 2023, the ESA first introduced a fly-over film of the labyrinth using data from their Mars Express which has been orbiting Mars since December of 2003. That same data has been used to create a large and detailed image of the labyrinth which they released this past week.
Mars' 'labyrinth of night' is filled with: massive landslides, expansive windblown sand dunes, and intersecting canyons that measure up to 30 kilometers (19 miles) wide and 6 kilometers (4 miles) deep. The whole area is also roughly 1,190 kilometers (740 miles) in length, according to the ESA, and is found between the volcanic hub of Tharsis and he western edge of Calles Marineris.
Volcanism in the region of Tharsis has seemed to haphazardly erode large chunks of the ground, though the original ground can be seen at the plateau-tops. And there are signs of hydrated salts and clay minerals in the labyrinth as well, which show that water was once present, says the ESA.
Mars Express has been providing images of the Red Planet for nearly 20 years. And it has provided evidence for researchers that MArs once had the appropriate environmental conditions to sustain life.

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Strangely Adorned Skeletons Found in 1,000-Year-Old Kiev Cemetery

The skeletons were found adorned with buckets on their feet and rings around their necks.
A 1,000-year-old cemetery—located about 50 miles south of Kiev—has revealed over 107 skeletons that were buried with rings around their necks and buckets on their feet. The mass grave is believed to be a pagan-era cemetery, and provides researchers with a better glimpse into the Dark Ages.
Unearthing the cemetery also revealed axes, swords, spears, jewelry, bracelets, beads and the remains of food offerings such as eggshells and chicken bones.

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The weapons are typical for Kievan Rus' and northeastern Europe, says researchers Vsevolod Ivakin and Vyacheslav Baranov, who led the excavation. The two presented their findings at the Archaeological Institute of America annual meeting in Chicago in early January, according to one report.

According to the researchers, the cemetery included both men and women and "most of the identified burials were deposed in wooden coffins".

While some of the men seemed to have been buried with weapons, a few of the women were found with elaborate neck rings that may have acted as a social marker. Some of the remains were also found with wooden buckets at the feet, which could have been part of funerary rituals, and has been found within burials around this region.

"Other elements, such as buckets from two Ostriv male graves, are also found at 11th-century Prussian cremation and Pomeranian and Masovian inhumation cemeteries of military elites," the researchers said.

A stone altar was also found at the site and could have been used for early Christian rituals or pagan rituals. At the time of this cemetery's use, the people in this region were undergoing a conversion to Christianity, which can be dated back to the baptism of Vladimir the Great around 987, before his marriage to Anna, the sister of the Byzantine emperor Basil II.

🏴 Brazilian police conducted raids Thursday on the country's former intelligence chief and 11 other suspects who are accused of illegally spying on ex-Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's political rivals.

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It's claimed that the former head of the Abin intelligence agency Alexandre Ramagem improperly used the Israeli surveillance software FirstMile to track the cellphone geolocation data of some 1,800 judges and politicians.

Among the alleged victims of the spying is Supreme Court justice and electoral court chief Alexandre de Moraes, who authorized the raids. The justice has been consistently embroiled in disputes with Bolsonaro and his supporters after the former president alleged electoral fraud in the 2022 elections that saw Bolsonaro removed from the presidency.

Ramagem has denied the charges while his allies claim the raids are political persecution against Ramagem, who now sits in Brazil's congress and plans to run for mayor of Rio de Janeiro in October.

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Tech mogul Elon Musk claimed it's "undeniable at this point" that US President Joe Biden favors "open borders" in the United States in a series of posts on the issue Friday.

"No laws need to be passed," wrote the Tesla CEO on his X social media platform (formerly Twitter). "All that is needed is an executive order to require proof before granting an asylum hearing."

Biden's willingness to compromise on the issue, which is highly controversial among elements of the Democratic Party's base, suggests the importance he places on continued aid to Ukraine, which he hopes to receive in exchange for a compromise on border policy.

Meanwhile former President Donald Trump and some members of the Republican Party in Congress have signaled rejection of the compromise legislation in the Senate, suggesting legislative dysfunction will continue to derail progress on an issue which is likely to feature prominently in November's presidential election.

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The United States and six Western allies announced this weekend they plan to cut funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees as mass hunger remains a growing concern in the besieged Gaza Strip.

The announcement comes after the UN-aligned International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a ruling Friday ordering Israel to take steps to prevent genocidal acts in Gaza.

The UNRWA fired 12 employees Friday after Israeli intelligence claimed to have found evidence they participated in the October 7 Hamas attacks in the country. But the timing of the accusations, released only days ago, has led to speculation Israel is attempting to shift the narrative away from the ICJ's ruling.

A recent study found that 80% of the world's population facing "catastrophic" or "famine" levels of hunger are in Gaza as Israel continues to limit the amount of aid allowed into the territory.

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A group of 43 prominent figures from throughout Israeli society have released a letter demanding the "immediate removal" of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, calling him "an existential and ongoing threat to the people and to the state of Israel."

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The missive calls the Israeli leader a “clear and present danger” to the country and claims “Israel has leaders capable of replacing him immediately.”

The letter was signed by six former Israeli military and security chiefs and three Nobel Prize winners, in addition to a number of CEOs, scientists, and former diplomats.

The statement comes amidst continuing societal upheaval in the country and the economic ramifications of Israel’s almost four month-long state of war. Last week Netanyahu voiced his opposition to the creation of a Palestinian state, a stance that may placate rightwing members of his coalition but will alienate his backers in the Biden administration.

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“We get thousands of people into our recruiting stations every year that want to join the Navy but do not have an education credential,” said the branch’s chief of personnel Vice Admiral Rick Cheeseman.

Now, the Navy will accept some of those potential recruits lacking a high school diploma or GED after announcing they’re lowering their recruitment standards. The change in policy comes as the Navy reports having trouble meeting its yearly recruiting goals. The Air Force and Army also reported falling short by thousands of recruits last year.

Recent polling shows Americans’ confidence in the country’s armed forces has reached a two decade low.

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An overnight drone strike killed 3 US troops, but there is controversy over exactly where.

US officials have claimed a rebel attack killed 3 and injured at least 30 at a small US “outpost” in northeast Jordan, but a Jordanian government spokesman said the strike was actually targeted at the large Al-Tanf US base just across the border in Syria.

The distinction is significant as the Syrian government and other countries consider the US presence in Syria to be illegal.

Sputnik takes a deep dive into the genesis of the US’ decade-long presence in Syria kicked off via the CIA’s covert Timber Sycamore program, which has cost US taxpayers over $1 billion.

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The Biden Administration may give Israel fewer weapons to convince the country to rethink its deadly military operation in Gaza, or it may give them more weapons.

That's according to a report published by the NBC News that suggests the White House is unsure about how to influence the behavior of America's largest recipient of foreign aid.

The article, citing Biden administration officials, claims the president has both considered cutting off the supply of certain weapons to punish Israel and contemplated sending more weapons as a gesture of good will. Critics suggest the reports are mere political posturing from a president who once proclaimed "the United States of America would have to invent an Israel" if it didn't already exist.

A Biden administration official contacted the author of the article after publication to stress that "there has not been a change in our policy" regarding the White House's backing of Israel.

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🐦‍⬛ Who's afraid of the Russians? Apparently former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), who alleged that Moscow is orchestrating pro-Palestine protests during an appearance on US television Sunday.

"For them [protesters] to call for a ceasefire is Mr. Putin's message, Mr. Putin's message," the 83-year-old politician warned.

"I think some financing should be investigated," she added, "and I want to ask the FBI to investigate that."

Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden was interrupted by pro-Palestine protesters 13 times at a recent campaign rally, with protestors shouting "ceasefire now" and "Genocide Joe."

Democrats have favored accusing their political opponents of ties to Russia since 2016, when members of the Hillary Clinton campaign devised the tactic as a way to explain her unanticipated loss to Donald Trump.

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Billionaire financier George Soros has pumped at least $3 million into the US state of Texas in an effort to boost Democratic Party candidates, according to new analysis in US media. The report claims the wealthy donor has contributed funds to at least five progressive groups in the state, and has funded one organization's $2.25 million in donations entirely.

Soros, who is criticized by conservatives in the United States for his liberal advocacy, has spent large sums of money to help install US-aligned political leaders in Eastern Europe.

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Ex-Brazilian President Bolsonaro's Intel Chief Raided Over Illegal Spying Claims

Bolsonaro's rhetoric praising the country's former military dictatorship raised concerns about the ex-army captain's commitment to civil liberties throughout his presidency.
Brazilian police conducted a raid on the home and offices of Alexandre Ramagem Thursday after accusations that the former intelligence chief engaged in illegal spying for controversial ex-President Jair Bolsonaro.
The investigation seeks to determine whether Ramagem improperly used surveillance software belonging to Brazil's intelligence agency (ABIN) for political gain for the ex-president and his allies.
"Federal police have identified the existence of a criminal organization set up to illegally monitor individuals and public authorities... without judicial authorization," read a statement from Brazil's Supreme Court, which authorized the police action.
"Investigations indicate a criminal group created a parallel structure within ABIN and used its tools and services for illicit acts, producing information for political and media purposes, for personal gain and to interfere in federal police investigations," read a simultaneous statement from police.
Ramagem currently represents Bolsonaro's Liberal Party in the Brazilian Congress and is running to be mayor of Rio de Janeiro in elections later this year. Eleven other suspects were targeted in addition to the former intel chief in raids conducted in Rio, the southern state of Minas Gerais, and Brazil's capital Brasilia.
The suspects are accused of improperly using the Israeli surveillance software FirstMile to track the cell phone geolocation data of hundreds of Bolsonaro's perceived enemies. Investigators allege Ramagem and others spied on some 1,800 politicians and judges, including Supreme Court justice and electoral court head Alexandre de Moraes.
De Moraes authorized the raid on Thursday; the justice has been consistently embroiled in disputes with Bolsonaro and his supporters after the former president alleged electoral fraud in the 2022 elections that saw Bolsonaro removed from the presidency.
Bolsonaro's allies have claimed the investigation and raids are an exercise in political persecution.

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"To be clear, this tool is legal within ABIN, its use is legal. It was sold to various institutions in Brazil, including at the state level. Why are we being investigated?" asked Ramagem on a Brazilian television news program.

Israeli tech companies like Cognyte, which sells the FirstMile application, are often criticized for creating invasive surveillance software that critics claim is abused by authoritarian governments to spy on activists and journalists. Currently, smartphone maker Apple is engaged in a lawsuit against the Israel-based NSO Group which produces the infamous Pegasus software. A judge recently determined Apple's lawsuit against the company can move forward in the United States.

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Elon Musk: 'Undeniable at this Point' Biden Wants Open Borders in US

Partisan rhetoric around immigration in the United States has become heated as evidence suggests the politically-charged issue will prominently feature in November's presidential election.

Tech mogul Elon Musk threw cold water on border legislation favored by US President Joe Biden late Friday as Republican opposition mounts to a proposed bipartisan Senate deal.

"No laws need to be passed," wrote the outspoken CEO of Tesla and X, formerly known as Twitter. "All that is needed is an executive order to require proof before granting an asylum hearing. That is how it used to be."

Musk also approvingly reposted commentary from venture capitalist David Sacks claiming "Biden's policy is open borders. Everything else is noise."

"That is undeniable at this point," Musk wrote in response.

Biden has proposed a compromise on border issues with congressional Republicans in recent weeks in exchange for continued military aid to Ukraine. "For too long, we all know the border's been broken," the president said in a statement released Friday. "That's why two months ago, I instructed my team to begin negotiations with a bipartisan group of Senators to seriously, and finally, address the border crisis."

Biden's willingness to compromise on the issue suggests the degree of importance he places on aid to Ukraine, which has stalled in Congress amidst increasing opposition.

