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1/29/24 Monday

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US Government Employees Plan 'Day of Fasting for Gaza' to Denounce Biden's Policies

The group, which also organized an office walkout earlier this month, plan to stage a hunger strike on Thursday.

US government employees of the group Feds United for Peace are planning a day of "fasting" in an attempt to raise awareness of the humanitarian conflict in Gaza. The group is made up of dozens of officials who are against US President Joe Biden's policies toward Israel, and had organized a walkout earlier this month, also in protest of Biden's policies.

Government officials who participate in the protest are also expected to show up to their offices dressed in black or wearing keffiyeh scarves as a symbol of Palestinian solidarity. Forgoing food out of choice, said one federal employee, is representative of Israel's use of "starvation as a weapon of war by intentionally withholding food from entering Gaza".

This month, an Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) report found that the Gaza Strip conflict has left those in the area food insecure and at risk of famine.

The group is made up of members who represent more than two dozen agencies including the department of defense, homeland security and state, those with careers in the public service, and political appointees. According to a report published on Monday, the group expects hundreds of government employees to participate in the hunger strike.

A walkout by the group earlier this month drew criticism from both Republicans and Democrats. US House Speaker Mike Johnosn (R-LA) said that those who participated "deserved to be fired". But the Feds United for Peace Group say that they are only hoping to start a conversation about the Gaza conflict in their offices, in hopes of working towards a policy that would support a ceasefire.

However, one report notes that Biden seems unswayed by any political protests regarding the conflict in Gaza. And White House insiders reportedly say that Biden has the final say on any of the administration's decisions regarding Israel policy.

The US president has repeatedly refused to encourage a ceasefire in Gaza, which has claimed more than 26,000 Palestinians. The administration also bypassed Congress in order to funnel millions of dollars worth of weapons to Israel, and the president has continued to seek billions more.

As a result, Biden (who faces a looming battle to keep his position in the White House this year) has lost support from his base. Just one in three registered voters reportedly approve of his handling of the conflict, according to polls. And the figure drops even more among young voters with just 20% of those under the age of 30 supporting his decision.

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Sustainable Food System Switch Could Create Up to $10 Trillion in Benefits Yearly

The commission has proposed a plan to overhaul food production across the globe that could save lives as well as economic costs.

If the global food system were overhauled, we could bring in trillions of dollars worth of benefits, according to a report published on Monday by the Food System Economics Commission (FSEC).

Currently, the way in which food is being produced, marketed, and consumed globally adds up to $15 trillion in losses a year—which is equivalent to 12% of the GDP in 2020.

“The recent evolution of food systems has fuelled – and continues to inflame – some of the greatest and gravest challenges facing humanity, notably persistent hunger, undernutrition, the obesity epidemic, loss of biodiversity, environmental damage and climate change,” the report writes.

“The economic value of this human suffering and planetary harm is well above $10 trillion a year, more than food systems contribute to global GDP. In short, our food systems are destroying more value than they create.”

The report found that our current food practices are responsible for a third of global greenhouse gas emissions, including those which arise from deforestation which result in the “net loss of over 6 million hectares of natural forest” every year and result in environmental costs of about $3 trillion. And if we continue down this path, we will reach a warming effect of 2.7C by the end of the century.

“Food production in many countries becomes increasingly vulnerable to climate change and environmental degradation, with the likelihood of extreme events dramatically increasing,” says the FSEC.

“Rising food prices due to climate or other shocks heighten poverty and hunger, stretching the budgets of the poor and middle classes. This leads to social tensions and the imposition of measures to limit trade.”

Health costs, the report estimates, is equivalent to about $11 trillion per year: the negative effects of labor productivity are caused by the ill health linked to our current food system. If we continue down the path of our current food system, the study says, then 640 million people will be underweight by 2050, while rates of obesity in other parts of the world will increase by 70%.

Our current food system also contributed to a source of structural poverty through the costs of goods and the low incomes of those who work in food production, the report says. The rate of food poverty tends to be higher in agriculture than in the other divisions of food labor systems.

Current policy commitments, says the FSEC, will not do enough to derail the current global food system from its unsustainable path. But the commission claims that they have created a pathway which they have titled the Food System Transformation (FST).

The FST could provide economic benefits of $5 trillion to $10 trillion, the report claims. This system could “eliminate” undernutrition by 2050, and save 164 million lives from premature deaths due to poor health, grant farmers a sufficient income, and protect an additional 1.4 billion hectares of land while a further “200 million hectares are afforested”.

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The FST plan could also reverse biodiversity loss, reduce demand for irrigation water and almost cut in half nitrogen surplus from agriculture and natural land, the report adds. They also claim that this new plan could ensure that global warming is limited to well below the 1.5C Paris Climate target by the end of the century. This plan could also reallocate about 75 million more on-farm jobs to other segments of food systems or other sectors than expected under "current trends".

"There is no longer time to delay the inevitable — this report highlights the steps that policymakers must take now to create a healthier, more sustainable future," Michael Pollan, a food writer and Harvard professor, said. "The restructuring of food systems is indisputably one of the greatest opportunities we have to reverse decades of damage to both the planet and to human health."

The report comes just after the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization released research in November that estimated the hidden cost of food systems across the world to be about $10 trillion a year.

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Musk Says His Startup Neuralink Has Implanted First Brain Chip in a Human

The billionaire's startup claims the interface will enable people with quadriplegia (paralysis of all four limbs) to control devices with their thoughts.

US billionaire and business owner Elon Musk says his tech start up Neuralink has successfully inserted a chip into the brain of its first human test subject.

The 52-year-old took to his company X (formerly Twitter) on Monday writing: "The first human received an implant from @Neuralink yesterday and is recovering well. Initial results show promising neuron spike detection."

Last month, the company announced it was looking for quadriplegics under 40 years of age to participate in their testing. According to a report, the company's testing involves removing part of the patient's skull before allowing a 7-foot-tall robot to implant 64 threads lined with electrodes into that person's brain.

"The short-term goal of the company is to build a generalized brain interface and restore autonomy to those with debilitating neurological conditions and unmet medical needs," said DJ Seo, the co-founder of Neuralink.

"Then, really, the long-term goal is to have this available for billions of people and unlock human potential and go beyond our biological capabilities," added Seo.

Last year, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) gave Neuralink clearance to conduct its first trial to test its implants on humans after the company performed hundreds of tests on pigs, sheep and monkeys.

The company has killed about 1,500 animals as a result. The medical device company fell under a federal investigation for potential animal-welfare violations amid complaints that animal testing was being rushed, and that animals were needlessly suffering and dying as a result, according to a report from December of 2022.

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Current and former Neuralink employees claimed that the number of animal deaths was higher than is typical for medical research due to Musk's demands to speed up the process. According to the report, he sent staffers a news article which claimed Swiss researchers were able to help a paralyzed man walk again with the aid of an electrical implant.

"We could enable people to use their hands and walk again in daily life!" Musk wrote in an email in 2022 to staff. "In general, we are simply not moving fast enough. It is driving me nuts!"

Earlier this month the company was also fined for violating US Department of Transportation (DoT) rules regarding the movement of hazardous materials, according to a report. The company's facilities in Texas and California were investigated in February of 2023 and the DoT found that Neuralink had failed to register itself as a transporter of hazardous material.

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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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UK Labour Party Suspends MP Over Suggestion Gaza Conflict Amounts to Genocide in X Post

A left-wing activist group lambasted the decision to suspend Osamor, and said it damaged the Labour Party's reputation.

Kate Osamor, a Labour MP for Edmonton in North London, has been suspended over a Holocaust Memorial Day post in which she suggested that the Israeli action in Gaza is a genocide.

In her social media post to X (formerly Twitter), she wrote: "Tomorrow is Holocaust Memorial Day, an international day to remember the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust, the millions of other people murdered under Nazi persecution of other groups and more recent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and now Gaza."

Afterwards, she made a post saying: "Holocaust Memorial Day is a day to remember the 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust and the genocides that have occurred since. I apologize for any offense caused by my reference to the ongoing humanitarian disaster in Gaza as part of that period of remembrance."

She then repeated her first message, but substituted "Gaza" with "Darfur".

The MP's comments were made on the same day that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) made a provisional ruling that ordered Tel Aviv to prevent acts of genocide in Gaza. But despite that ruling, the Board of Deputies of British Jews issued a statement saying that it "unreservedly condemn(s) the attempts by Kate Osamor to link the Holocaust to the current situation in Gaza". In addition, the Jewish Labour Movement condemned the post as "inappropriate and offensive", and added that her "non-apology rang hollow".

A left-wing activist group offered their support for the MP and criticized the Labour Party and damaged their "anti-racism" reputation.

"This outrageous decision further damages Labour's reputation for anti-racism under Keir Starmer, and should be immediately reversed," the group said. "Just two days ago, the International Court of Justice found that Israel had a plausible case to answer on genocide in regards to its brutal and inhumane war on Gaza."

"But instead of echoing this call to stop a potential genocide, Keir Starmer is attacking those calling it out. We call on all in Labour to resist this shameful and opportunistic attempt to hound another Black woman out of the party."

On Sunday, a Labour source confirmed that the chief whip had suspended Osamor and that an investigation over her comments was pending, according to a UK report.

Shadow Secretary of State for Business Jonathan Reynolds said that Osamor had met the chief whip to discuss the X post and was also due to meet officials this week for more "conversations" about the post.

The conflict between state and federal power is among the most historically contentious aspects of the United States' system of governance. The dynamic has led some to fear an outbreak of violence as Texas Gov. Greg Abbott continues to defy President Joe Biden on policy at America's southern border.

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“This country's coming unglued,” feared host Gerland Nixon on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program Monday.

But his colleague Jamarl Thomas says the confrontation is designed to make Biden look weak before the upcoming November election, with scenes of chaos at the border and a potential collapse in Ukraine as Biden fails to secure legislation on either issue.

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‘Cutthroat Politics’: Republicans Refuse to Bail Out Biden on Border, Ukraine

Election year politics stymies legislation on immigration and foreign aid, creating the potential for chaos at the border and “collapse” in Ukraine.

The border policy standoff between US President Joe Biden and Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has intensified in recent days, with the Republican governor pledging to install more razor wire in defiance of a Supreme Court order.

