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2/5/24 Monday

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US & Germany Continue to Spiral Under Pressure as Voters Protest Foreign Spending

Nearly two-thirds of German voters want to toss out their current government, claims an article that was recently published in Naked Capitalism. Chancellor Olaf Scholz carries some of the lowest approval ratings for his position ever, mirroring US President Joe Biden's stance amid US voters.

Berlin is doubling down on their support for Ukraine, agreeing in November to increase their military aid to $8.6 billion for the year 2024. But the German public, including farmers and train workers, have been labeled as far right members when they question their government's decision making, an article published on Sunday warns.

While dissenters in Germany are labeled as members of the far-right, those in the US are left with the same option and that is: no options, as a presidential election between two extremely unpopular candidates appears inevitable this year. On Monday, Dan Lazare, the independent investigative journalist and author, said the chemistry between the two countries is "basically the same".

"The problem is the chemistry is basically the same. The center is not holding, I'm talking about the traffic light coalition in Germany," said Lazare. "In the US, the Democratic Party here—which is basically a center-right party—is not doing well either. The situation with Ukraine is a major factor, things are really coming apart there in a really dramatic way, and the fact that Biden is unable to get an aid package through Congress is very important."

"That leaves NATO feeling adrift and puts Germany in an especially tight spot because it worries that it'll have a war, a civil war on its doorstep if Ukraine collapses under Russian pressure. So, everyone's getting more nervous. The right wing is getting more active. The center is more at a loss over what to do, and that seems sort of like the situation in both countries." said Lazare.

On Thursday, angry farmers outside the EU Parliament building in Brussels protested environmental regulations, cheap foreign imports, and rising costs imposed by their governments. The streets of the Belgian capital were blockaded by about 1,300 vehicles, according to a police estimate. The protesting farmers burned pallets and piles of manure and threw eggs, stone, fireworks, and other flaming objects at the legislature.

Thursday's picketing is a culmination of protests which have occurred across Europe over the past few months. Berlin is trying to find ways to save or reallocate about $66 billion over the next several years, and one thing they decided to cut were diesel fuel subsidies purchased by those growing their food. In December, farmers in Germany took to the streets and demanded that Scholz abandon his plans to scrap diesel subsidies.

"Their economic miracle is running out of steam. It's been running out of steam for a long time," added Lazare, in reference to the "German economic miracle" which was the country's ascent to becoming a global economic power following the end of World War II.

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Germany's economic woes are a result of their economic war against Russia. They have found themselves in a position where they are forced to replace affordable Russian energy with expensive Russian energy that has been "laundered" through middle countries, Sunday's article notes.

"And then they have all these problems that we're familiar with in the US: homelessness, skyrocketing housing costs, wage stagnation, etc." said Lazare. "They're really in trouble. And then there's the Nord Stream which was clearly an American operation, it was an act of war by America on Germany—its supposed NATO partner. But the effect is to leave the Olaf Scholz government looking even more helpless and foolish than it was before. And that view is not going away."

Lazare added that the "developments on both sides of the Atlantic" are moving in "perfect synchronization", and pointed out that Trump seems to be Americans' top choice for representing their anger towards the Democratic party.

"Trump is the perfect expression of these voices: Americans who are really angry at the Democratic Party and the elitist, social engineering that it represents. They feel they're getting the short end of the stick," said Lazare. "And they want change, and they don't really care, and they want Trump because they think he's the only person who's got the gumption to institute fundamental, radical change."

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Chile Wildfires Leave At Least 122 Dead

The raging fires in Chile have become the world's third-deadliest wildfire event of this century. On Monday, Chile began two days of national mourning for their dead following a raging wildfire in the country that consumed the residential areas in the coastal cities of Valparaiso and Vina Del Mar.

At least 122 victims' lives have been claimed by the wildfires thus far, and only 32 of those victims have been identified. Most of the deaths that have occurred were in Vina del Mar, a popular tourist area known for its beaches and botanical gardens. The search for hundreds who are missing continues, and some 14,000 homes are said to have been damaged by the fires, officials say.

"All of Chile weeps for Valparaiso," President Gabriel Boric said Sunday, adding that the death toll could rise "significantly". The 37-year-old president declared a state of emergency, and pledged government support for those affected by the fires.

The towns of Quilpe and Villa Alemana—which are also in the Valparaiso region—have also been hit hard by the wildfires.