"What's been negotiated would – if passed into law – be the toughest and fairest set of reforms to secure the border we've ever had in our country," Biden added.

Many Democrats have historically opposed increased immigration in the United States. "I think at a time when the middle class is shrinking, the last thing we need is to bring, over a period of years, millions of people into this country who are prepared to lower wages for American workers," progressive Senator Bernie Sanders said in 2007.

Former Democratic President Barack Obama was dubbed the "deporter-in-chief" by immigrant rights activists angered by the high number of deportations that took place during his two terms. But the issue has become intensely polarized since 2016 when former President Donald Trump unveiled controversial proposals to forcefully expel undocumented immigrants and separate

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family members at the border. Liberals claim Trump's focus on the issue is part of a nativist agenda, while conservatives increasingly allege that undocumented immigration is a national security and criminal justice issue.

Republicans have also claimed Democrats are trying to reshape the US electorate under the guise of a surge of Latino immigration to the country. Earlier this month Musk wrote that the Biden administration sees migrants as "potential Dem voters."

President Biden may be counting on continued Congressional dysfunction to derail border legislation given the issue is highly controversial with elements of the Democratic Party base. Indeed, some members of the Republican party have taken former President Trump's lead in rejecting the Senate compromise.

"A bad border deal is far worse than no border deal," wroteTrump on his Truth Social platform Saturday.

Trump's posturing seems to suggest he plans to run on the issue once again in the 2024 election. Comprehensive immigration reform in the United States has been repeatedly derailed since being proposed by former President George W. Bush in 2004. Current rhetoric on the subject suggests the issue will remain a political football with the two major parties unable to see eye-to-eye on a compromise this year.

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As Palestinians in Gaza Face Mass Famine, US & Allies Cut Funding to UN Aid Agency

The move is an apparent response to the UN-aligned International Court of Justice's verdict Friday ordering Israel to prevent genocide in the besieged Gaza Strip.

"I miss everything in Beit Lahia, the strawberries, spinach, and the traditional 'Hamis' dish," said one young Palestinian man.

"The relaxation on the couch, sitting together with the kids and wife, and eating at the table," said another, also asked what he missed most after Israel's months-long operation in Gaza turned life in the crowded territory upside down.

"My life, and food and drinks," said a young boy, perhaps 5 or 6 years old. Like the others, his eyes are sunken and his face is gaunt.

International organizations have warned for months that Gaza is on the brink of mass starvation amidst Israeli strikes on infrastructure and a tightly-enforced blockade. Now the United States and six allies are threatening one of Palestinians' last lifelines after announcing their plan to pause funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees.

The US government, which is the agency's largest donor, made the announcement Friday and was quickly joined in its decision by Canada. By Saturday the UK, Finland, Australia, Italy, and the Netherlands had followed suit.

The decision comes after the UN refugee agency fired 12 employees Friday that Israel claimed had taken part in Hamas' October 7 attack in the country. Earlier in the day the UN-aligned International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a devastating decision urging Israel to take steps to

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prevent genocide in the Gaza Strip and punish government officials who sanctioned mass killings, without directly accusing Israel of crimes against humanity.

Israel drew attention to their claims against the UNRWA, one of the largest employers in the Gaza Strip, earlier this week, suggesting they anticipated the ICJ to rule against the country in South Africa's widely-publicized genocide case. The Israeli government in general and Benjamin Netanyahu in particular have long sought to discredit the United Nations, where Arab countries have often led successful General Assembly votes criticizing Israel.

Meanwhile the United States has used its permanent seat on the UN Security Council to veto any binding decision against its Middle Eastern ally.

Israeli defense officials first presented their claims against the UNRWA in recent days, saying intelligence analysis had only confirmed the accusations in the last two weeks. A spokesperson for Israel's military also claimed the country possesses "evidence pointing to the use of UNRWA facilities for terrorist purposes."

UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini said the accusations were being investigated in a statement issued Friday that claimed any employee found to be involved in the October 7 attack would be "held accountable, including through criminal prosecution."

Israel has yet to publicly share its alleged evidence. Israeli intelligence services have been accused of fabricating claims in the past, such as when the country insisted last year that the armed group Hamas was using the al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza as a command center. Investigations since then have failed to support the Israeli claims.

An anonymous diplomat told US media Friday the UNRWA has sufficient resources to continue to function in the short term but warned the lack of funding could eventually force it to cease operations.

More than 26,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since Israel began its military campaign there last year according to the latest data from local officials. An additional 64,487 have been wounded. Women and children make up a reported 70% of the casualties in the territory.

An Israeli soldier generated outrage earlier this week with a TikTok video flaunting food rations as Palestinians in Gaza go hungry. 80% of the world's population who are currently experiencing "catastrophic" or "famine" levels of hunger are located in Gaza, according to a recent report.

The United States' abandonment of the UNRWA raises questions about whether China or other countries will fill the void in an increasingly multipolar world where Western countries rapidly lose influence and authority. Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed last year the outbreak of violence in Gaza is an example of the "failure" of US administrations to solve the long running Palestine-Israel conflict.

"I think that many will agree with me that this is a clear example of the failure of the policy of the United States in the Middle East, which tried to monopolize the settlement, but, unfortunately, was not concerned with finding compromises acceptable to both sides," said Putin in a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Al Sudani. US forces in the Middle East have come under increasing attack in recent months amidst rejection of the country's strong support for Israel.

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The End of Israel? National Leaders Say Netanyahu Is 'Existential' Threat to Country

The longtime Prime Minister has presided over a deterioration of Israel's economy and international standing amidst widespread criticism of his military campaign in Gaza.

A group of 43 prominent figures from throughout Israeli society have released a letter demanding the "immediate removal" of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"As key contributors to the country's defense and to one of the world's strongest economies over the past decades, we strongly believe that Netanyahu represents an existential and ongoing threat to the people and to the state of Israel," readthe missive, signed by six former Israeli military and security chiefs and three Nobel Prize winners, in addition to a number of CEOs, scientists, and former diplomats.

Netanyahu is a "clear and present danger" to the country read the statement, which claimed "Israel has leaders capable of replacing him immediately."

The letter was delivered to the Israeli parliament and President Isaac Herzog. Copies were also sent to US Secretary of State Antony Blinkenand National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, underscoring the importance of Israel's largest state benefactor in the country's governance.

The remarkable act of defiance comes as the economic damage of Israel's almost four-month long state of war sets in. Some 360,000 reservists, or about four percent of Israel's population, were called into military service in the days after Hamas' October 7 operation. Nearly half a million people have fled the country.

The unprecedented societal upheaval caused a labor shortage even before the Houthis' effective blockade of the Red Sea in recent weeks damaged the economy further. When Israel pulled thousands of troops from Gaza earlier this month, Israeli military spokesman Admiral Daniel Hagari admitted the government hoped to "ease the burden on the economy."

But Israeli society faced political turmoil before October 7 as demonstrators flooded the streets to protest Netanyahu's planned judicial reform package. The Israeli Supreme Court recently struck down the legislation, ruling in an 8-7 decision that the prime minister's proposal would harm "the core character of the State of Israel as a democratic country."

The letter's signers suggested Netanyahu's damage to the cohesiveness of Israeli society enabled Hamas' unprecedented attack. "Leaders of Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas openly praised what they correctly saw as a destabilizing and erosive process of Israel's stability, led by Netanyahu, and seized the opportunity to harm and damage Israel's security," they alleged.

The composition of the Israeli prime minister's political coalition has caused him considerable strain in recent months. Netanyahu was forced to include hardline figures like Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich in his cabinet in order to eke out a narrow majority in the Knesset, Israel's lawmaking body. But Biden administration officials have criticized the two lawmakers by name recently in response to their open calls to forcibly displace Palestinians from Gaza.

Netanyahu rejected calls to step down at a press conference last week, using the occasion to also reject the possibility of a Palestinian state. His posturing suggests he's keen to keep far-right members of his coalition on board, but the rejection of a two-state solution places him at odds with Biden.

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It remains to be seen how long Netanyahu can publicly rebuff the United States or to what degree President Biden might pressure the prime minister amidst significant pushback from his own base. In the meantime, observers have suggested Netanyahu has an incentive to prolong military action to secure his political fate.
If Biden is replaced by former President Donald Trump this fall, Netanyahu may find himself with greater leverage to implement the Israeli right's desired ethnic cleansing of Gaza. The outcome assumes a highly-fractured Israeli society is able to unite behind him for another ten months, a proposition that remains to be seen.

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Struggling to Meet Recruiting Goals, US Navy Says High School Diploma No Longer Needed

The Navy was one of three branches of the US armed forces to announce they failed to meet their recruiting target last year.
The Navy is the latest branch of the United States' armed forces to lower its recruitment standards after struggling to meet its yearly goals.
"We get thousands of people into our recruiting stations every year that want to join the Navy but do not have an education credential," said the branch's chief of personnel Vice Admiral Rick Cheeseman. "And we just turn them away."
Now the Navy will accept some of those potential recruits lacking a high school diploma or GED, assuming they're able to score 50 or above on a qualification test.
The move comes after the service previously lowered their qualification requirements in 2022, again amidst recruitment challenges. The Navy is the only branch of the US armed forces that admits applicants who score below 30 out of 100 on the qualification test. Officials say some positions, such as in maintenance or food preparation, don't require a conventional education.
The change in policy likely won't be enough to fully meet the Navy's recruiting shortfall. The branch fell 5,866 recruits short of its goal last year, while Cheeseman estimates perhaps 500 of the applicants it turned away would immediately be able to score high enough on the exam.
Still, the Navy hopes the revised policy will encourage more people to enlist, and that low-scoring applicants can eventually make the grade with proper training.
The US Air Force also reported failing to meet their recruiting goals last year, while the Army said they fell 15,000 short of their target. Only the Marine Corps and the fledgling Space Force hit their goals.
The recruitment problems come as the Biden administration recently announced talks to end the country's 20-year military presence in Iraq. Biden presided over a chaotic pullout from Afghanistan in 2021. Pollingshows Americans' confidence in the country's armed forces has reached a two decade low.

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American Base Near Syria-Jordan Border Attacked Amidst Rejection of US Role in Area

The United States has been engaged in a semi-covert regime change effort in Syria for over a decade.

A US base near the Syria-Jordan border was struck by an overnight drone attack in the latest demonstration of widespread rejection of the United States' role in the region.

The attack killed three US Army soldiers and injured more than 30, according to the latest reports from US officials Sunday.

There is dispute over whether the targeted US installation was in Jordan or Syria. US officials have claimed the attack hit Tower 22 in Jordan, which US media describes as a "small US outpost" in the northeast of the country. Meanwhile Jordanian government spokesman Muhannad al Mubaidin told a local television channel the strike was actually against the Al-Tanf base, which hosts a substantial US military presence in Syria.

The distinction is significant as the Syrian government and other countries consider the US presence in Syria to be illegal.

The instance is the first known time US troops have been killed in attacks targeting the country's presence in the Middle East since US backing of Israel provoked retaliatory strikes starting in October. US strikes are thought to have produced casualties as recently as four days ago, when the White House reported that an attack on Kataib Hezbollah likely killedseveral members of the militia.

Although the United States has never formally declared war on Syria, the country has been involved in efforts to oust President Bashar al-Assadfor more than a decade. Here, Sputnik takes a look at the controversial US role in the country, which has contributed to the death of at least half a million people.

Covert Operations

Many of the details surrounding the genesis of US presence in Syria are still shrouded in mystery. The intervention is thought to have begun in 2012 or 2013 as a classified program of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) known as Timber Sycamore. The program was launched by the agency's infamous Special Activities Center, a division that conducts secret paramilitary activity, psychological operations, and economic warfare without oversight from the US public.