“The federal government has broken the compact between the United States and the states,” read a statement from the conservative politician. “The executive branch of the United States has a constitutional duty to enforce those laws and has even violated them. The result is that he has smashed records for illegal immigration.”

Immigrant rights activists have slammed the measure, claiming Texas officials’ actions have contributed to the deaths of migrants.

Eager to secure more military aid for Ukraine, Biden has advocated compromise legislation combining the two issues, but has been rebuffedby House Republicans. As Congressional dysfunction seems poised to stall progress on yet another legislative priority, Jamarl Thomas and Garland Nixon, the hosts of Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program, discussed the fallout on Monday.

“This country's coming unglued,” said Nixon of the contentious political battle. “The country is politically unstable. People are like, 'Hey, should we send the federal government against the states?' And there's now a bunch of truckers that are like, 'we're armed and we're going to the border to stand up against the Biden administration.' And I'm like, man, the wheels are falling off the cart here.”

“It is rather shocking when you think about it,” agreed Thomas. “And, look, to be honest, Joe Biden can call for the military, for the federal troops in Texas to be federalized. So, the federal law is right.”

Historic political polarization combined with the prospect of an encounter between armed state and federal agents has led many to suggest a civil war could be in the making. The conflict between state and federal power is among the most historically contentious aspects of the United States’ system of governance. Thomas noted the potential for a violent incident is “an unsettling place to be.”

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Meanwhile, legislative efforts to address border policy have fallen victim to election year politics. “When you look at the Senate, the Senate seems like they're ready to deal,” observed Thomas. “[Republican House Speaker] Mike Johnson is like 'kick rocks.' But it's like, how long can Mike Johnson kick rocks? The Republican Party has screamed about the border, Fox News screams about it everyday, then Biden said, 'Okay, I'm ready for a deal, you got me, I'm taking the knee.' How do they tell him no?”

Thomas speculated Republicans’ would continue to stall legislation on both aid for Kiev and immigration, forcing Biden to seek reelection amidst accusations of chaos at the border and Ukraine in danger of “collapse.”

‘[With] every dollar they don't give to Ukraine it enhances Republican chances of them pointing the finger and saying, 'Look at what Joe Biden did, this is Joe Biden's war. Look at all the money he gave to it and it just fell apart,'” said Thomas. “If you were a Trump, or you're the Republicans, you want that border to be a festering wound for the next five months so you can point to that wound [and say], 'We tried to get Joe Biden to do something. He just doesn't want to do anything on the border.'”

“It's not nice and it ain't right,” agreed Nixon. “It's cut-throat politics.”

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US Says to Revoke Venezuela Oil Sanctions Relief Absent Progress Between Gov't, Opposition

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - The United States will not renew its general license in April that allows crude purchases from Venezuela unless there is progress between President Nicolas Maduro and the opposition, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Friday.

"In support of the Barbados Agreement, the United States issued General License 44, which provides relief to Venezuela’s oil and gas sector," Miller said in a statement. "Absent progress between Maduro and his representatives and the opposition Unitary Platform, particularly on allowing all presidential candidates to compete in this year’s election, the United States will not renew the license when it expires on April 18, 2024."

Additionally, the United States is revoking General License 43, which authorized transactions involving Venezuelan state-owned gold mining company Minerven.

"U.S. persons will have fourteen days to wind down any transactions that were previously authorized by that license," the spokesman added.

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Blinken, Qatari Prime Minister Discuss Gaza Hostages in Washington Meeting – State Dept.

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WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken raised the issue of immediately releasing all hostages held by Hamas during his meeting with Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani in Washington, the State Department said on Tuesday.

"The leaders discussed the importance of facilitating the immediate release of all hostages held by Hamas. Secretary Blinken additionally expressed gratitude for Qatar's indispensable mediation efforts, especially since October 7," the release stated.

They also discussed humanitarian assistance to Gaza, the Houthi attacks on ships transiting through the Red Sea, and the two-state solution.

Al Thani said on Monday at the Atlantic Council that he hoped to be able to relay a proposal to Hamas that would see the group engage constructively.

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Blinken to Arrive in Israel on Saturday Amid Hostage Deal Talks - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is expected to travel to Israel this week amid reports of progress on a potential agreement to release remaining hostages in Gaza, the Israeli news outlet Ynet reported on Tuesday.

Blinken is set to arrive in Israel on Saturday for his sixth trip since the October 7 Hamas attack, the report said.

On Monday, NBC News reported that Israel, the United States, Egypt and Qatar agreed in Paris on the basis of a new deal for the gradual release of hostages in the Gaza Strip. The new deal includes a phased release of the remaining US and Israeli hostages, starting with women and children, along with gradual pauses in fighting and aid supplies to the Gaza Strip, as well as the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli prisons.

The Palestinian movement Hamas has received a proposal regarding a truce in the Gaza Strip and will give a response after studying it, the chairman of the movement's political office, Ismail Haniyeh, said on Tuesday.

The Hamas leadership has also received an invitation to visit Cairo to discuss a framework agreement reached in Paris.

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Broader Economic Impact From Red Sea Attacks Remains Limited, But Risks High - IMF

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) – Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea continue to have a limited impact on the global economy, but risks remain, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Chief Economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said on Tuesday.

"As of now, the broader economic impact remains limited," Gourinchas said during a briefing.

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He added that the IMF continues to monitor the situation very closely and warned about potential implications.

"We've already seen, for instance, shipping costs from Asia to Europe increase quite sharply on the back of the rerouting of the shipping around Africa instead of going through the Suez Canal. So yes, there are some concerns about this," he added.

The IMF, however, does not believe that it could lead to elevated inflation, Gourinchas said.

The escalation in the Red Sea, through which 11% of global trade flows, remains one of the major challenges to global recovery, the IMF said in its World Economic Outlook on Tuesday.

The Houthis, also known as the Ansar Allah movement, vowed in November to attack any ships associated with Israel until it halts its military actions in the Gaza Strip.

This led US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in December to announce the creation of a multinational operation to secure navigation in the Red Sea. In addition, the US and the United Kingdom have since launched several rounds of strikes against Houthi positions in a bid to degrade the rebels' ability to target commercial vessels.

The US strikes have failed to prevent attacks on vessels in the Red Sea, the Houthis have said. The only way to stop the escalation is to allow unrestricted imports of food and medicine into the Gaza Strip and stop the "genocide" of the population in Gaza, they stated.

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Global Oil Price Decline Does Not Directly Impact Russian Revenue Due to Oil Cap - IMF

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday that an expected decline in global oil prices may not necessarily impact the Russian economy because the country's energy revenues were already limited by the Group of Seven (G7)-imposed oil price cap.

"Of course, the situation in the case of Russia is a little bit more complicated, as you well know, because there is also an oil price cap that is in place by the G7, and so, even if global oil prices were to decline, then that'd be not necessarily directly impact Russian oil revenues depending on the enforcement and implementation of the oil price gap," IMF Chief Economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas told reporters.

However, Gourinchas pointed out that a decline in global oil prices would "mechanically" weigh on Russia’s export revenues given that the country is a big oil exporter.

The IMF said in its World Economic Outlook on Tuesday that the annual average oil prices are projected to fall by about 2.3% in 2024.

In December 2022, the G7, the European Union and Australia introduced a price cap on Russian oil at $60 per barrel. At the end of 2023, the G7 tightened control over compliance with the price ceiling and imposed a number of sanctions against companies and individual tankers transporting Russian oil allegedly in violation of the restrictions.

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Annual Average Oil Prices Projected to Fall by About 2.3% in 2024 - IMF

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund's latest economic forecasts are based on the assumption that annual average oil prices will fall by about 2.3% in 2024, according to the latest update to the IMF's World Economic Outlook on Tuesday.

"Annual average oil prices are projected to fall by about 2.3 percent in 2024, whereas nonfuel commodity prices are expected to fall by 0.9 percent," the IMF said in World Economic Outlook (WEO).

The IMF noted, however, that a key downside risk to global growth is that the conflict in Gaza and Israel could escalate further into the Middle East, which produces about 35 percent of the world's oil exports and 14 percent of its gas exports.

"Continued attacks in the Red Sea—through which 11 percent of global trade flows—and the ongoing war in Ukraine risk generating fresh adverse supply shocks to the global recovery, with spikes in food, energy, and transportation costs," the IMF added.

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IMF Says Russian Economy Doing Better on Growth Than Forecast as Seen Repeatedly in 2023

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - The Russian economy is doing better with respect to growth than the International Monetary Fund had previously forecast, IMF Chief Economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said ahead of the release of the IMF's updated World Economic Outlook.

"I think the overall picture is certainly one where the Russian economy has been doing better on growth than what we've forecasted. That's something that we've seen repeatedly in 2023," Gourinchas told reporters.

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IMF Revises Russia's 2024 Growth Forecast Upward by 1.5 Percentage Points to 2.6% - WEO

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund on Tuesday revised its economic growth forecast for Russia in 2024 upward by 1.5 percentage points to 2.6%, according to the latest update to the IMF's World Economic Outlook (WEO).

"Growth in Russia is projected at 2.6 percent in 2024 and 1.1 percent in 2025, with an upward revision of 1.5 percentage points over the October 2023 figure for 2024, reflecting carry over from stronger-than-expected growth in 2023 on account of high military spending and private

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consumption, supported by wage growth in a tight labor market," the IMF said in its update.

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IMF Revises 2024 Global Growth Forecast Upward by 0.2 Percentage Points to 3.1% - WEO

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund on Tuesday revised its global economic growth forecast for 2024 upward by 0.2 percentage points to 3.1%, according to the latest update to the IMF's World Economic Outlook (WEO).

"Global growth is projected at 3.1 percent in 2024 and 3.2 percent in 2025, with the 2024 forecast 0.2 percentage point higher than that in the October 2023 World Economic Outlook (WEO) on account of greater-than-expected resilience in the United States and several large emerging market and developing economies, as well as fiscal support in China," the IMF said.

However, the forecast for 2024 and 2025 remains below the historical average of 3.8%, with global growth projected at 3.2% in 2025, it added.