"It's like a war zone, as if a bomb went off," said a 63-year-old eyewitness who fled her home in nearby Villa Independencia—the epicenter of the disaster—on Friday, and returned to nothing but wreckage on Monday.

"It burned like someone was throwing gasoline on the houses. I don't understand what happened … There was a lot of wind, a lot of wind and big balls of fire that would fly by."

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The fires in Chile reportedly began to rage on Friday and were quickly accelerated by winds and an intense heatwave that the country has been battling this summer. Santiago, the country's capital, has been experiencing consecutive days of hot and dry temperatures above 91.4 degrees Fahrenheit (33 degrees Celsius).

Those temperatures have been driven by the El Nino weather pattern, as well as human-caused climate change.

A man was at home doing welding work when a fire accidentally started and spread to nearby grasslands, police say. The suspect was reportedlyarraigned on Sunday in connection to the wildfires, though it has not been confirmed if that was the cause of the fires or if the fires were started intentionally.

The national disaster service SENAPRED has said that nearly 64,000 acres have been burned as of Sunday.

A reported 31 firefighting helicopters and airplanes, and roughly 1,400 firefighters, and 1,300 military personnel and volunteers worked to combat the wildfires. Schools and other public buildings in Vina del Mar and Santiago have been turned into recovery centers where victims of the fire can receive water, food and other resources.

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While dissenters in Germany are labeled as members of the far-right, those in the US are left with the same option and that is: no options, as a presidential election between two extremely unpopular candidates appears inevitable this year. On Monday, Dan Lazare, the independent investigative journalist and author, said the chemistry between the two countries is "basically the same".

"The problem is the chemistry is basically the same. The center is not holding, I'm talking about the traffic light coalition in Germany," said Lazare. "In the US, the Democratic Party here—which is basically a center-right party—is not doing well either. The situation with Ukraine is a major factor, things are really coming apart there in a really dramatic way, and the fact that Biden is unable to get an aid package through Congress is very important."

"That leaves NATO feeling adrift and puts Germany in an especially tight spot because it worries that it'll have a war, a civil war on its doorstep if Ukraine collapses under Russian pressure. So,

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Thursday's picketing is a culmination of protests which have occurred across Europe over the past few months. Berlin is trying to find ways to save or reallocate about $66 billion over the next several years, and one thing they decided to cut were diesel fuel subsidies purchased by those growing their food. In December, farmers in Germany took to the streets and demanded that Scholz abandon his plans to scrap diesel subsidies.
"Their economic miracle is running out of steam. It's been running out of steam for a long time," added Lazare, in reference to the "German economic miracle" which was the country's ascent to becoming a global economic power following the end of World War II.
Germany's economic woes are a result of their economic war against Russia. They have found themselves in a position where they are forced to replace affordable Russian energy with expensive Russian energy that has been "laundered" through middle countries, Sunday's article notes.
"And then they have all these problems that we're familiar with in the US: homelessness, skyrocketing housing costs, wage stagnation, etc." said Lazare. "They're really in trouble. And then there's the Nord Stream which was clearly an American operation, it was an act of war by America on Germany—its supposed NATO partner. But the effect is to leave the Olaf Scholz government looking even more helpless and foolish than it was before. And that view is not going away."
Lazare added that the "developments on both sides of the Atlantic" are moving in "perfect synchronization", and pointed out that Trump seems to be Americans' top choice for representing their anger towards the Democratic party.
"Trump is the perfect expression of these voices: Americans who are really angry at the Democratic Party and the elitist, social engineering that it represents. They feel they're getting the short end of the stick," said Lazare. "And they want change, and they don't really care, and they want Trump because they think he's the only person who's got the gumption to institute fundamental, radical change."
The vengeful attacks of Washington would not deter strikes on US troops in the region provoked by outrage over American backing of Israel, former US Marine Corps intelligence officer Scott Ritter told Sputnik's Fault Lines program Monday.

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"Our shock and awe initiation – I think 80, 85 targets, 220 plus munitions, $500 million it cost us to strike these targets – immediately several of the militias in the area have fired drones and

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rockets against American bases, and it's ongoing," he noted. "This is just the insanity of the cycle of violence that the United States has engaged in."

Ritter also noted the attacks angered Syria and Iraq, where US troops are stationed against those governments' will.

"We are a terrorist organization, and we are sponsoring attacks against the legitimate government of Syria," Ritter lamented.

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'Long knives are out': Zelensky and Ukrainian political establishment battle for supremacy.