Launched at a time of mass US public opposition to unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, CIA officials hoped they could topple Syria's government through the arming and training of rebel forces in the country. Ironically, many of the militants backed by the CIA had ties to ISIS*, a force the United States has ostensibly fought to defeat in the region. This led former US President Donald Trump to claim former President Barack Obama was the "founder of ISIS."

Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai has also claimed ISIS is a tool of US foreign policy, claiming he cannot distinguish between the United States and ISIS. Meanwhile Israel admitted in 2019 to arming ISIS-linked Syrian rebels in its shared desire with the US to eliminate al-Assad. Ex-US State Department official Michael Maloof has claimed US foreign policy in the Middle East is oriented around eliminating Israel's enemies in Syria, Iran, and Libya, among other countries.

Hefty Pricetag

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The CIA's Timber Sycamore program is thought to be one of the most expensive efforts in the agency's history. It's been reported that more than $1 billion in weaponry has been sent to Syrian rebels, although the exact figure is not known. Thousands of tons of arms have been shippedfrom allied US countries.

The Al-Tanf base on the Syria-Jordan border is one of at least ten that the United States operates in Syria without the approval of the country's government, which has ordered US forces to leave the country. Thousands of US troops have been stationed in the country and an unknown number of Special Operations Forces. The US military has worked to keep details of the US presence secret, and responded angrily when a Turkish news agency published a map of US installations.

US politicians have typically sold the US military presence as necessary to combat ISIS, despite the country's cooperation with ISIS-linked Islamic radicals in the country. The United States has long sought to expand its presence in the oil-rich region more broadly, to the exclusion of others. The US has criticized the presence of Russian forces in the country, who assist Syria's military at the invitation of the allied country's government.

In a rare moment of candor of the type that earns him opposition from members of the US intelligence community, former US President Donald Trump once proclaimed the United States maintains a presence in Syria "only for oil."

Legalities Be Damned

Many observers claim the American presence in Syria is contrary to US law and the so-called "rules-based order" often purportedly championed by the United States.

US Senator Rand Paul has sought to end the war, which he points out has never been declared by Congress in line with the US Constitution. The war's backers insist US presidents have the authority to oversee action in Syria based on the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) which gives the executive branch broad latitude in the so-called "War on Terror." Others say the AUMF itself is an unconstitutional abrogation of Congress's defined constitutional powers.

"The United States cannot fix Syria," said Robert Ford, Obama's former ambassador to Syria, recently. "Yet we still have 900 troops in eastern Syria for eight years, going on nine. I'm puzzled that we haven't had a national debate on what U.S. troops are doing in Syria."

"We need to have that debate about the authorization of military force," he added. "There needs to be a definition of the mission of U.S. forces. There needs to be a set of metrics to measure their success or failure."

Given that the CIA's intervention in the country may have begun without even informing the US president at the time, America's decade-long presence in Syria raises questions about the sprawling US deep state's lack of accountability.

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Biden May Give Israel Fewer Weapons to Protest Gaza Violence, or More Weapons

The White House is reportedly unsure about how to rein in Israel's military operation in the Gaza Strip, according to US officials.

US President Joe Biden has reportedly been working for weeks behind the scenes to protest Israel's bloody campaign in the Gaza Strip, although officials suggest he is unsure how to go about it.

"After weeks of private administration requests produced fewer results than the White House wants, the sources said, the U.S. is considering slowing or pausing [arms] deliveries in the hope that doing so will prod the Israelis to take action," read a report in US media Sunday. The opening of humanitarian corridors or the authorization for more aid to enter Gaza were cited as two examples of policy the Biden administration would reportedly like Israel to adopt.

Conversely, the Biden administration is also considering providing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with more weapons to convince the country to change tack.

"Administration officials have also discussed offering the Israeli government more of the weaponry it has requested as an incentive," the report read.

The confused policy demonstrates Biden's political dilemma as Israel's operation in Gaza, which has killed over 26,000, is protested by wide swaths of the American public. Younger voters and Arab-Americans, in particular, have voiced opposition to US aid to Israel in various surveys. Both demographics typically vote Democrat and are thought to be necessary for Biden to defeat former US President Donald Trump in November's presidential election.

But Biden has been a career-long strong supporter of Israel. "Were there not an Israel, the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interest in the region," he once declared from the floor of the US Senate. Biden has insisted there are "no red lines" Israel could cross that would cause the country to lose his support.

Biden's loyalty has been richly rewarded. A recent study found the US president receives more funding from the pro-Israel lobby than any other politician in the country, raking in millions of dollars over the years.

Last month, Biden used emergency powers to fast-track an arms shipment to Israel without congressional oversight, again demonstrating his firm commitment to arming the country.

Biden's apparent unwillingness so far to use material leverage against Israel has caused critics to conclude his administration's alleged attempts to pressure the country are mere political posturing.

"We have [remained committed to supporting Israel] since Oct 7, and will continue to," a Biden National Security Council spokesperson was quoted as saying. "There has not been a change in our policy."

The spokesperson reached out to the story's author after publication to ensure the comment was included, suggesting the importance the White House places on stressing its position to Israel supporters.

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Russians Under the Bed: Pelosi Says Moscow Funding Pro-Palestine Protests

The aging politician and former House leader is demanding an FBI investigation of demonstrators calling for a Gaza ceasefire, suggesting they are “connected to Russia.”
Democrats in Washington stepped up their criticism of pro-Palestine activism Sunday as former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi called for the FBI to investigate pro-Palestine organizers.
“For them [protesters] to call for a ceasefire is Mr. Putin’s message, Mr. Putin’s message,” the 83-year-old politician claimed in an interview on US television Sunday. “Make no mistake. This is directly connected to what he would like to see. Same thing with Ukraine. It’s about Putin’s message.”
“I don't think they're plants,” Pelosi added, when asked to clarify her stance. “I think some financing should be investigated. And I want to ask the FBI to investigate that.”
Activists have increasingly demonstrated against the Democratic Party’s support for Israel’s Gaza campaign in recent months, which has killed over 26,000 Palestinians. Recently, US President Joe Biden was interrupted13 times at a campaign event designed to kick off the general election season, with protestors shouting “ceasefire now” and “Genocide Joe.”
Pelosi suggested she’s intimately familiar with the efforts of pro-Palestine protesters, noting, “they're in front of my house all the time.”
Pelosi has played a key role in gatekeeping criticism of Israel within the Democratic Party. The powerful politician was one of a number of Democrats who pressured Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) to apologize after Omar criticized the influence of the pro-Israel lobby in Washington, taking to the floor of the House to slam the representative.
Omar is one of only three Muslims currently sitting in US Congress. She reported receiving harassment and death threats after the unprecedented display of hostility from within her own party.
Democrats have increasingly favored accusing their political opponents of ties to Russia since 2016, when members of the Hillary Clinton campaign devised the tactic as a way to distract from the candidate’s unanticipated loss to Donald Trump in that year’s presidential election.
“Within 24 hours of her [Clinton’s] concession speech, [Campaign manager Robby] Mook and [John] Podesta assembled her communications team at the Brooklyn headquarters to engineer the case that the election wasn’t entirely on the up-and-up,” according to an account by journalists Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes.
“For a couple of hours, with Shake Shack containers littering the room, they went over the script they would pitch to the press and the public. Already, Russian hacking was the centerpiece of the argument.”
Senator Bernie Sanders has also engaged in the McCarthy-esque argument. “Who’s paying you?” the Vermont politician who aligns with the Democratic Party angrily asked when confronted by a former campaign chief over his vote to arm Ukrainian neo-Nazis.
In 2016 Democrats installed noise machines to drown out the chants of dissenting delegates at the party’s Democratic National Convention.
Nancy Pelosi’s reported net worth stands at over $114 million. The elite politician’s wealth has increased dramatically during her time in Washington, with many observers accusing her and other high-profile lawmakers of engaging in insider trading informed by her privileged position in Congress.

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Regime Change String-Puller George Soros Sets Sights on Texas

Wealthy donors are able to pump large amounts of money into electoral politics in the United States since a 2010 Supreme Court decision overturned decades-old campaign finance regulation.

Billionaire financier George Soros has pumped at least $3 million into the US state of Texas in an effort to boost Democratic Party candidates, according to new analysis in US media.

The report claims the wealthy donor has contributed funds to at least five progressive groups in the state, including an organization known as Texas Majority PAC. The group, run by staffers from former Democratic gubernatorial candidate Beto O'Rourke's campaign, reportedly amassed almost $2.25 million in donations last year.

Analysis reveals the entirety of the funding so far has originated from Soros. The donor contributed $1.4 million to the group directly and $850,000 from his Democracy PAC II fund.

Although traditionally a conservative-leaning state, Texas has increasingly shifted towards the Democratic Party in recent years. In 2018 O'Rourke mounted a stiff challenge to Republican Ted Cruz, coming within three percentage points of ousting the prominent GOP senator. Exit polling revealed a narrow majority of native-born Texans actually supported O'Rourke, while voters who moved to Texas from other states supported Cruz.

Soros, who is criticized by conservatives in the United States for his liberal advocacy, has spent large sums of money to help install US-aligned political leaders in Eastern Europe.

Wealthy donors frequently pump millions of dollars into political causes aligned with both major parties in the United States, especially after a 2010 Supreme Court decision overturned much of the country's system of campaign finance regulation. Former US President Jimmy Carter has lamented the role of wealthy donors in modern US politics, recently calling the United States an "oligarchy with unlimited political bribery."

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US Defense Chief Austin Returns to Work at Pentagon Following Hospitalization - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin returned to performing his duties from the office at the Pentagon following nearly a month away after cancer-related hospitalization, a department spokesperson said on Monday.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III returned to work at the Pentagon today. The Secretary has been conducting his duties from home since his release from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on Jan. 15, 2024," the spokesperson said in a statement.

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NASA Astronaut Compares Moon Program to Antarctic Exploration

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik), Lenka White - NASA astronaut Matthew Dominick in an interview with Sputnik compared the American Lunar program "Artemis" with the exploration of Antarctica during the 20th century, saying that it will require international efforts.

"I like to think about the analogy of Antarctica. When humans first went to Antarctica …. it was a race, does this sound familiar?" the astronaut, who will serve as commander for the Dragon Crew-8 mission launching in late February, said.

He recalled that the race for Antarctica involved different countries.

"They were going there just to touch it and come back to say that they were the first," Dominick said.

Following this, it took us 50 years to create an international coalition to the South Pole to actually stay there, the astronaut said.

"You can see the analogy here. Right now we have an international coalition going to stay on the moon. Yeah, instead of just *ping* [the surface of the Moon] and come back," Dominick continued.

The Amundsen–Scott South Pole Station, named after the first Antarctic explorers, is a permanently inhabited station at the Earth's South Pole, owned by the United States.

The US launched a program to return to the Moon under the Trump administration. It is called "Artemis" and includes several stages, including a manned flyby of the Moon, then the landing of a crew and the construction of a habitable station in lunar orbit.

The program is described as international in nature, with the United States signing Artemis Accords bilateral agreements with countries declaring their interest in the project. Last week, such an agreement was signed with Belgium, marking the 34th country to join the Artemis Accords.

NASA management has repeatedly said that it is in a space race with China to get to the Moon, but does not consider Russia a participant in the competition.

NASA chief Bill Nelson stated that if Beijing were to arrive at the lunar south pole first, it would stake a unique claim to the region and discourage widespread interaction there. China says it is not interested in a space race and accuses the US of seizing space resources for its own gain.

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US to Respond to Deadly Attack on Base in Jordan, Does Not Want Wider Conflict - Kirby

(Adds background in paras 2, 4, 6, 7)

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - The United States will retaliate to a deadly drone attack on its military base in Jordan at a time and in a manner of its choosing, but it is not seeking a

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wider conflict in the region, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, Axios reported that President Joe Biden discussed a "significant military response" to the attack during a meeting with top US officials on Sunday.