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Growth in China Expected at 4.6% in 2024, 4.1% in 2025 - IMF

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) – China's economy is expected to grow by 4.6% this year and 4.1% in 2025, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday.

"Growth in China is projected at 4.6 percent in 2024 and 4.1 percent in 2025," the IMF said in its World Economic Outlook (WEO).

The IMF revised up China's 2024 forecast by 0.4 percentage points compared to its October projection, according to the report.

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Growth in Euro Area to Recover to 0.9% in 2024, 1.7% in 2025 - IMF

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) – Economic growth in the euro area is expected to recover from 0.5% last year to 0.9% in 2024 and to 1.7% in 2025, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday.

"Growth in the euro area is projected to recover from its low rate of an estimated 0.5 percent in 2023, which reflected relatively high exposure to the war in Ukraine, to 0.9 percent in 2024 and 1.7 percent in 2025," the IMF said in its World Economic Outlook.

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The IMF expects stronger household consumption to drive the recovery, the report added.

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US Growth Projected to Fall to 2.1% in 2024, 1.7% in 2025 - IMF

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) – US economic growth is expected to slow down from 2.5% last year to 2.1% in 2024 and 1.7% in 2025, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday in a report.

"In the United States, growth is projected to fall from 2.5 percent in 2023 to 2.1 percent in 2024 and 1.7 percent in 2025, with the lagged effects of monetary policy tightening, gradual fiscal tightening, and a softening in labor markets slowing aggregate demand," the IMF said in its World Economic Outlook (WEO).

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IMF Expects Global Headline Inflation to Fall to 5.8% in 2024, 4.4% in 2025

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) – Global headline inflation is set to fall from 6.8% to 5.8% this year and to 4.4% in 2025, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday.

"Global headline inflation is expected to fall from an estimated 6.8 percent in 2023 (annual average) to 5.8 percent in 2024 and 4.4 percent in 2025," the IMF said in its World Economic Outlook (WEO).

The global forecast is unrevised for 2024 compared with October 2023 projections and revised down by 0.2 percentage point for 2025, according to the report.

"Advanced economies are expected to see faster disinflation, with inflation falling by 2.0 percentage points in 2024 to 2.6 percent, than are emerging market and developing economies, where inflation is projected to decline by just 0.3 percentage point to 8.1 percent," the WEO added.

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IMF Says Absence of External Funds Would Adversely Impact Ukraine Economy

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - External funds remain important for Ukraine to close its funding gap and their absence would adversely impact the country's macroeconomic environment, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday.

"It is very much the case that that funding is important for Ukraine to be able to close its funding

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gap, and in the absence of that funding, the macroeconomic environment would be much, much adversely impacted," IMF Chief Economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said.
Gourinchas emphasized that Ukraine needs $42 billion in additional funding for 2024, pointing out that the IMF's program with Ukraine is providing about $15 billion in funding.

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American Views of US Economy Improve but Remain Dim – Poll

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) – American views of the US economy have improved to its highest point in two years, yet the majority of Americans still say the economy is getting worse, according to a Gallup poll released Tuesday.
Gallup's latest monthly Economic Confidence Index, measured during a January 2-22 poll, rose to -26, marking an increase of six points from the previous month. More than one quarter of respondents rated economic conditions as "excellent" (5%) or good (22%). A similar percentage (29%) saw them as "fair," while most (45%) saw them as "poor."
Additionally, 63% of respondents said the economy is getting worse, although this marked a decrease from 68% last month. In a separate poll that Gallup conducted from January 2-16, the same percentage cited recent price increases as causing financial hardship for their family.
The Economic Confidence Index, which ranges from -100 to +100, has been in negative territory for the most part since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

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Montana Governor Says Monitoring Case of Teen Taken From Parents Amid Gender Dispute

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - Montana Governor Greg Gianforte said in a statement via social media platform X that his administration is monitoring the case of a 14-year-old teen who was separated from their parents by state officials, amid disputes over the teen's gender identity.
"Upon hearing recent allegations related to a child welfare case, I asked Lieutenant Governor Kristen Juras… to review it," the statement said on Monday. "I have asked the lieutenant governor to continue monitoring the case as it progresses."
The teen's parents are accusing Montana's child protective services of kidnapping their child, after the 14-year-old expressed suicidal ideations, Reduxx reported, citing an interview with the parents.
Hospital staff refused the parents' requests not to refer to the teenager, who identifies as a male, by their unofficial name, the report said. The parents told the hospital staff that referring to the teen by their self-chosen name violates their moral and religious beliefs, the report said.
The medical gender transition of minors, as well as the use of taxpayer funds for such

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treatments, is prohibited under Montana state law. Nevertheless, the Montana Child and Family Services Division and police took the teen from the parents for allegedly refusing to provide medical care, the report said.

Officials temporarily moved the teen to a facility in Wyoming without consulting with the parents, the report said. However, the teen has since returned to a facility in Montana, the report said.

On January 19, a court granted full custody of the teen to state authorities, citing the parents' refusal to go along with the gender transition, the report said. The teen may now be placed in the care of her birth mother in Canada, who the parents claim has never had a meaningful relationship with the child, the report said.

The teen's parents defied a court order to remain silent about the case in order to share their story, the report said. The parents were set to appear in court on Monday to respond to contempt charges, although the hearing was delayed, the report said.

The parents intend to seek legal action against the Child and Family Services Division, the hospital and a group facility, which they allege socially transitioned the teen against their wishes, the report said.

An initial review of the case indicates that the court followed state policy and law in their handling of the case, Gianforte's statement said.

Last year, Gianforte vetoed a bill passed by the state legislature, which would have required the Child and Family Services Division to obtain a warrant before removing a child from their parents' home, unless the child were at risk for physical abuse in the time it would take to obtain one.

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US Authorizing Dealings With Venezuelan Gold Firm Minerven Through February 13 - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - The United States is authorizing transactions with the Venezuelan gold mining company Minerven until February 13, the Treasury Department said in a notice.

"All transactions that are ordinarily incident and necessary to the wind down of any transaction involving CVG Compania General de Mineria de Venezuela CA (Minerven), or any entity in which Minerven owns, directly or indirectly, a 50 percent or greater interest, that are prohibited by Executive Order (EO) 13850, as amended by EO 13857, or EO 13884, each as incorporated into the Venezuela Sanctions Regulations, 31 CFR part 591, are authorized through 12:01 a.m. eastern standard time, February 13, 2024," the notice said on Monday.

In October, the United States issued a sanctions relief package on Venezuela's energy sector and Minerven as part of Caracas' commitment to hold free and fair elections and to release the so-called "wrongfully" detained political prisoners.

According to the Treasury Department, the sanctions waiver on Minerven was meant to reduce the trafficking of Venezuelan gold.

The United States is reportedly preparing to let a US sanctions waiver on Venezuela's oil and gas sector expire in April for allegedly failing to meet its commitments under the so-called

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"electoral roadmap." It is unclear if the deadline for transactions with Minerven is related to this effort.

Venezuelan Prosecutor General Tarek William Saab recently said that the country's security forces had thwarted preparations for five terrorist attacks, arresting 27 persons. The detainees are believed to have recruited Venezuelan military personnel and planned, in coordination with the US authorities, assassination attempts on President Nicolas Maduro and other high-ranking officials. Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez alleged that US oil giant Exxon Mobil had sponsored preparations for the foiled assassination attempts.

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Musk Says Neuralink Implanted First Human With Company's In-Brain Device

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said in a statement via social media platform X that his neurotechnology company, Neuralink, implanted the first human with one of its in-brain devices.

"The first human received an implant from Neuralink yesterday and is recovering well," the statement said on Monday.

Initial results indicate a "promising" neuron spike detection, the statement said.

Musk has previously said that Neuralink's objective is to develop a comprehensive brain interface that incorporates a generalized input and output device to enable interaction with all aspects of the brain.

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Europe Will Soon Have Capacity to Provide Ukraine 1Mln Rounds of Ammo - Commissioner

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - European countries will soon have the production capacity to provide Ukraine with one million rounds of ammunition, European Commissioner for the Internal Market Thierry Breton said in an Atlantic Council interview.

"We will soon reach the capacity to deliver 1 million rounds — when I say soon, it means at the end of March — of ammunition by Europe for Ukraine," Breton said on Monday.

European Union countries must now work closely to ensure that ammo is effectively delivered to Ukraine, Breton said.

Supporting Ukraine will remain a priority for "as long as it takes," Breton said, adding that countries will do whatever it takes to aid the country.

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Two Thirds of US Voters Back Texas Against Biden on Building Border Barriers - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - More than two-thirds of potential voters back Texas in its actions to erect razor barbed wire fencing on its portion of the US land border with Mexico in defiance of the federal government, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed.

"In a dispute over the US-Mexico border that made it to the Supreme Court, most voters side with Texas against President Joe Biden's administration," a release on the poll said on Monday.

The poll found that that 69% of likely US voters support Texas erecting barriers at the border to prevent illegal immigrants from crossing into the United States, the release said.

That figure includes 53% of voters who strongly support the actions of Texas Governor Greg Abbott, the release said.

"Only 27% oppose Texas taking action to prevent illegal immigration, including 15% who strongly oppose the state's action," the statement added.

On January 22,the US Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in support of the Biden administration's move to prevent the barriers from being erected. Abbott issued a statement saying it was Texas' obligation to protect the citizens from what he termed has been an invasion, given the federal government's failure to do so.

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ANALYSIS - Texas Dispute With Biden Admin. Over Protecting Border Reveals US Empire in Decline

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - The escalating dispute between the state of Texas, backed by 25 other US states, and the Biden administration over Governor Greg Abbott's plans to erect barbed wire barriers against illegal immigrants crossing over the US border with Mexico is a significant sign that the United States is an empire in decline with wider implications for NATO, legal and political authorities told Sputnik.

"The growing polarization and division involved in the immigrant issue is another sign, in my opinion, of an empire in decline, and a problem that the United States [with] NATO helped bring on itself," retired FBI agent, renowned whistleblower and former Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel for the bureau Coleen Rowley said.

Twenty-five state governments have come out in support of Abbott's declaration that he will defy the Biden administration and go ahead with building the barriers to protect the US southern border from the record level of illegal immigrant arrivals in the United States numbering in the millions.