"Coming into the weekend, the Washington Post tells us that… Zelensky let the United States know that he was going to fire [military leader Valery] Zaluzhny, but they weren't happy about it," security analyst Mark Sleboda told Sputnik's Fault Lines program Monday, noting the controversial Ukrainian leader has met resistance from within Ukraine and from his handlers in Washington.

The president then appeared on Ukrainian television and announced he was planning a purge of the entirety of the country's leadership.

"This seems to be, I would think, anger and frustration over his inability to exercise his presidential authority to get rid of Zaluzhny," Sleboda stressed, noting that the Ukrainian president has been met with opposition from military and intelligence leaders.

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"The fact that this targeting [of Tucker Carlson] is happening in the way it is happening now signifies a fear from the United States," said journalist Fiorella Isabel, who noted the anxieties of US regime propagandists over the prospect the maverick commentator might practice journalism with an interview of Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

Host Garland Nixon noted that demonization of foreign leaders is a traditional tactic of US propaganda as Americans are conditioned to revile figures like President Bashar al-Assad in Syria or President Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. The "danger" of Carlson's interview, he noted, is that Putin would be humanized before an American audience.

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Isabel noted that Putin has made highly subversive arguments for American audiences, questioning the fairness of US elections and noting that US foreign policy generally remains unchanged as new presidents enter the White House.

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'We Defeat Ourselves': US-Backed Orgy of Violence in Iraq, Syria Further Delegitimizes Country

"We are a terrorist organization," said former intelligence officer Scott Ritter of the United States, which continues to destabilize the Middle East through its unwanted presence.
Former US Marine Corps intelligence officer Scott Ritter appeared on Sputnik's Fault Lines program Monday to respond to the United States' violent retaliatory blitz in Iraq and Syria over the weekend, which has killed some 40 people.
The former United Nations weapons inspector, who was shunned in Washington for disputing US intelligence narratives about alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, said the US' vengeful attacks would not deter strikes on US troops in the region provoked by outrage over American backing of Israel.
"Our shock and awe initiation – I think 80, 85 targets, 220 plus munitions, $500 million it cost us to strike these targets – immediately several of the militias in the area have fired drones and rockets against American bases, and it's ongoing," he noted. "Not only that, I mean, look, President [Joe] Biden admitted that the strikes against the Houthis have not deterred them, that they continue to do what they do [blockading ships in the Red Sea]."
"You know, this is just the insanity of the cycle of violence that the United States has engaged in," Ritter concluded. "It's mindless. It's automatic. We don't know any other process. We never once paused and said, 'what are we genuinely trying to accomplish here?'"
Ritter claimed the retaliatory strikes would only further worsen the reputation of the United States in the Middle East and across the world, which is already in freefall as a multipolar world order emerges led by countries like China and Russia.
"If there was ever any legitimacy to the American presence in Iraq and Syria linked to the so-called anti-Islamic state mission that we're ostensibly engaged in, we just think that," said the analyst. "I mean, the Syrian government will never support us to stay in American presence on their soil, especially an illegal presence."
"We've just alienated the Iraqi government," he added. "We've undermined our own legitimacy… We took a bad situation and we made it worse, and it's only going to continue to get worse. We defeat ourselves."
"No one has ever once paused and reflected, 'Why were they there? What were they trying to accomplish?'" said Ritter. "And by avenging their deaths, are we not just putting more American servicemens' lives at risk for a cause that's not worth the life of one American, let alone the scores of Syrians and Iraqis that we're killing as a result of this? So, we don't learn anything. I'm just, I'm ashamed of my country."

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The United States has repeatedly claimed that the illegal, covert presence of US troops in Syria is justified by efforts to defeat the ISIS* terrorist group. But the United States has empowered ISIS-linked fighters through its efforts to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. What's more, the United States' close ally Israel has admitted to supplying weapons to ISIS-linked Syrian militants to aid their fight against al-Assad, who is considered an enemy of Israel in the region.

"We created or helped facilitate the growth of Islamic State in Syria because we wanted them to target [Syrian President] Bashar al Assad," noted Ritter. "So now we are in this very interesting situation where we're attacking the very weapon we created to achieve a result that we still want to achieve. And so the al-Tanf base [in Syria] is an outgrowth of that."

"We are a terrorist organization, and we are sponsoring attacks against the legitimate government of Syria," Ritter lamented. "That's the mission. And I wish every American would recognize this and understand that there's no legitimacy here. It's actually the most illegitimate mission one can imagine. And it should disgust every American that we are literally state sponsors of terrorism."