"As for our response options, the President is working his way through that right now. He had a good meeting yesterday with the National Security Team," Kirby told CNN.

According to Axios, the White House and Pentagon are seeking to calibrate their retaliation to contain the risk of a wider conflict. Meanwhile, some hawks on the Capitol Hill are pushing for strikes inside Iran, the report said.

"We will respond. We will do it in a time and a manner of our choosing. We'll respond, you know, in a very consequential way but we don't seek a war with Iran. We are not looking for a wider conflict in the Middle East," Kirby said, when asked if the US is considering strikes inside Iran.

On Sunday, three US soldiers had been killed and 34 others injured in a drone attack on a US military base in Jordan's northeast near the border with Syria.

President Biden pinned the blame on unspecified Iran-backed militant groups, while also saying the US was still gathering the facts. Jordanian cabinet spokesman Muhannad Mubaidin said that the strike targeted the US's Al-Tanf base in Syria, not a base on Jordanian territory.

Iran has nothing to do with the drone attack on a US military base, Iranian state-run news agency IRNA reported, citing an Iranian official.

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Allegations Against UNRWA Staff Should Not Impugn Agency's Work - Kirby

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - Allegations that some staffers of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) were involved in the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel should not cast doubt upon the work of the agency, US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"We've got a dozen employees here with serious allegations but we shouldn't let that impugn the work of the UN Relief and Works Agency, which has more than 10,000 employees across the region and certainly in Gaza," Kirby told CNN.

The United States has seen the information collected by the Israelis with regard to the staff's purported role in the attack, he added.

Kirby also welcomed the UN secretary-general's response to the allegations.

On Friday, UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini said that Israel shared with UNRWA data on the alleged involvement of some of the agency's staff members in the Hamas attack, and promised to hold accountable anyone who was implicated it. The US, Finland, the United Kingdom, Italy, Australia, Canada, Germany and some other countries have since suspended funding for UNRWA.

On October 7, the Gaza Strip-controlling Hamas movement launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel and breached the border. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete

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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 26,000 people have since been killed 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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US Seeks to Crack Down on Foreign Abuse of Cloud Computing Services – Commerce Department

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Commerce is proposing to require American providers of a certain type of cloud computing service to adopt measures to deter its malicious use by foreign actors, according to a federal registry document published on Monday.

Acting on executive orders to address malicious cyber activities, the Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security is proposing rules that would require Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS) providers like Amazon, Google, and Microsoft to investigate and report on foreign customers developing AI applications on their servers.

Such companies would be required to collect, store, and analyze foreign customers' identifying details and data, and report any suspicious activity to the federal government. The rules appear to target Chinese companies that use IaaS to train and host large AI models.

IaaS providers offer customers a type of cloud computing service, whereby they can run software and store data on rented servers without needing to directly operate and maintain them.

The US says malicious foreign actors have used American IaaS products to steal intellectual property and sensitive data, engage in espionage, and target critical infrastructure. Temporary company registration and the use of third-party resellers of these services currently make it difficult for the US government to track malicious actors.

The proposed rules are open for public comment until April 29.

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US to Respond to Deadly Attack on Base in Jordan, Does Not Want Wider Conflict - Kirby

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - The United States will retaliate to a deadly drone attack on its military base in Jordan at a time and in a manner of its choosing, but it is not seeking a wider conflict in the region, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

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"As for our response options, the President is working his way through that right now. He had a good meeting yesterday with the National Security Team," Kirby told CNN.

"We will respond. We will do it in a time and a manner of our choosing. We'll respond, you know, in a very consequential way but we don't seek a war with Iran. We are not looking for a wider conflict in the Middle East," he said, when asked if the US is considering strikes inside Iran.

Iran has nothing to do with Sunday's drone attack on a US military base in Jordan that left three US soldiers dead and dozens injured, Iranian state-run news agency IRNA reported, citing an Iranian official.

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Biden Considering Response After 3 Soldiers Killed in Attack on Base in Jordan - Kirby

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is considering an appropriate response to Sunday's drone attack on a US military base in Jordan that left three US soldiers dead and dozens injured, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"I certainly cannot deny the fact that there have been a series of attacks, now increasingly lethal, over weeks and months which is why the President is going to be reviewing what the appropriate response is going forward," Kirby told CNN.

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US Border Patrol Union Says It's 'Upsetting' Biden Prevents Securing US Southern Border

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - US National Border Patrol Council Vice President Art Del Cueto told Sputnik that it is upsetting the Biden administration continues to block efforts to secure the US southern border.

On Monday, the US Supreme Court ruled that federal agents can cut razor wire fencing Texas installed on miles of the US-Mexico border, but it does not require the state to remove it. The Texas National Guard placed razor wire fencing along the state's border with Mexico in order to deter the record level of migrants coming into the United States illegally and overwhelming local resources and communities struggling to cope with the crisis.

"It's upsetting that the current administration continues to do everything they can to prevent securing our nation's borders," Cueto said on Saturday when asked about the standoff between Texas and the Biden administration on the border.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott said on Friday that he was prepared for a conflict with federal authorities over the dispute.

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

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southern border town Eagle Pass, Texas. The border town has been a hot spot for illegal migration since President Joe Biden came into office in 2021.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton vowed to continue "Texas's efforts to protect its southern border against every effort by the Biden Administration to undermine the state's constitutional right of self-defense."

The Biden administration has argued that Texas' actions on the southern border prevent federal agents from doing their duties.

US Customs and Border Protection recently revealed that there were more than 302,000 migrant encounters on the US southern border in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded. The Biden administration has experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the southern border.

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Texas Will Settle Border Row With Feds But Biden Will Lose Support - Former US Official

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - The conflict this week between Texas backed by 25 Republican state governors and the US federal government over barriers to prevent illegal immigration from Mexico will probably be resolved soon but may damage President Joe Biden's prospects of winning border states in the November election, former State Department official James Carden told Sputnik on Friday.

"I would expect this to resolve sooner or later," Carden said. "On a solely legal basis it appears that SCOTUS [the Supreme Court of the United States] has spoken and decided in favor of the DOJ [Department of Justice].

On Monday, the Supreme Court issued a temporary order allowing federal Border Patrol agents to remove physical border barriers placed by Texas. However, Texas Governor Greg Abbott said on Friday that he was prepared for a conflict with federal authorities over the dispute.

Carden cautioned that even when the dispute was legally settled, the ill feeling resulting from it would weaken support for Biden in Texas and neighboring border states.

"I think politically it may harm Biden going into the election year," he said.

More than two dozen Republican governors expressed solidarity with Texas in its standoff with the federal government over efforts to secure the state's border with Mexico from illegal migration.

The joint statement released by the Republican Governors Association was signed by 25 Republican governors, including Ron DeSantis of Florida, Sarah Sanders of Arkansas, Brian Kemp of Georgia and Greg Gianforte of Montana. Independent presidential candidate Robert Kennedy Jr., former US President Donald Trump and former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley have also expressed support for Texas.

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

Texas in 'Uncharted Territory" With Biden Admin. Border Standoff - State Attorney General

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - The state of Texas' dispute with the Biden administration over the placement of razor wire barriers at the United States' border with Mexico has brought the state into uncharted political territory, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton said in an interview with Tucker Carlson.

"I don't think anybody knows exactly what happens. We're in uncharted territory," Paxton said on Friday, when asked how the standoff with the federal government might unfold.

The Biden administration is ignoring federal law and participating with criminal cartels to bring migrants into the country, Paxton said.

On Monday, the US Supreme Court issued a temporary order to allow federal Border Patrol agents to remove the barriers placed by Texas. However, Paxton and Texas Governor Greg Abbott insist that the state has the constitutional right to defend its border, due to the Biden administration's failure to address the illegal flow of migrants into the United States from Mexico.

Abbott said on Friday that Texas is continuing its border security operations, despite the US Department of Homeland Security requesting confirmation of the state's willingness to comply with federal demands by Friday.

More than two dozen Republican governors issued a joint statement backing Abbott in his dispute with the Biden administration. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis also said that he supports sending the Florida National Guard and State Guard to assist Texan authorities at the border.

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Algeria Requests UN Security Council Meeting on Gaza Wednesday - Source

UNITED NATIONS, January 27 (Sputnik) - Algeria has requested a UN Security Council meeting on the situation in the Gaza Strip to be held on January 31, a United Nations source told Sputnik.

"Algeria asked for a Security Council meeting for the 31st of January," the source said on Friday evening.

The theme of the meeting is the situation in Gaza and Palestine more broadly in view of the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) order on provisional measures earlier in the day, the source added.

The ICJ earlier on Friday ordered Israel to take "all measures within its power" to prevent genocide in Gaza, including refraining from killing or causing harm to Palestinian civilians, preventing and punishing incitement to genocide and taking immediate action to allow basic aid to Gaza.

The French mission to the United Nations organized earlier in the week a high-level ministerial meeting on the situation in Gaza. Many UN Security Council member states sent ministers to participate in the meeting in New York.

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The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he will promptly send the notice of provisional measures ordered by the ICJ to the UN Security Council.

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Biden Says 'For Too Long' The Border Has Been Broken, Time To Fix It - White House

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) -President Joe Biden said in a statement that there is a need to address the long-standing issue of a broken border, emphasizing that it has persisted for too long.

"For too long, we all know the border's been broken. It's long past time to fix it," Biden said on Friday.

According to the statement, two months ago, President Joe Biden directed his team to engage in negotiations with a bipartisan group of Senators to effectively and tackle the border crisis.

"What's been negotiated would – if passed into law – be the toughest and fairest set of reforms to secure the border we've ever had in our country. It would give me, as President, a new emergency authority to shut down the border when it becomes overwhelmed. And if given that authority, I would use it the day I sign the bill into law," the statement said.

The statement added that Congress needed to provide the requested funding for border security, including resources like additional border patrol agents, immigration judges, asylum officers, and advanced inspection machines to combat fentanyl at the southwest border.

The White House and US Congress are negotiating a supplemental funding bill, which also includes border security measures. However, lawmakers have yet to reach a final agreement on the legislation, with US House Speaker Mike Johnson stating in a letter to lawmakers that the border security deal that is being negotiated between the Biden administration and Congress will be "dead on arrival" in its current form.

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Canada Pauses UNRWA Funding Over Alleged Role of Some Staff in Hamas Attacks - Minister

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - Canada has paused any additional funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) amid a probe into allegations that some of UNRWA's staff aided the October 7 Hamas attacks against Israel, International Development Minister Ahmed Hussen said.

"As UNRWA undertakes this investigation, Canada will not reduce its support to the people of Gaza. Canada will continue to work with other partners to provide life-saving assistance to civilians in Gaza," Hussen said.

Hussein pointed out that he spoke with UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini to express Canada's alarm about the allegations.

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Canada welcomes UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' directive for UNRWA to promptly investigate the allegations, leading to a temporary funding pause during the inquiry, Hussein added.

Earlier on Friday, Lazzarini said that he decided to fire several staff members amid allegations of their involvement in the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel.

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Colombia Recalls Envoy to Argentina Over Milei Calling Petro "Communist Murderer"

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - Bogota has recalled its Ambassador in Argentina after President Javier Milei insulted his Colombian counterpart Gustavo Petro on live television, the Foreign Affairs Ministry said on Friday.

On Thursday, as he answered a series of questions on world leaders during a live program, Milei referred to Petro as a "communist murder who is sinking Colombia".

"In light of the circumstances created by the words of the President of Argentina, the Colombian Government recalls for immediate consultations Ambassador Camilo Romero, representative of Colombia in said country," the ministry's statement said.