On January 22, the US Supreme Court ruled in a 5-4 decision that federal Border Patrol agents had the constitutional right to remove the razor-wire fencing set up by the Texas authorities on

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Abbott's instructions.

However, on Friday, Abbott said he was prepared for a conflict with the federal authorities over the issue. Abbott argued that Texas - and the United States - are facing an invasion and have the constitutional right to protect themselves from it when the federal government not fulfilling its obligation.

Now, President Joe Biden wants the Senate to grant him new emergency powers to deal with the problem.

A bipartisan bill is being discussed that would give Biden "a new emergency authority to shut down the border when it becomes overwhelmed," with the president claiming that he will use this power as soon as it becomes available to him.

However, Rowley warned Biden's actions would not avert the major constitutional crisis that was erupting over the issue.

"Anytime half of the states disagree on an important issue and try to defy federal authority, it's serious and risks turning into a constitutional crisis," Rowley said.

The border and constitutional crisis has already had global repercussions since it has derailed Biden's efforts to secure additional aid for Ukraine through Congress and more armaments supplies to that country, Rowley said.

"Even if courts can quickly order the states to comply with federal authority, the illegal immigrant problem is already holding up the billions of dollars in Biden's request for funding of weapons to Ukraine and is being reported as a main issue for the upcoming presidential election," Rowley said.

The mass immigration itself was the product of generations of exploitation of Central and Latin America by US oligarchs and financial interests, Rowley also said.

"The Global North's exploitation and its launching of wars and 'regime change' coups in the Global South seem to be a large part of the massive migrations," Rowley added.

A HISTORIC DISPUTE AMID RECORD ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT INFLOWS

California State University Professor Emeritus of Political Science Beau Grosscup said the crisis was also deeply rooted in historic disputes over the extent of federal authority when it conflicts with the deeply felt interests of major US states, especially across the country's continental heartland.

"This is the latest in a long-standing dispute over Article 2: The Supremacy Clause in which the Supreme Court has consistently upheld the principle that the federal government is supreme in all things foreign policy to the point of declaring all state laws including with Article 2 invalid," Grosscup said.

The Supreme Court's vote last week was consistent with previous judicial outcomes on such issues, Grosscup pointed out.

"The Supreme Court 5-4 decision is in line with past rulings that echo the following: No State can rewrite our foreign policy to conform to its own domestic policies," Grosscup said.

Power over external affairs was not shared by the states but was vested in the national government exclusively, Grosscup said.

"Does that mean that the Constitution matters or not? In the case of Article 2, five Supreme Court justices say it does," Grosscup said.

Legally, Texas and its supporters were not posing a constitutional crisis, Grosscup said.

However, "Depending on how the Biden administration and state authorities behave, the

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political question is as in the past challenges, the real issue," Grosscup added.
Former president Donald Trump, the likely Republican nominee for president this year, lashed out at the Biden administration on Saturday for allowing the illegal immigrant surge on the US southern border to continue unabated.
"Our border has become a weapon of mass destruction - our destruction," Trump wrote in a series of posts on his social media platform Truth Social.
The US authorities had 302,000 encounters with immigrants trying to cross the border illegally during the month of December, in what is marked as an all-time record.

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American Airlines Faces Class Action Lawsuit for Seizing Frequent Flier Miles - Filing

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - American Airlines (AA) faces a potential class action lawsuit for seizing frequent flier miles from customers, according to a class action complaint filed in the US District Court for the Northern District of California.
“This action arises out of AA’s wrongful and unilateral termination of AAdvantage program accounts, resulting in the loss of airline miles benefits that had been accrued based on previous purchases, and which carried monetary value,” the complaint, filed Monday, said.
The plaintiffs, Ari and Shanna Nachison, were forced to forfeit more than half a million frequent flier miles each, the filing said. The class action complaint is brought both on behalf of the Nachisons and for “similarly situated” members of the AAdvantage program, the filing said.
The lawsuit seeks relief for alleged breach of contract and unjust enrichment, the filing said. The plaintiffs are seeking actual, general, special, incidental, statutory, punitive and consequential damages and restitution, pre- and post-judgement interest on monetary relief, and attorneys’ fees and costs, the filing said.
The plaintiffs demand a trial by jury on all triable issues, the filing added.

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Situation in Middle East Most Dangerous 'Since at least 1973' - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - The current situation in the Middle East is the most dangerous since at least 1973, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during the joint press conference with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in Washington.
"It is very important to note that this is an incredibly volatile time in the Middle East. I would argue that we have not seen a situation as dangerous as the one we are facing now across the region since at least 1973, and arguably even before that," Blinken said on Monday.
Three US soldiers were killed on Sunday and dozens were injured in a drone attack on a US military outpost in the northeast of Jordan near the border with Syria.

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President Joe Biden blamed unspecified allegedly Iran-backed militant groups, but said the United States was still gathering the facts about the attack.
Iran has denied playing any role in the attack.

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Stoltenberg Says Supporting Ukraine is Not Charity, It Is An Investment in Global Security

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said during a press briefing that supporting Ukraine goes beyond charity, serving as an investment into global security.
"Supporting Ukraine is not a charity, it is an investment in our own security," Stoltenberg said during a press briefing on Monday.
In October, the White House requested from Congress supplemental funding of for more than $100 billion, including more than $60 billion for Ukraine, but Republican lawmakers have refused to approve the request without including substantive measures to strengthen US border security and address record levels of illegal immigration into the United States.
Western countries have been providing military aid to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022 in the amount of hundreds of billions of dollars. The aid evolved from artillery munitions and training in 2022 to heavier weapons, including tanks, advanced air-defense systems, cluster munitions and missiles later that year and in 2023. The Kremlin has consistently warned against the West's continued arms deliveries to Ukraine.
Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that NATO's expansion to include Ukraine creates a direct national security threat to Russia and Moscow considers the non-aligned status of Ukraine to be extremely important. Putin also said that Russia has always stood against Ukraine's membership in NATO due to its national security concerns, but never opposed its aspirations to join the European Union.

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NATO Chief Says Plans to Meet With Members of Congress Tuesday to Discuss Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that he plans to meet with US lawmakers on Capitol Hill on Tuesday to discuss a various issues, among them Ukraine.
"I will meet the members of Congress tomorrow, and, of course, I'm looking forward to discussing many issues with them, including Ukraine," Stoltenberg said during a joint press conference with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Monday.
Stoltenberg is visiting the United States from January 27 - February 1 for meetings with senior US officials, including with Blinken, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and National Security

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Advisor Jake Sullivan.

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UPDATE: US Exported Over $238Bln Worth of Weapons in 2023 - State Department

(Updates with details in paras 4-8

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - The United States exported over $238.4 billion worth of weapons in the 2023 fiscal year, with major deals spurred by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, according to a State Department fact sheet released on Monday.

"In FY2023 the total value of transferred defense articles and services and security cooperation activities conducted under the Foreign Military Sales system was $80.9 billion. This represents a 55.9% increase, up from $51.9 billion in FY2022. This is the highest annual total of sales and assistance provided to our allies and partners," the fact sheet said.

Additionally, the United States authorized $157.5 billion worth of direct commercial arms sales during the 2023 fiscal year, marking a 2.5% increase over 2022, according to the release.

Some of the largest foreign military sales included more than $40 billion worth of attack helicopters, long-range missiles, tanks and other equipment to Germany and Poland amid soaring tensions between NATO allies and Moscow.

Some of deals have been inked with US allies to replenish weapons sent to Ukraine and used against Russia.

Russia President Vladimir Putin in December noted that the military activity of the NATO bloc has sharply increased, with increasing numbers of troops and advanced weapons systems from the US deployed to Russia's borders, saying the aggressive nature of the bloc is longer hidden.

The United States is responsible for the largest amount of arms exports in the world, with sales more than doubling those of Russia and France the second, and third-largest arms exporters, respectively.

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Canada Lifts Arm Export Restrictions on Turkey, Including on Drones - Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has lifted the temporary pause it had introduced in 2020 to issue new permits for export-controlled goods and technology to Turkey, Global Affairs Canada Export Controls Operations Division said in a notice.

On Friday, media reported that Ottawa and Ankara had agreed on resuming Canadian drone parts exports to Turkey in exchange for greater transparency on their use and Sweden's accession to NATO. The agreement was reportedly reached in early January following months of negotiations and would come into effect after Turkey ratifies Sweden's accession to NATO.

"As of the date of this notification: The presumptive denial policy is no longer in place," the notice said on Monday.

Export and brokering permit applications destined to Turkey for all groups on the Export Control List and the Brokering Control List, including so-called Group 2 items (Munitions List) will now be reviewed on a case-by-case basis under Canada's risk assessment framework, the notice said.

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

The government then introduced another suspension in light of Turkey's military assistance to Azerbaijan at the time of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 amid reports that Canadian drone technology was used on the battlefield.

Canada completely canceled the suspended permits in 2021 after a review confirmed their involvement in the armed conflict.

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Blinken Says Hungary Must Act in Order to Complete Sweden's Accession to NATO

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he anticipates Hungary will have to act in order to complete Sweden's accession procedure to join NATO in the weeks ahead.

"Hungary now will have to act in order to complete the process of Sweden's accession, but I fully anticipate that that will happen in the weeks ahead when Hungary's Parliament returns," Blinken said during a joint press conference with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on Monday.

Meanwhile, Stoltenberg noted that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban was "clear" with him that he supports the Swedish bid to become a NATO member and he will promptly finalize the

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certification as soon as parliament reconvenes at the end of February.

On January 22, the Turkish parliament ratified Sweden's accession protocol by a vote of 285-55. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is expected to sign the bill into law in the coming days.

The vote left Hungary as the only hold-out among NATO member states blocking Sweden's bid to join the military alliance.

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NATO's Door Remains Open, Ukraine Will Become Member - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - NATO's door remains open to Ukraine and the country will become a member the military alliance, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a joint press conference with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in Washington.

"I think the process that we've seen in actually record time first with Finland, and now with Sweden, demonstrates that NATO's door is open, remains open, including to Ukraine which will become a member of NATO," Blinken said on Monday.