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'Long Knives Are Out': Zelensky, Ukrainian Political Establishment Battle for Supremacy

The controversial Ukrainian leader is attempting to purge his political opponents, but has been met with resistance within the country and from his handlers in Washington.

Security analyst Mark Sleboda joined Sputnik's Fault Lines program Monday to discuss political intrigue in Ukraine as President Volodymyr Zelensky's position grows more tenuous by the day. In recent weeks the embattled Ukrainian leader has made attempts to sideline potential political opponents, most notably the head of Ukraine's armed forces Valery Zaluzhny. But Zelensky has been met with opposition as the controversial leader struggles to maintain the country's standing on the battlefield.

"Last week, everyone in the Western media told us that Zelensky tried to fire Zaluzhny but failed," recalled Sleboda. "And there's different reasons why he couldn't get his replacements. [Kyrylo] Budanov and [Oleksandr] Syrsky both turned down [the position], then Zaluzhny declined to resign and said, 'You'll have to fire me,' then the West put pressure on him not to do it."

"But CNN told us that he would be fired by the end of the week, that that was the word from their source," he continued. "And coming into the weekend, the Washington Post tells us that, over the weekend, Zelensky let the United States know that he was going to fire Zaluzhny, but they weren't happy about it."

President Zelensky then appeared on Ukrainian television and announced he was planning a purge of the entirety of the country's leadership.

"This seems to be, I would think, anger and frustration over his inability to exercise his presidential authority to get rid of Zaluzhny," concluded Sleboda, noting that the Ukrainian president has been met with opposition from military and intelligence leaders. "And presumably

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there is other opposition within the regime. We know that [Vitali] Klitschko, the mayor of Kiev, the former boxer who was one of the public frontmen of the Maidan Putsch, he's come out and attacked Zelensky on multiple occasions."

The analyst noted that Zelensky has also been criticized by business leaders as well as Petro Poroshenko, the extremist figure who was the first president of the Russophobic government that took hold in Ukraine after the US-backed Euromaidan coup.

"So, the long knives are out and Zelensky wants, evidently, a clean sweep. He's just, 'I'm going to get rid of everyone. You're all against me,'" the analyst insisted.

But Sleboda noted that Zelensky has been widely ridiculed within the Ukrainian government, recalling Ukrainian officials' characterization of him in Time magazine as delusional and "an emperor with no clothes," in Sleboda's words. The analyst called him "an isolated figure that is growing increasingly unhinged from reality. And now he's apparently lashing out at the entire Kiev regime leadership."

Sleboda noted that the United States often supports outright dictators internationally if they serve the country's geopolitical interests; in fact, one study revealed that the US supports 73% of governments deemed "dictatorships" throughout the world.

"We see what tragic consequences the wave of so-called color revolutions led to," Putin once remarked, noting covert US-backed regime change operations internationally. "For us, this is a lesson and a warning. We should do everything necessary so that nothing similar ever happens in Russia," he concluded, suggesting that US efforts to interfere in Russian politics would prove to be futile.

The United States has utilized military power and undercover operations through entities like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), USAID, and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) to undermine and overthrow governments in Haiti, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Iraq, Bulgaria, Panama, Nicaragua, Libya, Morocco, Grenada, Angola, Australia, Guatemala, Bolivia, Greece, Chile, Uruguay, Ghana, Indonesia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Brazil, the Congo, Ecuador, France, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Italy, Syria, Costa Rica, Iran, Albania, Korea, the Philippines, and China, among other countries, according to author William Blum who extensively documented such efforts in his acclaimed and eye-opening book Killing Hope.

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US Propaganda Machine Panicking Tucker Carlson Will Continue Objective Reporting in Russia

The prominent American political commentator previously claimed his efforts to interview Russian President Vladimir Putin made him a target of US government surveillance, undermining 'official' narratives about the "boogeyman" leader.

Maverick US journalist Tucker Carlson has raised eyebrows after being spotted in Moscow this week, with observers speculating Carlson has arrived to interview Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The popular American commentator has so far remained coy about the reasons for his visit, but he has expressed his willingness to speak with Putin in the past, allegedly making him the target

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of surveillance from US intelligence agencies. As Russiagaters melt down over the prospect Carlson will undermine US regime propaganda by practicing real journalism, geopolitical analyst and journalist Fiorella Isabel joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Monday to discuss the situation.