Words expressed by the Argentinean President imperil the strong bilateral friendship, understanding and cooperation that have historically united both countries, the statement continued.

Colombian Minister of Foreign Affaire Alvaro Leyva Duran further stressed that Milei's remarks against Petro were disrespectful and irresponsible.

"In the name of the Colombian Government, I present my most energetic protest for the disrespectful and irresponsible remarks by the President of the Argentinean Republic," Leyva said via X.

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US Senate Foreign Relations Panel Chair Says Will Approve F-16 Sale to Turkey

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Ben Cardin said in a statement that he will allow the sale of F-16 fighter jets from the United States to Turkey to advance, following Ankara's approval of Sweden's membership in NATO.

"I commend the Turkish Parliament for its important vote in favor of approving Sweden's NATO accession protocol, and President Erdogan for signing it," the statement said on Friday. "My approval of Turkey's request to purchase F-16 aircrafts has been contingent on Turkish approval of Sweden's NATO membership. But make no mistake: this was not a decision I came to lightly."

Cardin said he looks forward to the beginning of a "new chapter" in the US-Turkey relationship, expanding NATO and working with allies to counter Russia, the statement said.

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ANALYSIS - Texas Border Dispute Shows Entire US Constitutional System Collapsing in Multiple Ways

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - The escalating dispute between Texas and the Biden administration over Austin's efforts to erect its own barriers to illegal immigration from Mexico show that the quarter of a millennium old federal US political system is collapsing along many different fault lines, constitutional and political experts told Sputnik.

Twenty-five state governors have come out in support of Texas Governor Greg Abbott's declaration that he will defy the Biden administration in Washington, DC and go ahead with building barbed wire barriers along his state's land border with Mexico.

The Supreme Court ruled in a narrow 5-4 decision Monday authorizing federal Border Patrol agents to remove razor-wire fencing set up by Texas authorities on Abbott's instructions. However, on Friday, Abbott said he was prepared for a conflict with federal authorities over the issue.

"We are prepared, in the event that that unlikely event does occur, just to make sure that we will be able to continue exactly what we've been doing over the past month, and that is building these barriers," the Texas governor told Tucker Carlson in an interview.

The crisis was real and serious, US constitutional historian and political commentator Dan Lazare warned on Friday.

US SYSTEM FRACTURING

"Sure, it's a crisis, a big one," Lazare said. "It's yet another sign of how the US constitutional system is fracturing along multiple fault lines."

The crisis had been developing in full public view over the past quarter century, Lazare pointed out.

"First it was the breakdown on Capitol Hill as gridlock took hold from the mid-1990s on. Then it was the Electoral College, which backfired in 2000 and again in 2016 by cancelling the popular vote," he said.

In 2022, the conservative-dominated Supreme Court overturned the overwhelmingly popular Roe vs. Wade decision of nearly half a century before that had legalized abortion on demand throughout the United States. And now the process of disintegration and the discrediting of ancient national institutions was accelerating, he observed.

"Now it [the US political system] is cracking along state and federal lines. I have no idea how far this will go," he said.

The crisis goes far beyond a local dispute between Texas and the federal government: It threatens the very existence and survival of the United States, Lazare stated.

"It is nearly 10 months to the presidential elections, yet already civil war is erupting. The 248-year-old American republic is crumbling before our very eyes," he said.

SECESSION MEASURE

University of Houston Professor of African American History Gerald Horne agreed that the crisis was alarming.

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"It is quite serious. The ultra-right in the Lone Star state is seeking to place on the ballot a measure that would allow for secession from the United States," he said.

The principle of secession is not unimaginable in Texas but, on the contrary, it is deeply rooted in the origins and history of the state, Horne explained. "Recall that Texas seceded from Mexico in 1836, formed an independent state - then joined the United States in 1845 ...then sought to secede again in 1861," he said.

Abbott has actually been traveling the world already to assess what support he might be able to gather for any move to secede from the United States, Horne noted. "As we speak the governor is touring abroad - ostensibly on a commercial mission but likely seeking to gauge international support," he said.

Texas is the second largest state in the Union in terms of both territory (after Alaska) and population (after California).

Horne acknowledged that Abbott had not yet made any hard or irrevocable decision to break with Washington. "To be fair, he has not endorsed officially 'Texit' or Texas exiting the United States, [comparable to] the United Kingdom exiting the European Union (EU) or 'Brexit,'" he said.

However, the possibility of a Texas secession followed by a wider disintegration of the United States remained very possible, Horne advised. "A question is this: does all this portend a breakup of the United States, especially if there is a controversy concerning the November presidential election: Stay tuned," he said.

NOT SERIOUS THREAT

Nevertheless, the crisis still had plenty of time to be peacefully resolved and there has been similar false alarms throughout US history, George Mason University Professor of Law Francis Buckley advised.

"[The crisis is Not [Serious]. It's called interposition and [US Founding Father and early president James] Madison proposed it in 1798. [It] happens often," he said.

Abbott has issued a "Statement on Texas' Constitutional Right to Self-Defense" in which he stressed the state's right to defend itself against an "invasion" of illegal immigrants, and he also accused Biden of violating and refusing to enforce immigration laws.

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Texas Governor Says Will Continue to Defend Border Amid Dispute With Biden Administration

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - The state of Texas will continue to defend its portion of the US border with Mexico amid a standoff with the Biden administration over the use of razor wire barriers, Texas Governor Greg Abbott said in a statement.

"Texas will continue to exercise its constitutional right to protect and defend our southern border," Abbott said on Friday via social media platform X. "In President Biden's absence, we will hold the line to keep Texans - and Americans - safe."

On Monday, the US Supreme Court issued a temporary order to allow Border Patrol agents to remove the barriers placed by Texas. The following day, Department of Homeland Security

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General Counsel Jonathan Meyer sent a letter to Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton requesting that the state confirm federal access to border sites by Friday.

However, Abbott maintains that Texas has a constitutional right to protect the border due to the Biden administration's failure to address the record flow of illegal immigrants into the United States from Mexico.

Texas' border security effort, dubbed Operation Lone Star, has led to nearly half a million illegal immigrant apprehensions and more than 38,700 criminal arrests, Abbott's office said in a statement on Friday.

Operation Lone Star continues to fill gaps created by the Biden administration's refusal to secure the border, the statement said.

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White House's Ideas to Confiscate Russian State Assets Contradict Int'l Law - Antonov

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's ideas to confiscate Russian assets are driven by selfish political goals and contradict both international law and common sense, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told reporters.

"We call on the American side to abandon the current strategy aimed at harming the Russian economy. The 'creative' ideas of the White House are motivated by selfish political goals such as the confiscation of Russian state assets and contradict not only international law but also common sense," Antonov said on Friday.

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Tanker Marlin Luanda Suppressing Fire Caused by Missile Strike in Gulf of Aden - Trafigura

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - The tanker Marlin Luanda operated by the freight company Trafigura from Denmark has deployed firefighting equipment to suppress a fire reportedly caused by a Houthi missile when the ship was crossing the Gulf of Aden, the company said in a statement to Sputnik.

"Earlier on 26th January, the Marlin Luanda, a petroleum products tanker vessel operated on behalf of Trafigura, was struck by a missile in the Gulf of Aden after transiting the Red Sea. Firefighting equipment on board is being deployed to suppress and control the fire caused in one cargo tank on the starboard side," the statement said on Friday.

No injuries have been reported as a result of the missile strike, the statement also said.

Military ships are currently heading to the Marlin Luanda to provide necessary assistance, the statement added.

Yemen's Ansar Allah movement, also known as the Houthis, vowed in November 2023 to attack any ships associated with Israel until that country halts all military actions in the Gaza Strip. The

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move prompted the United States 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 missile strikes against Houthi positions in Yemen in a bid to degrade the rebels' ability to target commercial vessels.

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Trump Says Will Appeal New Jury Verdict in E. Jean Carroll Defamation Case

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said he will appeal the jury verdict to pay an additional sum of $83.3 million for former advice columnist E. Jean Carroll for defaming her and damaging her reputation, saying the legal system is being used as a "political weapon" against him.

"Absolutely ridiculous! I fully disagree with both verdicts and will be appealing this whole Biden-directed witch hunt focused on me and the Republican Party. Our legal system is out of control and being used as a political weapon. They have taken away all First Amendment rights. This is not America," Trump said via the social media platform Truth Social on Friday.

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Pentagon Neither Denies nor Confirms US Plans to Station Nuclear Weapons in UK - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) – A Pentagon spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik that it is a US policy to neither confirm nor deny the presence or absence of nuclear weapons at a specific location amid reports that Washington plans to station its nuclear weapons in the United Kingdom.

“It is U.S. policy to neither confirm nor deny the presence or absence of nuclear weapons at any general or specific location,” the statement said on Friday.

The statement noted that the United States “routinely upgrades its military facilities in allied nations.”

The Telegraph reported on Friday that the United States is expected to station B61-12 gravity bombs, which are three times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, at the Lakenheath base for the first time in 15 years after Washington decided to remove its nuclear arsenal from the United Kingdom in 2008.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has said that the Kremlin would view the deployment of US nuclear weapons in the United Kingdom as an escalatory action.

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Jury Awards E. Jean Carroll Additional $83.3Mln in Defamation Case Against Trump

NEW YORK, January 27 (Sputnik) - A jury awarded an additional $83.3 million to former advice columnist E. Jean Carroll, who said she was defamed and her reputation damaged by former President Donald Trump for calling her a liar.

Trump is expected to pay $7.3 million in compensatory damages, $11 million for reputational repair and $65 million in punitive damages.

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Major Crimes in US Capital Increased by Over 30% in 2023 - Police Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - The number of major crimes committed in Washington increased by more than 30% in 2023, the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia (MPDC) said.

The number of violent crimes reported to the police last year amounted to 5,338, which marks a 39% increase from the previous year. The data also revealed that robberies increased by 67% to 3,470.

Washington also faced 6,829 thefts of motor vehicles, marking an 82% increase from the 3,756 carjackings in 2022, MPDC said.

Crimes against property increased by almost a quarter from 23,455 to more than 29,000 cases, MPDC said.

Officers also recovered 3,135 firearms, a slightly smaller number than last year but more than two times above the level of 2013, MPDC said.

The total number of crimes in the capital increased by 26% to almost 34,500 in 2023, MPDC added.

Earlier on Friday, the US Justice Department said that it will increase law enforcement resources to counter the growth of violent crime in Washington, including a multi-component Gun Violence Analytic Cell (GVAC), which is led by the FBI and its partnering agencies.

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US Justice Dept. Says Reached Deal With New York to Resolve Cuomo Harassment Claims

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department said in a statement that it reached an agreement with the State of New York Executive Chamber to resolve claims that

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former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo engaged in a pattern of sexual harassment, due to reforms made by current governor Kathy Hochul.

"With this settlement agreement, the Executive Chamber under Governor Hochul is undertaking additional actions that will address system failures of the past while helping prevent the recurrence of systemic sexual harassment and retaliation in the future," Justice Department Civil Rights Division Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke said in the statement on Friday.

Cuomo's conduct as governor was "especially egregious" because of the power differential involved and the lack of avenues for victims to report harassment, Clarke said.

The Justice Department appreciates Hochul's determination to ensure that harassment does not recur at the top of the New York state government, US Attorney for the Eastern District of New York Breon Peace said in the statement. The Justice Department shares Hochul's goal and will work under the agreement to create clear, comprehensive and enduring policies to prevent harassment in the Executive Chamber, Peace said.

A Justice Department investigation found that Cuomo's Executive Chamber subjected female employees to a sexually hostile work environment, tolerated that environment and retaliated against employees who spoke out about it, the statement said.