As a result of the NATO Summit in Vilnius from July 11-12, NATO leaders agreed on a package of three elements to bring Ukraine closer to the alliance. The first element is the creation of an assistance program for Ukraine that will facilitate its transition to NATO standards, training and doctrine.

The second element is the establishment of a NATO-Ukraine council and the third is the cancellation of the Membership Action Plan for Ukraine, which will allow the shortening of the accession process for the country from two steps to one. However, NATO has not extended an official invitation to Ukraine yet.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that NATO expansion to include Ukraine creates a direct national security threat for Russia and Moscow considers the non-aligned status of Ukraine to be extremely important. Putin also said that Russia has always stood against Ukraine's membership in NATO due to its national security concerns, but never opposed its aspirations to join the European Union.

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NATO Chief Says Will Visit Lockheed Martin Factory in Alabama on Wednesday

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced that he will visit a Lockheed Martin production facility in the US state of Alabama on Wednesday to recognize the need to boost production of munitions, such as the Javelin anti-tank system.

"On Wednesday, I will go to Alabama to the factory where they are producing Javelins, to recognize the importance of ramping up production," Stoltenberg said during a joint press

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conference with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

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Evidence of Lack of US Funding for Ukraine Seen on Battlefield - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - The United States is already seeing some evidence of what the lack of additional funding for Ukraine means on the battlefield against Russia, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a joint press conference with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.
"There is no other magic pot of money and we are now currently out of the military assistance that we've been providing to Ukraine and we are even seeing some evidence of what that means on the battlefield," Blinken said on Monday.

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US Response to Deadly Drone Attack in Jordan May Be Multi-Level, Come in Stages - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) - The United States' response to the deadly drone attack against US forces in Jordan could be multi-leveled and sustained over time, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a press conference.
"That response could be multi-leveled, come in stages, and be sustained over," Blinken said alongside NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg on Monday.

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Without Supplemental Funding Everything Achieved by Ukrainians to Be in Jeopardy – Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) – Without additional funding authorization from Congress, everything that Ukrainians achieved on the battlefield against Russia will be in jeopardy, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday.
"It is vital that Congress pass the supplemental budget request the [US] President [Joe Biden] has put before it. Without it, simply put, everything that Ukrainians achieved, and that we've helped them achieve will be in jeopardy," Blinken said during a joint press conference with NATO head Jens Stoltenberg during his visit to Washington D.C.

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

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 30 (Sputnik) –
CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi was allegedly told to resign but there is no official decree yet, Ukrainian lawmaker Oleksiy Goncharenko said on Monday, citing sources.
* Reports on the resignation of Zaluzhnyi are not true, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry said.
* Ukrainian shelling of Donetsk from a multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) killed three civilians and injured one more, Donetsk Mayor Alexey Kulemzin said.
PUTIN-LUKASHENKO TALKS
* Russia and Belarus will work jointly to ensure that there is equal and invisible security, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Monday during a meeting with his Belarusian counterpart, Alexander Lukashenko.
* Putin and Lukashenko signed a decree on Monday formally agreeing to set up a Union State media company, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the signing ceremony.
CAS DECISION ON RUSSIAN FIGURE SKATER VALIEVA CASE
* The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) on Monday found Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva to have committed a violation of an anti-doping rule and sanctioned her with a four-year period of ineligibility commencing on December 25, 2021.
* The decision of the CAS on the disqualification of Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva is politicized, and Russia will always protect the interests of its athletes, Peskov said.
US SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAQI BANK
* The United States on Monday sanctioned the owner of Iraq's Al-Huda Bank and proposed severing the bank from the US financial system, the Treasury Department said.
* The US sanctioned the owner of Iraq's Al-Huda Bank and alleged that the institution is enabling terrorist financing and money laundering, according to a Treasury release.
ISRAELI INVASION IN GAZA
* Israel, the United States, Qatar and Egypt have agreed to the framework of a deal on the release of hostages held by Hamas, and the proposal will be sent to the Palestinian movement later on Monday, NBC News reported, citing a source.
* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will host a donor meeting to secure funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.
* Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz canceled meetings between his ministerial officials and Philippe Lazzarini, head of the UNRWA, over allegations that some of its staff were involved in the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel.
ATTACK ON US BASE IN JORDAN
* 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.
* 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, Kirby said.

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* The deadly drone attack on a US military outpost in Jordan has the footprints of Kataib Hezbollah but no final assessment has been made yet, Pentagon deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh said

POLITICAL SITUATION IN GEORGIA

* Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said on Monday that he is stepping down from his position.

* Irakli Kobakhidze, who currently heads the ruling Georgian Dream party, is considered as a candidate for the post of the prime minister, Deputy Speaker of Parliament Archil Talakvadze said.

ISRAELI STRIKES ON DAMASCUS

* Israeli forces have launched a strike on the center of Iranian military advisers near Set Zaynab, one of the suburbs of Damascus, the Tasnim news agency reported on Monday.

* Several civilians were killed and injured in Israeli airstrikes that hit a number of positions south of the Syrian capital of Damascus, the Syrian Defense Ministry said.

EU SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The Council of the EU said on Monday that it had included Russia's Safe Internet League, its head Ekaterina Mizulina and three more people in the sanctions list for alleged human rights violation.

* The EU permanent representatives agreed on the preliminary proposal of the European Commission on the use of income from Russian frozen assets, the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU said.

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NATO 75th Summit in Washington to Be Most Ambitions Once Since End of Cold War – Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) – The upcoming 75th NATO summit that will take place in Washington D.C. in July will be the most ambitious one since the end of the Cold War, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday.

"All of this will come to an important inflection point when we get to the NATO summit…This is going to be, I think, the most ambitious summit since the end of the Cold War, showing NATO's adaptation to new challenges and new threats," Blinken said during a joint press conference with NATO head Jens Stoltenberg during his visit to Washington D.C.

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Sullivan, China's Wang Discuss Efforts to Resume Military Communication - White House

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Bangkok to discuss efforts to resume military

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communication, among other issues, Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Monday.

"Over the weekend, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan held more than 12 hours of meetings in Bangkok with his counterpart from China, Director Wang Yi. Mr. Sullivan and Director Wang took stock of progress on key issues ... That includes discussing efforts to resume military-to-military communication, which has occurred," Kirby said during a press briefing.

The two also spoke about addressing artificial intelligence safety and risks, and advancing bilateral counter-narcotics cooperation, Kirby added.

US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to restore military communications at a summit in San Francisco in November.

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US Speaker Says Even One Illegal Crossing Over Border is 'Non-Starter', Must be 'Zero'

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik)- US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Monday, that any potential deal that allows even a single illegal border crossing is a 'non-starter.

"Any border 'shutdown' authority that ALLOWS even one illegal crossing is a non-starter. Thousands each day is outrageous. The number must be ZERO," Johnson shared on his X social media profile.

Earlier today, Senator Ted Cruz stated that Senate negotiators have only provided lawmakers with bullet points about the potential deal, adding that the bill would allow nearly 1.8 million migrants into the US per year . Cruz also said that any president willing to enforce existing insisting immigration laws does not need further legislation to secure the border.

On Saturday, US House Speaker Mike Johnson likewise said that US President Joe Biden does not need new legislation from the US Congress to begin securing the border. Johnson also said that the US will have "already been surrendered" if 1.8 million migrants are allowed to enter yearly, as is purportedly authorized under the proposed deal.

However, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre insisted in an interview with CNN on Monday that Biden requires new authorities from Congress to begin securing the border, when asked about Johnson's stance.

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US Exported Over $238Bln Worth of Weapons in FY2023 - State Department

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - The United States exported over $238.4 billion worth of weapons in the 2023 fiscal year, with major deals spurred by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, according to a State Department fact sheet released on Monday.

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"In FY2023 the total value of transferred defense articles and services and security cooperation activities conducted under the Foreign Military Sales system was $80.9 billion. This represents a 55.9% increase, up from $51.9 billion in FY2022. This is the highest annual total of sales and assistance provided to our allies and partners," the fact sheet said.

Additionally, the United States authorized $157.5 billion worth of direct commercial arms sales during the 2023 fiscal year, marking a 2.5% increase over 2022, according to the release.

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White House Says Could Reinstate Sanctions on Venezuela in April Over Elections Issues

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - The United States may let the sanctions waiver on Venezuela's energy sector expire in April if Caracas does not commit to free and fair elections, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"The Maduro regime... made some commitments about opposition political parties, about free and fair elections and they haven't taken those actions," Kirby said during a press briefing. "They got until April to do so."

Kirby pointed out that the Biden administration has available options, including imposing sanctions, but declined to preview any of those at this time.

Venezuela must allow opposition members to run for office and release "political prisoners," Kirby said.

Venezuelan Prosecutor General Tarek William Saab recently said that the country's security forces had thwarted preparations for five terrorist attacks and conspiracies, with 27 people detained in the case, which the United States claims includes political figures.

The detainees are believed to have recruited Venezuelan military personnel and planned, in coordination with the US authorities, assassination attempts on President Nicolas Maduro and other high-ranking officials. In addition, Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez alleged that US oil giant Exxon Mobil had sponsored preparations for the foiled assassination attempts.

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Attack on US Base Has Footprints of Kataib Hezbollah, But No Final Assessment - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - The deadly drone attack on a US military outpost in Jordan has the footprints of Kataib Hezbollah but no final assessment has been made yet, Pentagon deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh said on Monday.

"It has the footprints of Kataib Hezbollah, but not making a final assessment on that," Singh said in a press briefing.

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US Southern Border Convoy Group Says Warned of 'Infiltrators' in Movement

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - The Take Our Border Back Convoy Steering Committee said on Monday that it was warned about people attempting to infiltrate the group in an effort to disrupt their demonstration, which is scheduled for January 29 to February 3.

"We have been informed that groups are forming to infiltrate the convoy to disrupt and start problems within the convoy and at the border itself," the steering committee said in a statement. "All infiltrators, provocateurs, or disrupters will be reported to law enforcement authorities and our legal team and handled at their discretion."

The Take Our Border Back Convoy will assemble at three locations near the United States' border with Mexico to call on the Biden Administration to secure the border from an increase in illegal migration.