"The fact that this targeting [of Carlson] is happening in the way it is happening now signifies a fear from the United States," said Isabel. "They are fearful of a conversation that somebody like Tucker Carlson and Vladimir Putin could have because Tucker Carlson did leave Fox [News]. And since he did leave Fox, so much has happened in the world where, as you all were talking about before, there are major escalations, not only in the Asia-Pacific region, but also obviously with Iran via Israel-Palestine and via, of course, Ukraine."

"The United States is involved in every single one of these conflicts," noted the journalist. "And I think that the aim is to really show what Moscow is like, what the Russian people are like, and give a different perspective."

Isabel speculated Carlson was indeed likely to speak with Putin while in Moscow, adding "I don't think he would come for anything less." She also noted that Carlson has previously spoken with other leaders sometimes considered controversial in the United States, such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

"What we're looking at here is that the United States and their proxies are clearly afraid of the response that such a popular figure like Tucker Carlson might have with an audience, in response to Vladimir Putin, who we have been told is this boogeyman and he is evil, and there is no redeeming quality to him," said Isabel.

"But based on Putin's speeches and the things he says that many Western audiences don't get to hear, that will drastically change, I think, a lot of people, or at least impact them in a way, in a time where we're on the brink of a catastrophic nuclear event I think," she added. "I don't think that's an exaggeration. So I think that's why at this pivotal moment, the powers that be are extremely afraid of this interview, to the point where they're saying that they're going to go after Tucker Carlson in a legal way for simply being here and trying to attempt to do journalism."

"They have gone so far off from what journalism was supposed to be that they don't recognize that this is actually what you're supposed to do, talk to adversarial figures or people that you may disagree with," noted the analyst.

Host Garland Nixon noted that demonization of foreign leaders is a traditional tactic of US propaganda as Americans are conditioned to revile figures like President Bashar al-Assad in Syria or President Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. The "danger" of Carlson's interview, he noted, is that Putin would be humanized before an American audience.

Co-host Wilmer Leon agreed, arguing that Americans would see that Putin is not "crazy," "unhinged," or "evil."

Isabel noted that Putin has made highly subversive arguments for American audiences, questioning the fairness of US elections and noting that US foreign policy generally remains unchanged as new presidents enter the White House.

"So I think, when Americans would view or hear somebody like Vladimir Putin, especially Americans that haven't actually gotten a chance to listen to any of his speeches, they will be perhaps blown away in the sense that they will [say], 'wow, this guy makes a lot of sense. And he just simply is saying what's on our minds,'" said Isabel.

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“And I think that fear is what the West would fear, because they will now see Putin as not only a human being, but also a very intelligent leader that is actually doing what's best for his people. And that is everything that the American public wants.”

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‘Beaten by the Deep State’: After 2020 Defeat, Trump Learns How to Play Politics

The former US President is making his mark as Congress debates border legislation.
Trump has learned how to more effectively influence US politics since his chaotic first term in the White House, according to analyst Dan Lazare who appeared on Sputnik’s The Final Countdown program Monday to discuss current legislation moving through US Congress.
“He's really learned how to campaign and run and manipulate the system in a way that he just, you know, he was a babe in the woods in 2016,” noted host Ted Rall. “What do you think?”
“I agree,” said Lazare. “It's been a real learning curve. I think a second Trump administration, which I [place at] better than 50, 50 odds, will be a very different kettle of fish than the first one.”
“Trump was essentially beaten by the deep state,” added Lazare, perhaps referencing the contrived Russiagate narrative of US intelligence agencies which falsely suggested the former president colluded with Russia to win the 2016 election. “I expect the second Trump administration to be very different.”
Lazare noted that Trump’s improved political acumen is demonstrated by his influence on compromise border legislation currently making its way through Congress.
“The Republicans are, as you know, of the very mixed mind with regard to the Ukraine,” said Lazare. “And when it comes to Mexico, they are really under instructions from [former US President] Donald Trump. He's made it quite clear that he doesn't want any bill passed at all before the election.”
“He wants to hold the administration's feet to the fire to watch as the situation on the border gets worse and worse, more chaotic, so that public frustration grows,” he added. “Most of it will be directed at the White House, and the Republicans feel they’ll benefit – Trump feels he'll benefit as a result.”
“So therefore, he wants no action on the border, he's cold to aid to the Ukraine, but Republicans and Democrats agree on aid to Israel. So that's the line up basically,” Lazare concluded.