In August 2021, Cuomo and other senior staff resigned. The Executive Chamber has since expanded its human resources department, created new reporting and investigation policies, implemented anti-retaliation programs and established mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of the reforms, the statement said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) -

ISRAEL INVASION OF GAZA

* The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has ordered Israel to take urgent measures to prevent acts of genocide and to ensure the flow of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip, Court President Joan Donoghue said on Friday.

* The ICJ has recognized that the scale of suffering of the civilian population in the Gaza Strip justifies raising a question of genocide, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

* The World Health Organization (WHO) refutes Israel's accusation that the organization is colluding with the Palestinian movement Hamas, WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

* The United States has temporarily paused additional funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) amid allegations of UNRWA staff involvement in the October 7 attack on Israel, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

* The United States hopes that Israel and Hamas will agree to another hostage deal, but it does not anticipate any imminent developments, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby

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said.

TEXAS BORDER ISSUE

* Texas Governor Greg Abbott said on Friday that he is prepared for a conflict with the US federal authorities over a legal dispute about barriers placed along the state's portion of the US border with Mexico.

* Florida Governor Ron DeSantis said that he supports a Florida legislation to expand the state's National Guard to be able to operate in Texas during the standoff with the federal government.

HOUTHI ATTACKS IN RED SEA

* The Houthis fired an anti-ship ballistic missile toward the US destroyer Carney in the Gulf of Aden on Friday, the Central Command (CENTCOM) said.

* Naval forces of the Houthi movement in Yemen attacked a British oil ship in the Gulf of Aden and the vessel caught fire after it was hit by a missile, Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The situation in Soledar in the Donetsk People's Republic remains difficult as Ukraine keeps trying to attack the area but is not achieving any results, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday.

* Only a court has a right to recognize the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) and the military intelligence agency GUR as terrorist organizations, Putin said.

* Thirty-five Ukrainian soldiers have surrendered to the Russian forces in the past week, including 16 soldiers in the Krasnyi Lyman direction, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Media reports that Russia is allegedly ready to agree to Ukraine's non-neutral status and change its position on joining NATO are not true, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

IL-76 AIRPLANE CRASH IN RUSSIA

* The launch site of a missile that downed the Il-76 Russian military transport aircraft carrying Ukrainian prisoners of war has been identified, the Russian Investigators Committee said on Friday.

* The results of the investigation on the downing of Russia's Il-76 plane will be published so the Ukrainian people can find out what really happened, Putin said.

* There is no decisive condemnation of the downing of the Russian Il-76 military plane transporting Ukrainian prisoners of war for an exchange from Western countries, but the situation requires a proper assessment from the world community, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* The Russian Investigative Committee on Friday published a footage showing Ukrainian prisoners of war boarding the Il-76 plane that was later downed in the Belgorod Region.

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

Canada Does Not Accept Premise of ICJ Case Against Israel – Top Diplomat

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – Canada supports the role the International Court of Justice (ICJ) plays in the settlement of conflicts, but does not accept the premise of the case against Israel brought by South Africa, Minister of Foreign Affairs Melanie Joly said on Friday.

"Canada supports the ICJ's critical role in the peaceful settlement of disputes and its work in upholding the international rules-based order," Joly said in a statement. "Our support for the ICJ does not mean that we accept the premise of the case brought by South Africa."

Earlier in the day, the ICJ ruled on provisional measures requested by South Africa in its case against Israel over alleged genocide in the Gaza Strip. The court ordered Israel to take urgent measures to prevent acts of genocide and ensure the flow of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian enclave. At the same time, the ICJ did not order an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

The US State Department in a statement called the allegations that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza "unfounded" and also noted that the court did not make a finding about genocide per se.

South Africa filed a lawsuit accusing Israel of genocidal intent in Gaza with the ICJ on December 29 in response to a rising civilian death toll in the besieged Palestinian enclave. It seeks to prove that Israel's military campaign is genocidal in nature and targets Gazans as a part of the broader Palestinian people.

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US State Department Releases Report Accusing Russia of 'Long Tradition' of Anti-Semitism

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The US State Department's Global Engagement Center released a report on Friday, accusing Russia of historically using anti-Semitism as an instrument of division.

"For over a century, Tsarist, Soviet and now Russian Federation authorities have used antisemitism to discredit, divide, and weaken their perceived adversaries at home and abroad," the State Department said in a summary of the report. "These tactics build on a long tradition of exploiting antisemitism to create division and discontent."

The State Department released the report on the eve of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which coincides with the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp by Soviet forces on January 27, 1945.

The report accuses Tsarist security services of fabricating "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," which is considered a seminal anti-Semitic text. However, the exact origins of the text are unknown, according to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Soviet leader Joseph Stalin turned anti-Semitism into official government policy by attacking Jews as "rootless cosmopolitans" that threatened Soviet patriotism, the report said. Under Stalin's leadership, the Soviet Union established the Jewish Autonomous Oblast in the Russian

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Far East.
The report also claims that Soviet leader Yuri Andropov's formation of a Anti-Zionist Committee, which was led by Jews, was intended to deflect accusations of anti-Semitism.
Moreover, the report accuses Russia of falsely labeling supporters of Ukraine as neo-Nazis to support its special military operation.
In 2023, the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis recorded zero acts of anti-Semitic violence in Russia and one act of anti-Semitic vandalism.

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US Approves Possible $500Mln Sale of Helicopters to Croatia - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has approved a possible $500 million sale of UK-60M Black Hawk helicopters and related services to Croatia, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a release on Friday.
"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Croatia of UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters and related equipment and services for an estimated cost of $500 million," the release said.

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Trafigura Fuel Tanker on Fire After Houthi Missile Strike - Reports

Washington, January 26 (Sputnik) - A Trafigura fuel tanker is on fire in the Gulf of Aden after being struck by a Houthi missile, Bloomberg reported on Friday, citing a company spokesperson.
Firefighting equipment on board is being deployed to suppress and control the fire, which is located in a cargo tank on the vessel's starboard side. Military ships in the region are underway to provide assistance, according to the report.

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Virgin Galactic Completes Sixth Commercial Spaceflight on Friday

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - Virgin Galactic on Friday completed its sixth commercial spaceflight, the company said in a statement.
"We're pleased to announce that this morning, Virgin Galactic completed Galactic, its eleventh spaceflight to date, sixth commercial spaceflight and first spaceflight of the year!," the statement

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said.
The company pointed out in the statement that it became the first time all four seats aboard VSS Unity were occupied by private astronauts.
Lina Borozdina, who became the first woman to go to space, Robie Vaughn, Franz Haider, and Neil Kornswiet, flew aboard VSS Unity.
The Company shared in the statement that its next mission, planned for the second quarter of 2024, will include both a researcher and private astronauts.

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Cygnus Spacecraft to Carry Blindness, Bone Loss Experiments to ISS Next Week - NASA

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - An unmanned SpaceX Cygnus spacecraft will carry 8,200 pounds of supplies and new scientific experiments including a 3-D metal printing system, the first surgical robot ever to be tested on a space station and an automatic system to make semiconductors to the International Space Station (ISS) next week, project scientists told a NASA teleconference on Friday.
"According to preliminary data, we can produce better products in space [using 3D printing techniques]," NASA ISS Program scientist Meg Everett told the teleconference.
Other experiments on the Cygnus will include looking at how bacteria adapt in space, plant microbe interaction in zero gravity environments and studying bone loss in space, NASA ISS Biological and Physical Sciences Program Director Lisa Cornell said.
"We have taken DNA processing [in ISS experiments] from months to minutes," Hewlett Packard Enterprise computer investigator Mark Fernandez said.
Other experiments will look at arthritis inflammation and seek to manufacture artificial retina in space to combat macular degeneration, which is the leading cause of blindness on earth, Lambda Vision CEO Nicole Wagner said.
The Cygnus is scheduled to launch on a SpaceX Falcon 9 booster from Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida on Monday, according to NASA.

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Kirby Says Cannot Confirm Biden Pressed Netanyahu to Scale Back Gaza Operations

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The White House said on Friday it cannot confirm reports US President Joe Biden pressed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to scale down military operations in Gaza.
Biden pushed Netanyahu in a phone call last week to scale back military operations in the Gaza Strip and stressed he does not want them to last a year, Axios reported, citing US officials.
"I cannot," National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said in a press briefing, when

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asked whether he can confirm the report.

A significant portion of the 40-minute phone conversation between the two leaders focused on hostage release efforts, the report said. At least a third of the call centered around the Israeli timetable for moving to low-intensity operations across the enclave, the report said.

Biden also inquired several times about the plan and strategy in Gaza, according to the report. Netanyahu replied that the transition to low-intensity fighting already happened in northern Gaza and would take place in the south, but said that more time was needed, US officials said.

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US Planning to Station Nuclear Weapons in UK Amid Tensions With Russia - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States intends to once again station nuclear weapons in the United Kingdom amid increased tensions with Russia, The Telegraph reported on Friday.

The United States intends to station nuclear warheads at the Royal Air Force's Lakenheath base, the report said, citing Defense Department documents.

Washington removed its nuclear weapons from the United Kingdom in 2008 after having stationed them there during the Cold War.

The United States is expected to station B61-12 gravity bombs, which are three times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, at the Lakenheath base, the report said.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has said that the Kremlin would view the deployment of US nuclear weapons in the United Kingdom as an escalatory action.

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Qatari Leader to Visit US Next Week to Discuss Possible Israel-Hamas Peace Deal - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Qatari Emir Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani will visit Washington next week to discuss a potential peace deal between Israel and Hamas, Al-Monitor reported on Friday..

Al-Thani, who also holds Qatar's positions of prime minister and foreign affairs minister, is expected to meet with senior members of the Biden administration and lawmakers, the report said.

Earlier in the day, the White House pool reported that US President Joe Biden spoke with the head of the Gulf state and one of the main mediators between Israel and Hamas to discuss the latest developments in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian military group, including the release of hostages.

US media reported earlier in the week that Biden plans to send CIA Director William Burns to broker a deal between the Israeli government and Hamas that would involve releasing all

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remaining hostages held in the Gaza Strip and establish the longest ceasefire so far. Burns will reportedly meet with Al-Thani as well as with Mossad Director David Barnea and Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Kamel while in Europe.

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White House 'Deeply Troubled' by Nitrogen Gas Execution in Alabama

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The White House is "deeply troubled" by the first nitrogen gas execution that took place in Alabama yesterday, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.

"So we are deeply troubled by what we heard went on around Kevin Smith's death," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

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Texas Governor Says Prepared for Conflict With US Government Over Border Barriers

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott said on Friday that he is prepared for a conflict with federal authorities over a legal dispute about barriers placed along the state's portion of the US border with Mexico.

"We are prepared, in the event that that unlikely event does occur, just to make sure that we will be able to continue exactly what we've been doing over the past month, and that is building these barriers," Abbott said in an interview with Tucker Carlson, when asked about the potential for the federal government to take over the Texas National Guard.

On Monday, the US Supreme Court issued a temporary order allowing federal Border Patrol agents to remove physical border barriers placed by Texas. However, Abbott maintains that Texas has the constitutional authority to protect its borders, due to the federal government's failure to address the flow of illegal migrants into the United States.

Earlier on Friday, the Border Patrol Union said that its federal agents will not arrest Texas National Guard members for following their lawful orders. Rank-and-file Border Patrol agents "appreciate and respect" Texas' actions, the statement said.

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Guterres Says Will Promptly Transmit Notice of ICJ Decision on Israel to Security Council

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(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-6)

UNITED NATIONS, January 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will promptly send the notice of provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in a genocide case against Israel to the UN Security Council, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"In accordance with the statute of the Court [ICJ], the Secretary-General will promptly transmit the notice of the provisional measures ordered by the Court to the Security Council," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

The UN chief recalls that, pursuant to the UN Charter and to the ICJ statute, the court's decisions of are binding and he trusts that all parties will duly comply with the order, Dujarric said.