The group will not visit the border directly, the statement said. A declaration on the group's website condemns any violence and urges attendees to respect law enforcement and other government authorities.

The demonstration comes amid a dispute between Texas and the Biden administration over the state's placement of razor wire barriers at the border. Last week, the US Supreme Court issued a temporary order allowing federal agents to remove the barriers, but Texas Governor Greg Abbott maintained that the state has a constitutional right to protect against invasion if the federal government will not.

On Saturday, US National Border Patrol Council Vice President Art Del Cueto told Sputnik that it is "upsetting" that the Biden administration continues to hinder border security efforts.

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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US Awards 3.1MMB in SPR Contracts to Sunoco, Exxon, Phillips, Macquarie – Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) – The US Energy Department announced on Monday that it will purchase 3.1 million barrels of oil for a total of over $240 million to refill the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) from ExxonMobil, Macquarie Commodities Trading, Phillips 66, and Sunoco.

"As of January 29, 2024, the following contracts for the purchase of 3.1MMB, totaling $242,230,800.00, have been finalized under Solicitation No. 89243524RCR000013," SPR said in a statement with the heading "May 2024 Purchase Award Information."

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ExxonMobil will deliver 700,000, Macquarie Commodities Trading 800,000, Phillips 600,000, and Sunoco 1 million barrels of oil, according to the statement.

According to the latest Energy Information Administration data, there are 356.51 million barrels of crude oil in the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve, or 4% less than a year ago.

During his administration, US President Joe Biden repeatedly resorted to selling oil from the strategic reserve to reduce gasoline prices, which at times reached record levels. For comparison, in July 2020, the size of oil stocks in SPR was 656MMB and has been steadily declining since then.

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UN Chief Continues Efforts to Fund UNRWA, Organizes Donor Meeting for Tuesday - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 29 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will host a donor meeting to secure funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"He [Guterres] met with a permanent representative of the United States [Linda Thomas-Greenfield] this morning and will host a meeting here in New York with the major donors for UNRWA tomorrow afternoon," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Dujarric said the United Nations is "horrified" by the allegations that some UNRWA staff participated in the attack on Israel on October 7, but emphasized that the world body needs to continue UNRWA's work.

On Friday, UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini said Israel shared with UNRWA data on the alleged involvement of some of the agency's staff in the October 7 attack and promised to hold accountable anyone who was implicated in acts of terrorism. The United States, France, Germany, Italy, Canada and the United Kingdom responded to the allegations by suspending funding for UNRWA.

The allegations were unveiled after the International Court of Justice said it finds "plausible" the allegations of genocide conducted by Israel against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and will look into the issue. The ICJ also issued provisional measures that Israel - and the international community - must take steps to ensure that civilian life is protected, including by promptly delivering supplies to the besieged Palestinian enclave.

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West Virginia Attorney General Tells Biden Texas Has Right to Protect Border - Letter

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey on Monday sent a letter to US President Joe Biden saying that his administration's approach to the

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crisis on the US border with Mexico is wrong and the state of Texas has a constitutional right to defend itself from an invasion of illegal immigrants.

"You have run to [the Supreme] court to impede a fellow sovereign's efforts to protect its own citizens. And administration surrogates have even proclaimed that Texas is trying to start a second Civil War. Your view is wrong. Putting aside the outrageous rhetoric, States have an unqualified constitutional right to defend themselves from 'invasion' under Article I, Section 10, Clause 3 of the United States Constitution," the letter said.

Earlier on Monday, Fox News reported that Morrisey was among 26 Republican state attorneys general who sent a letter to Biden and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas to affirm their support for the actions Texas has been undertaking to repel the record number of illegal immigrants on its portion of the US border with Mexico.

Last Monday, the US Supreme Court ruled that federal agents can cut razor wire fencing Texas installed on swaths of the 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 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.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott said on Friday that he was prepared for a conflict with the federal authorities over the border protection 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 southern border town of 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 the state's efforts "to protect the border against every effort by the Biden administration to undermine the state's constitutional right of self-defense."

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 immigrants on the US southern border.

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US Senator on Calls to Strike Iran: Congress Must Declare War to Ensure Public Input

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - US Sen. Mike Lee said on Monday that the US Congress must formally declare war to ensure public accountability and input, following calls by fellow lawmakers for the United States to strike Iran.

"By requiring Congress to declare war, the Constitution ensures that decisions to go to war will be made in public with input from the people," Lee said in a statement via social media platform X. "Congress is the branch of government most accountable to the people at the most regular intervals."

Lee’s statement came in response to calls by US Senators Lindsey Graham and John Cornyn

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to strike Iran in retaliation for a deadly strike on US forces in Jordan on Sunday. The Biden administration attributed the attack to an Iran-backed militia.

There is not an "Iran is bad" exception to the US Constitution, Lee said in a separate statement to X.

US Congressman Thomas Massie echoed Lee's statement on the constitutional necessity of Congress declaring war. Massie also cited a speech by former US President and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, in which the late leader praised US non-interventionism and warned against the pursuit of foreign conflicts.

"[The United States] has abstained from interference in the concerns of others, even when conflict has been for principles to which she clings … she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy," Adams said in an 1821 foreign policy speech quoted by Massie.

Massie also questioned whether there is a country in the world that Graham does not want to bomb, referencing Graham's history of advocating for US military intervention abroad.

The US will respond to the strike in Jordan at a time and manner of its choosing but does not seek war with Iran or a broader conflict in the Middle East, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Monday.

A US defense official told Sputnik on Monday that the Pentagon continues to investigate the attack, which killed three US soldiers and injured more than two dozen others. An Iranian official reportedly said that Tehran has nothing to do with the attack.

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UN Palestinian Agency to Run Out of Money 'Past February' Without Funding- UN Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 29 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East may run out of money past February, the Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"Right now, I think past February looks like they will run out of money," Dujarric said in a briefing.

UNRWA has 13,000 staff who work for us who serve over 2 million people in Gaza, he added.

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 in acts of terrorism. The United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Canada and some other countries swiftly responded by suspending funding for UNRWA.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip while its fighters breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 26,400 people have been killed so far in the

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Gaza Strip, local authorities said.

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

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Canada, Ukraine Negotiating Bilateral Security Guarantees - Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - The Canadian and Ukrainian governments are negotiating bilateral security guarantees in line with the Group of Seven (G7) Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement on Monday.

In mid-January, Canadian Ambassador to Ukraine Natalka Cmoc said Ottawa was preparing to sign a document on security guarantees for Ukraine and has already sent a draft document to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office.

"These discussions are a crucial step forward in developing Canada's long-term security commitment to Ukraine in line with the G7 Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine, which was adopted during the NATO Summit in July 2023," the statement said. "Canada, along with its partners and allies, is committed to standing united with Ukraine and is unwavering in its support for the Ukrainian people as they fight Russian aggression, for as long as it takes."

During the talks, Canadian Assistant Deputy Minister for International Security Heidi Hulan reaffirmed Ottawa's readiness to assist Ukraine in deterring Russia as it carries out its special military operation, the statement said.

Moreover, key priorities, areas of cooperation and future negotiation steps were also discussed during the talks, the statement said.

On August 3, Zelenskyy said he was preparing a package of security guarantees, intended for the period while Ukraine is not part of NATO. Ukraine also plans to sign a number of bilateral agreements with the United States and 12 European countries in the near future, including with Belgium, Denmark and the Czech Republic.

In response to Zelenskyy's statement on the provision of security guarantees, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said handling the matter would likely be one-sided, disregarding Russia's security concerns and thus making it an unviable initiative.

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Conflict in Mideast Remains Contained to Gaza, US Does Not Want It to Expand - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) – The conflict in the Middle East remains contained to the Gaza Strip and it is a US priority to keep it so and not let it expand into a regional war, Pentagon

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deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh said on Monday.

"The conflict does remain contained to Gaza, and that's what our priority is to keep it contained to Gaza. We do not want a regional conflict. We do not seek a wider war," Singh told CNN in an interview.

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

President Joe Biden pinned the blame on unspecified Iran-backed militant groups, but said the US was still gathering the facts. Iran has denied it had any role in the attack.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip, while its fighters breached the border, opening fire on the military and civilians. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 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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Pentagon Refuses to Comment on Reports About Gen. Zaluzhnyi's Resignation

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Defense has no comments on reports about alleged departure of Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi and refers to the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, a Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

"I refer you to the Ukrainian government for comment," the spokesperson said in a statement.

Earlier in the day, Ukrainian lawmaker Oleksiy Goncharenko said, citing sources, that Zaluzhnyi was allegedly told to resign but there was no official decree yet.

The Ukrainian Defense Ministry dismissed the reports as untrue.

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Drone Attack on US Base in Jordan Still Under Investigation – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) – The attack on a US base in Jordan that resulted in three soldiers dead and over two dozen more injured is still being investigated by the US Central Command, a US defense official told Sputnik on Monday amid reports that an enemy drone may have been confused with an American drone returning to the US installation.

"The incident is still under investigation. We do not have any additional information to provide

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you with at this time," the official said in a statement.

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

President Joe Biden pinned the blame on unspecified Iran-backed militant groups, while also saying the US was still gathering the facts.

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

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Qatari PM Says Strike on US Forces in Jordan Impacts Regional Security, Condemns Attack

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani said on Monday that Qatar condemns a strike on US forces in Jordan, which will impact regional security in the Middle East.

"That attack that happened in Jordan is condemned," Al-Thani said during an Atlantic Council interview. "I hope that nothing would undermine the [Gaza hostage release] efforts that we are doing or jeopardize the process… one way or another it will have an impact on regional security, and we hope that things get contained and not escalated."

On Sunday, three US troops were killed in a strike on a military base in Jordan near the border with Syria. US President Joe Biden pinned the attack on unspecified Iran-backed militant groups.

Qatar condemns any attack that undermines stability or security in the region, Al-Thani said.

Earlier on Monday, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said the United States will respond to the attack but does not seek a war with Iran or a wider conflict in the Middle East,

Qatar likewise seeks to avoid further escalating tensions in the region, Al-Thani said, when asked about possible retaliatory strikes by the United States.