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US House Committee Accuses National Science Foundation of Funding AI Censorship Tools

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) – The US House Judiciary Committee released on Tuesday an interim report accusing the National Science Foundation of issuing grants to universities and non-profits to develop AI censorship and propaganda tools, according to a

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release.

"In the name of combatting alleged misinformation regarding COVID-19 and the 2020 election, NSF has been issuing multi-million-dollar grants to university and non-profit research teams. The purpose of these taxpayer-funded projects is to develop AI-powered censorship and propaganda tools that can be used by governments and Big Tech to shape public opinion by restricting certain viewpoints or promoting others," the release stated.

The report, prepared by the committee and its Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government, accused federal employees and disinformation researchers of seeking to enact censorship and promote propaganda through developing tools for content moderation and combating disinformation.

It also accused the foundation of tracking public criticism of its funding of misinformation research projects and considering the blacklisting of US media outlets that were scrutinizing it.

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Former Pentagon Chief Jim Mattis Consulted for UAE on Yemen War - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) – Retired US Marine general Jim Mattis quietly consulted for the UAE government regarding its war on Yemen prior to his appointment as US Secretary of Defense under the Trump administration, The Washington Post reported on Tuesday, citing documents obtained through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit.

On the personal request of his old friend and deputy supreme commander of the UAE's military, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Mattis acted as a military advisor on the "operational, tactical, informational and ethical aspects" of the war in Yemen, according to his June 2015 application to the Marine Corps and State Department for federal approval. He also stated on his application that he would be compensated although the amount had yet to be determined.

The exact scope and duration of his work for the UAE remains unclear. It is also unclear how Mattis was eventually compensated for his consulting work for the UAE. A spokesperson for Mattis said that he actually worked for free and his statement on the application was only intended to trigger the most rigorous level of scrutiny.

However, the documents obtained by the Post found that his application was quickly cleared throughout the different stages of the process, receiving preliminary approval by the Marine Corps in two weeks and then final approval in 1.5 months by the State Department. In comparison, the process usually takes several months or years.

The Washington Post launched a lawsuit in 2021 to obtain records of retired US military personnel employed by foreign governments. Its 2022 investigative report on the matter found that the UAE hired more US veterans than any other foreign country and paid far more than the veterans' prior military salaries. Federal agencies refused to release the records regarding Mattis until last fall when the Post secured a judge's record on the basis that Mattis' UAE work may have had a conflict of interest with his Pentagon work.

When he became secretary of defense in January 2017, Mattis did not include his consulting work for the UAE in his public work history, Office of Government Ethics financial disclosure

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forms, or his 2019 memoir. He reported it confidentially to the Senate Armed Services Committee, although multiple senators told the Post they were uninformed of it. Multiple US diplomats assigned to the Middle East, including Anne Patterson and Gerald Feierstein, also said that they were unaware that Mattis was specifically advising the UAE on the Yemen war.

After Mattis resigned as the Pentagon secretary in December 2018, he applied again for federal approval to work for the UAE, as a featured speaker at a conference hosted by Al-Nahyan in Abu Dhabi. Mattis' application stated that he would be paid $100,000 in addition to airfare and accommodation. However, Mattis' spokesperson said that he was ultimately not compensated and that again, his statement was only intended to trigger a rigorous review.

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Haley Requests Secret Service Protection After Rise in Threats – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) – US Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley has requested protection from the US Secret Service amid a growing number of threats she has received, The Wall Street Journal reported.

"We've had multiple issues," Haley, former South Carolina governor and US ambassador to the UN, told the newspaper on Monday.

She stated that the threats would not prevent her from continuing her campaign.

"It's not going to stop me from doing what I need to do," she vowed.

A request for Haley's protection has been submitted to federal officials, and the Department of Justice would now decide whether or not to grant it, the report said.

Her campaign is also considering how the increased security would affect Haley's schedule and travels, according to the report.

During an event in South Carolina last week, one woman tried to enter the stage. There have been several protesters who recently expressed opposition to Haley's support for Ukraine and Israel, the report said. Haley's home was scene of at least one recent swatting incident, the report added.

According to a Washington Post/Monmouth University poll released last week, Haley has the support of 32% of potential Republican primary voters, while former President Donald Trump has 52%.