Guterres also acknowledges the ICJ's decision to order Israel "to take all measures within its power" in relation to the treatment of Palestinians in Gaza, Dujarric added.

South Africa welcomed the ICJ ruling in the case against Israel and considers it to be a victory of the international rule of law.

South Africa filed a complaint with the ICJ on December 29 accusing Israel of genocidal intent in Gaza amid the rising civilian death toll in the besieged Palestinian enclave. South Africa sought to prove that Israel's military campaign in Gaza was genocidal in nature and targeted the resident of the enclave as part of the broader Palestinian people for collective punishment.

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UNRWA Says Fired Several Employees Amid Suspicion of Being Involved in October 7 Attack

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini said on Friday that he decided to fire several staff members amid allegations of their involvement in the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel.

"To protect the Agency's ability to deliver humanitarian assistance, I have taken the decision to immediately terminate the contracts of these staff members and launch an investigation in order to establish the truth without delay," Lazzarini said in a statement.

The statement called the allegations against UNRWA employees "shocking" and reiterated the condemnation of the October 7 attacks on Israel.

Earlier on Friday, Israel shared with UNRWA data on the alleged involvement of the agency's staff members in the Hamas attack, the statement said.

The United States has already responded to the news by suspending any additional funding for UNRWA while it reviews the allegations.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip. Some 1,200 Israelis - military and civilian - were killed and about 240 were taken hostage. Israel launched massive strikes and competely sealed off Gaza from any deliveries, including water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel. Israel also launched a ground invasion of the Palestinian enclave

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with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas and rescuing the hostages. Nearly 26,000 Palestinians have been killed so far in Gaza and well over 60,000 wounded as a result of Israel's military operations.

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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Trump Campaign Says Biden's LNG Export Pause 'Disastrous Self-Inflicted Wound'

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's move to pause the approval of new LNG projects constitutes yet another "disastrous self-inflicted wound" that will undermine US national security, the Trump campaign press secretary said on Friday.

"Joe Biden has once again caved to the radical demands of the environmental extremists in his administration," Karoline Leavitt said. "This decision to block the approval of new facilities to export American natural gas is one more disastrous self-inflicted wound that will further undermine America's economic and national security."

Earlier on Friday, the White House announced that the Biden administration would temporarily pause pending decisions regarding LNG exports to non-Free Trade Agreement partner countries.

"On day one, President Trump will unleash American Energy to lower the cost of living for all Americans, pay down debt, strengthen national security, and establish the United States as the manufacturing superpower of the world," Leavitt said.

US Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Joe Manchin said that he will hold a hearing in the coming weeks to discuss the Biden administration's decision to halt LNG exports.

Manchin said that if the administration's announcement is a" political ploy to pander to keep-it-in-the-ground climate activists," he would do his utmost to end the pause immediately.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson criticized Biden's decision as "an abject failure" that "empowers" Russian exports.

Meanwhile, Greenpeace USA called the pause a great victory for environmental activists.

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White House Says Hopeful About Progress on Hostage Deal, But Nothing Imminent Expected

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes that Israel and Hamas will agree to another hostage deal, but it does not anticipate any imminent developments, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

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"We continue to do everything we can to facilitate another hostage deal," Kirby said in a press briefing. "We are hopeful about the progress but I do not expect, we should not expect any imminent developments."

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UN Chief Takes Note of ICJ Provisional Measure Decision on Israel's Actions in Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, January 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is taking note of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) decision regarding Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"The Secretary-General takes note of the order of the International Court of Justice, indicating provisional measures in the case of South Africa against Israel on the application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

The UN chief has also acknowledged the court's decision to order Israel "to take all measures within its power" in relation to the treatment of Palestinians in Gaza, Dujarric added.

South Africa welcomed the ICJ ruling in the case against Israel and considers it a victory for the international rule of law.

South Africa filed a complaint with the ICJ on December 29, accusing Israel of genocidal intent in Gaza amid the rising civilian death toll in the besieged Palestinian enclave. The case sought to prove that Israel's military campaign was genocidal in nature and targeted residents of Gaza for collective punishment.

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WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott said on Friday that he is prepared for a conflict with federal authorities over a legal dispute about barriers placed along the state's portion of the US border with Mexico.

"We are prepared, in the event that that unlikely event does occur, just to make sure that we will be able to continue exactly what we've been doing over the past month, and that is building these barriers," Abbott said in an interview with Tucker Carlson, when asked about the potential for the federal government to take over the Texas National Guard.

On Monday, the US Supreme Court issued a temporary order allowing federal Border Patrol agents to remove physical border barriers placed by Texas. However, Abbott maintains that Texas has the constitutional authority to protect its borders, due to the federal government's failure to address the flow of illegal migrants into the United States.

Earlier on Friday, the Border Patrol Union said that its federal agents will not arrest Texas

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National Guard members for following their lawful orders. Rank-and-file Border Patrol agents "appreciate and respect" Texas' actions, the statement said.

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US ot Remain Reliable LNG Supplier to Europe Despite Biden Export Pause - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will remain a reliable supplier of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Europe despite the Biden administration's decision to pause LNG exports, White House spokesperson Ali Zaidi said on Friday.

"Let me be clear, the United States is already the number 1 exporter of LNG and we have been and remain unwavering in our commitment to support our allies and partners around the world," Zaidi said during a press briefing.

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Colorado Voters Seeking to Bar Trump From Ballot File Brief With US Supreme Court

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Six Colorado voters on Friday filed a brief with the US Supreme Court seeking to render former president Donald Trump ineligible for the 2024 election ballot under the 14th amendment of the Constitution.

"The most violent attack on our nation's Capitol since the War of 1812 - an attack which obstructed the peaceful transfer of presidential power for the first time in American history - meets any plausible definition of 'insurrection against the Constitution,'" the voters said in the brief.

The voters claimed that Trump was an officer under the Constitution during the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 - in contrast to Trump's statement issued last week claiming the opposite.

"Section 3 does not give a free pass to insurrectionist Presidents; they are 'officers' because they hold an 'office.' And states' broad authority to regulate presidential elections allows them to exclude constitutionally ineligible candidates from the ballot," the brief said.

The US states of Maine and Colorado have decided to oust Trump from their state ballots, but those decisions will not be effective until a higher court rules on Trump's appeals of the decisions.

Earlier this month, the US Supreme Court agreed to hear oral arguments in the case starting on February 8.

Trump has denied any wrongdoing and has repeatedly said he has a legal right to challenge the results of the 2020 election.

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Guterres Will 'Promptly' Transmit Notice of ICJ Israel Decision to UNSC - Office

UNITED NATIONS, January 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will swiftly send the notice of provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice in a genocide case against Israel to the UN Security Council, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"In accordance with the Statute of the Court, the Secretary-General will promptly transmit the notice of the provisional measures ordered by the Court to the Security Council," Dujarric told a briefing.

The secretary-general recalls that, pursuant to the Charter and to the Statute of the Court, decisions of the Court are binding and trusts that all parties will duly comply with the Order from the Court, the spokesman added.

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Biden Speaks With Leader of Qatar to Discuss Conflict in Gaza – White House Pool

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden spoke with Qatari Emir Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani to discuss the latest developments in the conflict between Israel and Hamas, including the release of hostages, the White House press pool said on Friday.

On Monday, Axios reported that Israel proposed a two-month ceasefire if Hamas agreed to release more than 130 hostages who are still being held in Gaza, but the group turned it down.

On Thursday, The Washington Post reported that President Biden plans to send CIA Director William Burns abroad on a mission to broker a deal between the Israeli government and Hamas that would involve releasing all remaining hostages held in the Gaza Strip and establish the longest ceasefire so far in the war.

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. Nearly 26,000 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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US House Speaker Says Biden 'Empowering' Russia by Pausing Approval of New LNG Projects

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – US House Speaker Mike Johnson on Friday criticized President Joe Biden's decision to pause pending natural gas export terminals as "an abject failure" that empowers Russian exports.

"President Biden's decision to place a pause on pending natural gas export terminals is outrageous. By bending the knee to climate activists, the President is empowering Russia, weakening U.S. energy security, and forcing Europe's reliance on dirty, Russian exports. An abject failure," Johnson said in an X (formerly known as Twitter) post.

Earlier on Friday, Biden paused the approval of new liquefied natural gas (LNG) export projects, citing a need to better assess climate, health, and economic considerations of pending licenses.

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State Dept. After ICJ Verdict Says Allegations of Genocide in Gaza 'Unfounded'

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – The United States continues to insist that Israeli actions in Gaza do not fall within the scope of the Genocide Convention, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday, after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) delivered a verdict on South Africa's case against Israel.

"We continue to believe that allegations of genocide are unfounded and note the court did not make a finding about genocide or call for a ceasefire in its ruling and that it called for the unconditional, immediate release of all hostages being held by Hamas," the spokesperson said in a statement.

Earlier in the day, the ICJ ruled that at lease some rights sought by South Africa in its genocide case against Israel's military operations in Gaza are plausible. It also ordered that Israel take action to prevent genocide in the Gaza Strip, but stopped short of ordering a ceasefire.

Commenting on the ICJ ruling, the Russian Foreign Ministry said that the court has recognized that the scale of suffering of the civilian population in the Gaza Strip justifies raising the question of genocide.

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. Nearly 26,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of Israeli strikes, local authorities said.

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Trudeau Vows to Counter 'Hateful Behaviors" Amid Domestic, Global Rise of Antisemitism

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – Canada will further continue its work to counter "hateful behaviors" amid a disturbing rise in antisemitism domestically and internationally, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday in a statement marking the International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Trudeau's remarks come amid mounting tensions between pro-Palestine and pro-Israel groups in Canada. As the first has held several major rallies across the country in support of Gaza, the latter decries the lack of action by the federal government in countering antisemitic acts, that include firebombing, shooting, and defacing of Jewish-held properties, and the "intimidation" of Jewish individuals.

"In recent months, a sharp, disturbing rise in antisemitism has been felt across the world, including right here at home. The Government of Canada continues to step up to counter hateful behaviours and acts of violence and to keep Canadians safe," Trudeau said in the statement.

The Prime Minister noted that his government has supported organizations whose purpose is to advance anti-racism and multiculturalism and has allocated more funding for programs aimed at supporting communities targeted by hate-motivated crimes.

Trudeau further noted that Canada aims at creating a safer and more inclusive environment for the descendants of holocaust survivors.

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 began a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages.

Nearly 26,000 people have been killed 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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NSC Migration Adviser Tobin Set to Resign, Amid Ongoing Asylum Law Talks - Reports

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WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - National Security Council (NSC) Migration Advisor Katie Tobin is set resign next week amid discussions between the White House and senators regarding potential changes to asylum laws, NBC News reported on Friday.

According to the report, Tobin is stepping down at a juncture where heightened attention is focused on border policy, given the unprecedented influx of migrants at the US-Mexico border.

The report added that Tobin played a key role at the White House, notably in planning for the end of Title 42 and leading the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, following her tenure as an expert on asylum law for the United Nations Refugee Agency.

The White House and US Congress are negotiating a supplemental funding bill, which also includes border security measures. However, lawmakers have yet to reach a final agreement on the legislation, with US House Speaker Mike Johnson stating in a letter to lawmakers that the border security deal that is being negotiated between the Biden administration and Congress will be "dead on arrival" in its current form.

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US Commerce Secretary Says Requiring Companies to Share Data on AI Development

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said on Friday that the Biden administration is using the Defense Production Act to require companies to share information on their development of large language model artificial intelligence (AI) systems.

“We’re using the Defense Production Act… to do a survey requiring companies to share with us every time they train a new large language model and share with us the results, the safety data, so we can review it,” Raimondo said during a Hoover Institution event.