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ICC Justice System Has ‘On, Off Button,’ Remote in Hands of Western States - Russian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, January 29 (Sputnik) - The International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague is biased in favor of Western interests and it pursues its agenda accordingly, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Maria Zabolotskaya said on Monday.

"As we have repeatedly noted, the pseudo-justice of the ICC has an on and off button, and the remote control is in the hands of the Western sponsors," Zabolotskaya said during a meeting of the UN Security Council meeting on South Sudan.

The interests of the ICC also happen to coincide with the interests of the countries of the collective West, Zabolotskaya added.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin said last year at a meeting with South Sudanese President Salva Kiir that there is a lot to be done regarding the economic cooperation between their two countries. The trade relationship between South Sudan and Russia decreased in 2022, however, it started growing again in 2023.

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Body Discovered on BART Tracks in San Francisco Prompts Temporary Station Closure

SAN FRANCISCO, January 29 (Sputnik) - A body was discovered on Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) tracks in San Francisco on Monday, leading to the closure of a station, BART spokesperson James Allison told Sputnik.

"Shortly after 1 this morning [9:00 GMT], a body was observed on the tracks between Balboa Park and Daly City Stations. Balboa Park Station was closed, and trains did not stop at the station when we opened for service at about 4:30 this morning," Allison said.

The body was recovered by the San Francisco Coroner's Office and BART Police, with no suspicion of foul play, according to the spokesperson.

"Two trains were delayed – one delayed 25 minutes and another 16 minutes," Allison said.

Allison added that the station was reopened at approximately 5:20 a.m., without any current delays in operations.

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Qatari Prime Minister Says Aiming for Permanent Israel-Hamas Ceasefire

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani said on Monday that Qatar is aiming for a permanent ceasefire between Israel and Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip.

"As you have highlighted, there was a clear demand for a permanent ceasefire ahead of the negotiations … this is what we are all aiming for," Sheikh Mohammed said in an interview at the Atlantic Council.

Qatar's main goal as a mediator is to facilitate a deal to secure the release of hostages and stop strikes on Gaza, Sheikh Mohammed said.

Earlier on Monday, US media reported that the United States, Qatar, Israel and Egypt agreed to a framework for a hostage release deal, which would include pauses in fighting in the Gaza Strip and the release of Palestinian prisoners.

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

US Air Force Successfully Tests Chimera Microwave Air Base Defense Weapon - Raytheon

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force has carried out a successful three week field test of a new high-powered microwave air base defense weapon called CHIMERA, Raytheon announced in a press release on Monday.

"The Air Force Research Laboratory and Raytheon,have successfully completed a three-week field test of the CHIMERA high-power microwave (HPM) weapon at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico," the release said "During the test, CHIMERA applied directed energy to multiple static target variations and demonstrated end-to-end fire control by acquiring and tracking aerial targets and maintaining tracking for the entire flight path."

The Counter-Electronic High-Power Microwave Extended-Range Air Base Defense system, known as CHIMERA, was built to fire highly concentrated radio energy at multiple middle-to-long-range targets. The ground-based demonstration system can project more power than other HPM systems to destroy airborne threats at the speed of light, the company said.

"High-power microwave systems are cost-effective and reliable solutions that play an important role in layered defense by increasing magazine depth and giving warfighters more options to defeat adversaries quickly. The successful test of CHIMERA is a testament to ...our commitment to developing non-kinetic solutions that can counter increasingly sophisticated threats," Raytheon Advanced Technology President Colin Whelan said in the release.

CHIMERA is part of the Directed Energy Front-line Electromagnetic Neutralization and Defeat (DEFEND) program to design, build and test HPM systems for front-line deployment, the release said.

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Ex-IRS Contractor Who Leaked Trump, Others' Tax Information Sentenced to 5 Years - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - Former Internal Revenue Service (IRS) contractor Charles Littlejohn, who leaked tax records of former President Donald Trump and others, was sentenced to five years in prison, CBS News reported on Monday.

The report also said Littlejohn was ordered to pay a $5,000 fine.

In October, Littlejohn pleaded guilty to one count of disclosing tax information without authorization.

Federal prosecutors accused Littlejohn of stealing Trump's tax return information while working as a government contractor at the IRS between 2018 and 2020.

After accessing the tax data, including records of a number of other individuals, Littlejohn contacted a news organization and provided them with Trump’s tax returns between August 2019 and October 2019, according to the Justice Department.

The stolen tax documents served as the basis for the publication of a number of articles in September 2020 by the news outlet about Trump’s tax returns ahead of the 2020 presidential

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election.

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UPDATE - US Proposes Sanctions on Iraq's Al-Huda Bank for Enabling Terrorist Financing - Treasury

(Updates with more details in paras 2-6; modifies headline)

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - The United States has proposed a series of sanctions to be imposed on Iraq's Al-Huda Bank for allegedly enabling terrorist financing and money laundering, while sanctioning the bank's owner, chairman and board president Hamad al-Moussawi, the Treasury Department said in a press release on Monday.

"Treasury is issuing a finding and notice of proposed rule-making (NPRM) that identifies Al-Huda Bank, an Iraqi bank that serves as a conduit for terrorist financing, as a foreign financial institution of primary money laundering concern," the release said.

Along with its finding, the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network proposed a rule that would sever the bank from the US financial system by prohibiting domestic financial institutions and agencies from opening or maintaining a correspondent account for or on its behalf, the release said.

In addition, the Treasury Department is imposing sanctions on the bank's owner, the release also said.

The Treasury Department alleged in the release that Al-Huda Bank was a "key money laundering channel" for terrorism sponsored by Iran and had been controlled and operated by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Quds Force since its establishment.

The bank exploited its access to US dollars to support groups designated by the United States as foreign terrorist organizations, including the IRGC and Iran-aligned Iraqi militia groups, including Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq.

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Czech Republic Confirms Purchase of 24 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters - Lockheed Martin

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - The Czech Republic has confirmed it is going to buy 24 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, Lockheed Martin announced in a press release on Monday.

"The Czech Republic government signed a Letter of Offer and Acceptance (LOA) today making official its intent to procure 24 Lockheed Martin 5th Generation F-35 Lightning II aircraft," the release said.

Through the US government Foreign Military Sale, the Czech Air Force will receive its first aircraft in 2031 in its advanced Block 4 configuration, Lockheed Martin said.

The agreement will also include personnel training, service and logistical support, and developing other support services ensuring successful deliveries of all 24 F-35s, the release

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said.
The Czech Republic will be 18th nation to join the global F-35 program, Lockheed Martin Vice President and F-35 Program General Manager Bridget Lauderdale said in the release.

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Yoav Gallant Tells US Officials He Will Not Allow Israeli Settlements in Gaza – Reports

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant told US officials last week that Tel Aviv will not allow Israeli settlers to rebuild illegal outposts or settlements in Gaza, Axios reported on Monday, citing officials from both countries.
US Ambassador to Israel Jack Lew and US envoy for humanitarian affairs David Satterfield pressed Gallant during a meeting last week to share the plans for a one-kilometer buffer zone in Gaza that is being planned by Israel and whether Tel Aviv is going to use it to build new settlements, the report said.
Gallant and IDF operations chief Oded Basyuk said during the meeting that the Israeli military will not allow their citizens to enter the buffer zone which will be used for security purposes only, according to the report.
In December, media reported that Israel had informed several Arab states it wanted to carve out a post-war buffer zone in Gaza. The US State Department said that there should be no reduction in the size of Gaza and that any post-war buffer zone within the region would violate this principle.
On Sunday, a dozen Israeli ministers, including those from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, reportedly took part in a conference that called for rebuilding settlements in Gaza and the displacement of Palestinians from the besieged enclave.
On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip, while its fighters breached the border, opening fire on the military and civilians. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 26,600 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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UPDATE - US Sanctions Owner of Iraq's Al-Huda Bank for Enabling 'Terrorist Financing' – Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) – The US sanctioned the owner of Iraq's Al-Huda Bank on Monday and alleged that the institution is enabling terrorist financing and money laundering, according to a treasury release.

"Treasury is issuing a finding and notice of proposed rulemaking (NPRM) that identifies Al-Huda Bank, an Iraqi bank that serves as a conduit for terrorist financing, as a foreign financial institution of primary money laundering concern," the release stated.

The Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control has imposed sanctions on the bank's owner, Hamad al-Moussawi, the release said.

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Austin Says 'Very Pleased' About Turkey Ratifying Sweden's NATO Bid

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Monday he was "very pleased" that Turkey is supporting Sweden's bid to join NATO.

"I'm very pleased that the Turkish parliament voted last week for Sweden to join NATO as well," Austin said ahead of a meeting with the NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg. "And we're looking forward to welcoming Sweden to NATO soon."

On January 22, the Turkish paRliament ratified Sweden's accession protocol by a vote of 285-55 Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is expected to sign the bill into law in the coming days.

The vote left Hungary as the only hold-out among NATO member states blocking Sweden's bid to join the military alliance.

The meeting on Monday marked Austin's first day of work at the Defense Department since being hospitalized after cancer treatment complications earlier this month.

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US Proposes Severing Iraq's Al-Huda Bank From Financial System, Sanctions Owner - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) – The United States on Monday sanctioned the owner of Iraq's Al-Huda Bank and proposed severing the bank from the US financial system, the Treasury Department said in a press release on Monday.

"[T]he Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) proposed a rule that would sever the bank from the US financial system by prohibiting domestic financial institutions and agencies from opening or maintaining a correspondent account for or on behalf of Al-Huda Bank. In

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addition, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is imposing sanctions on the bank's owner," the release said.

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Cosmonaut Grebenkin on Musk's Mars Ambitions: These Are Plans for Future

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Russian cosmonaut Alexander Grebenkin told Sputnik he believes that Elon Musk's ambitions to colonize Mars are plans for the future since there are currently no technologies in place to enable such a mission.

"Perhaps one day such a moment will come, it may now seem like something very, very distant for us, but perhaps there will be technologies that would allow this to be done, but at the moment I don't see such technologies yet," Grebenkin said.

He invoked the words of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, one of the founding fathers of astronautics, who said that "The Earth is the cradle of humanity, but mankind cannot stay in the cradle forever."

At that moment his words were perceived as science fiction, the cosmonaut said.