The Commerce Department is also beginning the process of requiring US cloud companies to inform the government every time a non-US entity uses their cloud to train a large language model, Raimondo said.

The potential downsides of AI technology are “pretty scary,” Raimondo said. The Biden administration will soon launch an AI safety institute, Raimondo said.

The Biden administration is not shying away from addressing AI related issues, Raimondo added.

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Austin to Have Follow-Up Visit at Medical Center After Being Hospitalized - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will visit Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for a follow-up appointment amid his prostate cancer treatment and recent hospitalization, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Friday.

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"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III will visit Walter Reed National Military Medical Center today for a scheduled appointment as part of his anticipated follow-up care following his recent hospitalization and prostate cancer diagnosis," Ryder said in a statement.

Austin continues to recover and is expected to make a full recovery, Ryder added, citing the defense secretary's doctors.

Austin was hospitalized on January 1 due to an infection following prostate cancer surgery in late December and has not been in office since then, prompting numerous calls for his resignation. Austin was released from the hospital on January 15 and has been recuperating and working from home since then.

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Key US Inflation Gauge PCE Dips Below 3%, Bolstering Hopes for Federal Reserve Rate Cut

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - An inflation gauge closely watched by the Federal Reserve showed US prices in December grew below the 3% monthly mark for the first time since the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic measures, boosting expectations that the central bank will proceed to cut interest rates later in the year.

The US Commerce Department's Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index (PCE) registered a year-on-year growth of 2.9% for the final month of last year, data released on Friday showed.

Wall Street economists polled by US media had forecast a PCE growth of 3% for December, consistent with trends seen for almost two years now. Getting inflation to below 3% is critical for the Fed, which wants to ultimately limit price growth at 2% per year.

"Inflation dynamics inside the metric that the Fed uses to formulate policy strongly imply that the central bank will hit its inflation target in the near term," RSM Chief Economist Joseph Brusuelas said in comments carried by CNBC. "This will create the conditions in which it makes [its] policy pivot and begins a multiyear campaign in which it reduces the policy rate towards a range between 2.5% and 3%."

The Fed is planning to cut rates in the coming months, for the first time in more than four years, if it can get inflation to 2% or below.

A broader gauge of inflation, known as Consumer Price Index (CPI) stood at 3.1% in November. The CPI hit a four-decade high of 9.1% some 18 months ago as trillions of federal relief spending over the coronavirus pandemic combined with supply chain breakdowns to send prices soaring.

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

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

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The Fed's next decision on interest rates will be delivered on January 31.

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Desantis Says Supports Legislation Expanding Florida State Guard To Operate In Texas

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron Desantis said on Friday that he supports a Florida legislation expanding the State Guard to be able to operate in Texas during the federal standoff.

"If we have Florida State Guard [then] that's not something that Biden could just simply federalize," said DeSantis during an event.

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Washington, Beijing to Hold High-Level Talks to Address Influx of Fentanyl in US - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - High-level US and Chinese officials are set to engage in discussions in Beijing next week to restrict the influx of fentanyl into the United States, NBC News reported on Friday.

The United States has indicated that China is recognized as being the primary supplier of precursor chemicals for fentanyl synthesized by Mexican drug cartels, the report said.

Chinese officials have not given any details about the meeting in Beijing, which also has not been publicly announced yet while the White House has chosen not to confirm that the discussions will take place, the report said.

Last year, US President Joe Biden met with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the leaders' summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in San Francisco. The leaders agreed on curbing fentanyl production.

Fentanyl is said to be 50 times more potent than heroin and 100 times more potent than morphine, according to reports.

From February 2022 to January 2023, at least 105,263 Americans died of drug overdoses, the majority of which involving synthetic opioids such as fentanyl and fentanyl analogues.

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House Lawmakers to Demand Biden Seeks Approval From Congress for Yemen Strikes – Reports

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WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – A group of two dozen bipartisan House lawmakers are planning to send a letter to President Joe Biden demanding he seeks Congress' authorization for any future strikes against the Houthis in Yemen, The Washington Post reported on Friday.

The lawmakers led by Rep. Ro Khanna and Rep. Warren Davidson are going to argue in the letter that Biden-authorized strikes in Yemen violate the Constitution and do not meet the criteria for a "national emergency" to bypass Congress, the report said.

"We ask that your Administration outline for us the legal authority used to conduct these strikes, and we urge your administration to seek authorization from Congress before conducting any more unauthorized strikes in Yemen," the report cited the lawmakers as saying in the letter.

The White House maintains that the strikes against Houthi positions in Yemen, which have been conducted since January 11, are "self-defense" operations and thus do not require Congress' permission.

Earlier this week, a group of senators also sent a letter to press the Biden administration on its strategy on continuing Houthis' attacks in the Red Sea and warned that Biden will require congressional approval if he decides to drag Washington into a new conflict in the Middle East.

"While the Houthis and their backers, namely Iran, bear the responsibility for escalation, unless there is a need to repel a sudden attack the Constitution requires that the United States not engage in military action absent a favorable vote of Congress," the senators said in their letter.

Since January 11, the US and the UK have launched several rounds of strikes targeting Houthi positions in Yemen to degrade their maritime attack capability.

Yemen's Ansar Allah movement, also known as the Houthis, vowed in November 2023 to attack any ships associated with Israel until it halts military actions in the Gaza Strip. This led the United States to announce the creation of a multinational operation to secure navigation in the Red Sea. Forces of the US and the United Kingdom later launched major strikes against Houthi positions in a bid to degrade the rebels' ability to target commercial vessels.

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US Senate Energy Committee Chair Says Will Hold Hearing on Biden's LNG Exports Pause

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Joe Manchin announced on Friday that he will hold a hearing in the coming weeks to discuss the Biden administration's decision to halt liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports.

"As chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, I will hold a hearing on LNG in the coming weeks to unveil the facts about the true state of play in the markets, this administration's motivations and their implications," Manchin said.

Earlier on Friday, the White House announced that the Biden administration would temporarily pause on pending decisions regarding LNG exports to non-Free Trade Agreement partner countries.

"Unfortunately, the announcement today reminds me of the ill-advised and unlawful pause on oil and gas leasing this administration attempted to put in place in the name of climate," Manchin said. "If the administration has the facts to prove that additional LNG export capacity

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would hurt Americans, they must make that information public and clear."

Manchin said that if the administration's announcement is a" political ploy to pander to keep-it-in-the-ground climate activists," he would do his utmost to end the pause immediately.

"Let me be crystal clear: America's LNG policy should be based on facts, not politics," Manchin added.

In November, US officials said the United States anticipates retaining the position of being the world's top LNG exporter for an extended period of time.

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Canada to Resume Arm Exports to Turkey After Support to Sweden's NATO Membership– Reports

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – Ottawa and Ankara have agreed on resuming Canadian drone parts exports to Turkey in exchange for greater transparency on their use and Sweden's accession to NATO, Reuters reported on Friday.

On Tuesday, Turkish lawmakers ratified the protocol on Sweden's accession to NATO in a 287-to-55 vote with four abstentions after 20 months of delay. Earlier on Friday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signed a decree officially approving the ratification of Sweden's NATO membership by Ankara.

The deal will only come into effect following Turkey's ratification of Sweden's accession into NATO, the report said, citing a source familiar with the matter. A second source with knowledge of the process said the agreement was achieved in early January following months of discussions.

"Canada and Turkey continue to engage in frank exchanges on our bilateral, economic and commercial relations," Global Affairs Canada spokesperson Charlotte MacLeod said as quoted by the report.

Following Turkey's "Peace Spring" military offensive in Northeast Syria in 2019, the Canadian government introduced a temporary pause to the issuance of new permits for export-controlled goods and technology to Turkey.

Another suspension was introduced in light of Turkey's military assistance to Azerbaijan at the time of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, and amid reports of Canadian drone technology being used on the battlefield. Ottawa completely cancelled those suspended permits in 2021 after a review confirmed their involvement in the armed conflict.

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Guterres Urges Action to Fight Anti-Semitism, All Forms of Bigotry

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UNITED NATIONS, January 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday called for action to combat a rise in anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim bigotry in a speech marking International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

"In the last several months, we have seen an outburst of antisemitism and anti-Muslim bigotry around the world. Every one of us must resolve to stand up against the forces of hate, discrimination, and division," Guterres said.

The action is particularly important in the wake of the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel, he stressed.

The UN chief called for action to fight all forms of bigotry, hatred and intolerance, including against minority Christian communities.

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Biden Pressed Netanyahu to Scale Back Gaza Operations During Recent Call - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden pushed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a phone call last week to scale down military operations in the Gaza Strip and stressed he does not want the conflict to last a year, Axios reported on Friday, citing US officials.

A significant portion of the 40-minute phone conversation focused on hostage release efforts, the report said. However, at least a third of the call centered around the Israeli timetable for moving to low-intensity operations across the enclave, the report said.

Biden also inquired several times about the plan and strategy in Gaza, according to the report. Netanyahu replied that the transition to low-intensity fighting already happened in northern Gaza and would take place in the south, but said that more time was needed, US officials said.

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 began a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages.

Almost 26,000 people have been killed 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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UNRWA Says Fired Several Employees Amid Suspicion of Being Involved in October 7 Attack

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini said on Friday that he decided to fire several staff members amid allegations of their involvement in the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel.

"To protect the Agency's ability to deliver humanitarian assistance, I have taken the decision to immediately terminate the contracts of these staff members and launch an investigation in order to establish the truth without delay," Lazzarini said in a statement.

The statement called the allegations against UNRWA employees "shocking" and reiterated the condemnation of the October 7 attacks on Israel.

Earlier on Friday, Israel shared with UNRWA data on the alleged involvement of the agency's staff members in the Hamas attack, the statement said.

The United States has already responded to the news by suspending any additional funding for UNRWA while it reviews the allegations.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip. Some 1,200 Israelis - military and civilian - were killed and about 240 were taken hostage. Israel launched massive strikes and competely sealed off Gaza from any deliveries, including water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel. Israel also launched a ground invasion of the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas and rescuing the hostages. Nearly 26,000 Palestinians have been killed so far in Gaza and well over 60,000 wounded as a result of Israel's military operations.

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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US Senator Says Probing Whether CIA Bribed Analysts to Change Stance on COVID-19 Origins

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US Senator Rand Paul said on Friday that he is working to find accountability and answers related to whistleblower claims that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) tried to bribe analysts to change their stances on the likely origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We deserve answers from the CIA on whistleblower allegations that they offered to pay off analysts to change their positions on the COVID-19 lab leak theory. I'm doing everything I can to hold them accountable," Paul said in a statement via the social media platform X.

On January 25, Paul and more than a dozen other senators sent a letter to CIA Director William Burns to request information on whistleblower allegations be provided to lawmakers. Six out of seven members of the CIA's COVID-19 Discovery Team concluded that the virus originated from

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a laboratory in Wuhan, China, the whistleblower said, according to the letter.

The allegations raise serious questions about the CIA's investigation, considering that the agency claimed in June 2023 that it remained unable to determine the precise origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, the letter said.

The letter requests information from the CIA about its COVID-19 Discovery Team, including documents and communications on its establishment, investigation and conclusions. The letter requests that the CIA provide the information no later than February 8.

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US House Speaker Says Border Deal 'Dead on Arrival' in Current Form - Letter

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Friday that the border security deal that is being negotiated between the Biden administration and Congress will be "dead on arrival" in its current form.

"I wanted to provide a brief update regarding the supplemental and the border, since the Senate appears unable to reach any agreement. If rumors about the contents of the draft proposal are true, it would have been dead on arrival in the House anyway," Johnson said in a letter to lawmakers.

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