Without drawing any parallel between Tsiolkovsky and Musk, Grebenkin emphasized that a flight to Mars requires resolving a huge set of problems, most of which have yet to be addressed.

"The solutions in many areas are not entirely obvious yet," the cosmonaut said, pointing to the need for breakthrough technologies in such areas as "protection from radiation, life support and, no matter how strange it may seem, in psychological aspects."

Being in some kind of confined space for a long time, even when people have good contact with each other, is still a thing that requires separate study, Grebenkin said.

"I think that in many countries scientists are working on this and I think that we will still be there someday, as now Elon Musk is making plans for the future," the cosmonaut said.

Grebenkin is part of the four-person crew of NASA's SpaceX Crew-8 mission to the International Space Station. It is part of the NASA-Roscosmos collaboration and cross flights to the ISS. The crew will fly aboard a SpaceX Dragon spacecraft named Endeavour.

American entrepreneur, owner of SpaceX Elon Musk announced plans to colonize Mars. To do this, he is building the Starship spacecraft and has announced plans to send one million people to the Fire Planet by 2050. Industry experts call such a goal unrealistic.

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SpaceX Crew-8 Taking Off to ISS Praises Cooperation Between NASA, Roscosmos - Cosmonauts

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WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Russian and American members of the next International Space Station (ISS) crew told Sputnik they hope for expanded cooperation between Russia and the United States in space and consider it a model for interaction between other countries.

"This [interaction] is probably very, very good from the point of view that it can really show us all what cooperation between different countries is and should be," Russian cosmonaut Alexander Grebenkin told Sputnik.

Grebenkin said that everyone in Crew-8 understands that their work is space involves tasks that need to be achieved together and cooperation for such missions begins on Earth.

"Those things that are done in orbit, those discoveries, scientific and biological experiments … they work here on Earth," the Roscosmos cosmonaut emphasized.

He called the interactions between NASA and Roscosmos a connecting thread between the two countries and expressed hope for the expansion of such cooperation.

"I would be very happy if it continued in the same spirit, at a minimum, and better, of course, if this cooperation continued to intensify," said the Russian cosmonaut, emphasizing that "we have room to move, and I think that it will happen."

His American colleague, NASA astronaut Matthew Dominick, in turn, said that he has enjoyed "a multiple-decade relationship with an incredible group of people, the Russian people."

"I cannot tell you how much I enjoyed my time in Moscow with the instructors over there that were passionate about what they were teaching. They were good at what they were teaching," Dominick said, as he shared his impressions of the training programs in the US and Russia.

He assessed his fellow crew member Grebenkin as "tough as nails, he is super sharp."

"Sasha is my crew mate and I have had an absolute blast working with him. He is an absolute professional," said Dominick.

Grebenkin and Dominick will depart for the ISS in mid-February as part of the Crew-8 mission along with NASA astronauts Michael Barratt and Jeanette Epps.

The flight of the Russian cosmonaut on an American ship takes place within the framework of the agreement between Roscosmos and NASA on cross-flights, which assumes that a Russian ship will send one American astronaut to the ISS and an American one will include one Russian cosmonaut.

The Crew-8 flight is the eighth crew rotation mission by SpaceX to the ISS as part of NASA's Commercial Crew Program. The crew will fly aboard the SpaceX Dragon spacecraft named Endeavour.

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US Sanctions Iraq's Al-Huda Bank for Enabling Terrorist Financing, Laundering – Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) – The US sanctioned Iraq's Al-Huda Bank on Monday for allegedly enabling terrorist financing and money laundering, according to a treasury release.

"Treasury is issuing a finding and notice of proposed rulemaking (NPRM) that identifies Al-Huda Bank, an Iraqi bank that serves as a conduit for terrorist financing, as a foreign financial

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institution of primary money laundering concern," the release stated.

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Air Defenses At US Camp in Jordan Confused Enemy Drone For US Drone - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - US forces failed to stop an enemy drone attack on American forces in Jordan because the aircraft's approach coincided with the return of a US drone to the military outpost, the Wall Street Journal reported on Monday, citing unnamed officials.

According to the report, a militia backed by Tehran launched the enemy drone toward Tower 22, an outpost in Jordan near the borders of Iraq and Syria.

The report added that US officials have not found evidence indicating that Iran directed the attack.

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

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3, 4)

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 Defense 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.

Later in the day, Austin said in opening remarks before his meeting with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg that he is "glad to be back to the Pentagon" and feels good, but is still recovering.

Austin was hospitalized on January 1 due to an infection following 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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US Senator Cruz Says Negotiators Refusing to Provide Lawmakers With Border Deal Text

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - US Senate negotiators working on a border security deal will not provide lawmakers the text of the proposed agreement, Senator Ted Cruz said on Monday.

"I haven't read the bill and there's a reason: nobody's read the bill. They won't actually give us the text," Cruz said during an interview with Fox News. "If you're hiding the text, it means it's even worse than people think it is."

Negotiators have only provided lawmakers with general "bullet points" about the potential deal, Cruz said. The deal would allow 5,000 migrants into the United States every day, totaling approximately 1.8 million per year, he said.

Any president willing to enforce existing immigration laws does not need further legislation to secure the border, Cruz said.

On Saturday, US House Speaker Mike Johnson likewise said that President Joe Biden does not need new legislation from Congress to begin securing the border. Johnson also said that the United States has "already been surrendered" if 1.8 million migrants are allowed to enter yearly, as is purportedly authorized under the proposed deal.

However, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre on Monday insisted that Biden requires new authorities from Congress to begin securing the border, when asked about Johnson's stance.

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Pelosi Says Thinks Pro-Palestine Protests Connected to Russia, Urges FBI to Probe Funding

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi said in an interview with CNN that Russia may be connected to some pro-Palestine protests in the United States.

"I think some of these protesters are spontaneous and organic and sincere. Some, I think, are connected to Russia," Pelosi said on Sunday.

The FBI ought to investigate funding for the protests, Pelosi added.

Pelosi said that her accusation is based on having looked at the issue for "a long time," but failed to cite any evidence to support her claim.

On Monday, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in an interview with CNN that she has nothing to add to Pelosi's comment and will let the congresswoman speak for herself.

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US, UK Impose Sanctions on Iranian Transnational Assassination Network - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department announced on Monday that it has imposed sanctions, in conjunction with its United Kingdom counterpart, on a network of individuals who are behind various assassinations ordered by the Iranian government.

"The network is led by Iranian narcotics trafficker Naji Ibrahim Sharifi-Zindashti (Zindashti) and operates at the behest of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS)," the Treasury Department said in a release.

The network has "carried out numerous acts of transnational repression including assassinations and kidnappings across multiple jurisdictions in an attempt to silence the Iranian regime's perceived critics" and has also "plotted operations in the United States," the release said.

The imposition of sanctions followed the unsealing of an indictment by the Justice Department and the FBI, the release said.

In addition, the United Kingdom sanctioned Mohammad Reza Ansari, an official of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who had been previously sanctioned by the Treasury Department, the release said.

The Treasury Department alleges that MOIS and IRCG have long targeted perceived government opponents outside of Iran in assassination, kidnapping and hacking operations, the release said.

Zindashti and his network have been linked to murders in the United Arab Emirates, Canada and Turkey and Iranian security forces protect them as well as enable him to thrive in Iran's drug market, the release said.

The sanctions also target Reza Hamidiravari, an MOIS officer who oversees Zindashti's operations directed by MOIS; Nihat Abdul Kadir Asan, a close Zindashti associate who has played a pivotal role in logistics planning; Ekrem Abdulkerym Oztunc, who is described as being a key lieutenant; and Shahram Ali Reza Tamarzadeh Zavieh Jakki, Zindashti's brother-in-law, the release said.

Furthermore, the sanctions target two Canadian nationals - Damion Patrick John Ryan and Adam Richard Pearson, who are alleged to have been enlisted to assassinate individuals in the United States, the release added.

Finally, sanctions have been imposed on Ali Esfanjani, Abdulvahap Kocak, Muhammad Reza Naserzadeh and Ali Kocak for their alleged involvement in assassinating in Istanbul a former Iranian cybersecurity official who later became a government critic, according to the release.

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Canadian Foreign Minister to Visit Poland, Moldova to Discuss Ukraine - Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Melanie Joly will travel to Poland and Moldova this week to discuss the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and regional

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security, Global Affairs Canada said on Monday.

Joly will visit the region from January 29 to February 1 during which time she will meet with her Polish and Moldovan counterparts and other senior government officials, Global Affairs Canada said in a release.

"I look forward to meeting with the Moldovan leadership to discuss how Canada can continue to support their peace and security. In Poland, I look forward to meeting my new Polish counterpart and build upon Canada and Poland's deep friendship, and work together to bolster peace and security along NATO's eastern flank," Joly said in the release.

Joly will reiterate Canada's support for Moldova's territorial integrity and the country's fight against alleged Russian efforts to undermine its democracy by using disinformation, the release said.

In Poland, Joly is set to discuss with her counterpart Radoslav Sikorski respective plans to provide additional support for Ukraine, promote human rights and prevent alleged regional security threats from Belarus and Russia, the release added.

Joly's schedule also includes meetings with representatives of the Ukrainian House Foundation and the Ukrainian Educational Hub, among other organizations, according to the release.

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Trump Wants to Expand Presidential Immunity Beyond Tenure in Office If Elected - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 29 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump is looking to expand presidential immunity to prohibit the prosecution of presidents even after they leave office, Rolling Stone reported on Monday, citing sources.

Trump and his allies are reportedly discussing plans to expand a Nixon-era memo from the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel that prohibits the department from prosecuting incumbent presidents, the magazine reported, citing two sources who have discussed the matter with Trump since last year.

If Trump wins in 2024, there are plans to issue a new memo, advising that the DOJ prohibit the prosecution of US leaders even after they leave office.

Trump has been briefed on these ideas by right-wing lawyers and longtime associates over the past several months, the report said.

Trump faces a total of 91 charges in four criminal cases in what the Republican politician calls an attempt by the Democratic establishment to prevent him from returning to the White House. The most severe counts might cost Trump 20 years in prison. If the punishment were to be determined by adding up the terms, he could be behind bars for more than 700 years in prison.

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