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Biden Campaign Becoming Aware Border Top Issue Among US Voters - Ex-US Official

EL PASO, February 6 (Sputnik) - The latest votes in the US primary elections have revealed to the Biden campaign that voters consider border security the top issue of concern, former acting deputy commissioner of US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Ronald Vitiello told Sputnik.

The CBP documented more than 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the

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highest single-month figure ever recorded. The Biden administration has also experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the southern border.

"They [Biden campaign] now know after New Hampshire and Iowa that it [immigration] is the number one issue in the minds of voters ... He has the lowest rating ever on it. And they continue to do the same thing," Vitiello said.

A Harvard CAPS-Harris poll released in late January found that immigration was the top issue in the United States among US voters, with inflation as the second top issue.

Former President Donald Trump, who dropped illegal immigration into the United States to historic lows, currently leads President Joe Biden in seven swing states, according to a recent Bloomberg poll.

On Sunday, the Senate released a $118 billion national security supplemental bill that includes some $60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine, $14 billion for Israel and some $20 billion for border security, among other priorities. US House Speaker Mike Johnson rejected the measure, adding that it would be "dead on arrival" if it reaches the House of Representatives.

The proposed legislation has received much backlash from Republicans and even from several Democrats, in both the Senate and House of Representatives over disagreements on the border policy measures, which makes the future of this legislation uncertain.

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'Unfortunate' Texas Needs to Secure Southern Border After Biden Refuses - Ex-US Official

EL PASO, February 6 (Sputnik) - The unfortunate thing about the migrant crisis in the United States is that Texas has to step up efforts to secure the US border with Mexico as a result of the Biden administration's refusal to do so, former Acting Deputy Commissioner of US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Ronald Vitiello told Sputnik.

"I think it's unfortunate that Texas has to do what the administration refuses to do to secure the border," Vitiello said.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott has spent more than $4 billion to boost border security and combat illegal immigration in the region over the last three years.

President Joe Biden's decision to rescind former President Donald Trump's border security policies, such as the so-called "Remain in Mexico" policy, is what created the current crisis, Vitiello said.

"Joe Biden took over 45 year lows in activity [on the US southern border]," Vitiello said. "To fix that, you don't need Congress to act. After they've ripped everything down, they refuse to fix it now."

The state of Texas is currently in court battles with the Biden administration over differences on border policy.

The US Supreme Court recently ruled that federal agents can cut razor wire fencing the Texas National Guard placed on miles of the state's border with Mexico to stop migrants from entering the United States illegally between ports of entry. Border Patrol agents cut the razor wire to let migrants into the United States so they can be processed.

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Moreover, the Biden administration is asking the Supreme Court to intervene in the Texas National Guard's efforts to block federal agents from patrolling a section of the US-Mexico border in Eagle Pass, which has long been a hot spot for illegal migration until recently. Texas' enforcement actions have stopped the heavy surge of illegal immigration in that area.

Texas' efforts in Eagle Pass have "obviously made a difference," Vitiello said.

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

The CBP documented more than 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded. The Biden administration has also experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the southern border, numbering more than eight million.

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US House Rules Committee Advances Resolution to Impeach Border Chief Mayorkas

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) - The US House Rules Committee advanced a resolution to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for his handling of illegal immigration at the United States' southern border.

The panel advanced the resolution on Monday in a vote of 8-4. The resolution accuses Mayorkas of willful and systemic refusal to comply with federal laws and his oath of office.

"Throughout his tenure as Secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro N. Mayorkas has repeatedly violated laws enacted by Congress regarding immigration and border security. In large part because of his unlawful conduct, millions of aliens have illegally entered the United States on an annual basis with many unlawfully remaining in the United States," the resolution said.

The resolution will now head to the full House of Representatives for further consideration. If House lawmakers pass the resolution, then the articles of impeachment will be sent to the US Senate, which will hold an impeachment trial. Two-thirds of senators must agree to convict an official on impeachment charges.

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Ex-US Border Official Says Senate Supplemental Bill Does Little to End Border Crisis

EL PASO, February 6 (Sputnik) - The US Senate's bipartisan deal on the Ukraine aid-border security bill does little to address the crisis on the United States' border with Mexico, former US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Acting Deputy Commissioner Ronald Vitiello told Sputnik.

On Sunday, the Senate released a $118 billion national security supplemental bill that includes

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some $60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine, $14 billion in aid for Israel and some $20 billion for border security, among other priorities. US House Speaker Mike Johnson rejected the measure, saying it would be "dead on arrival" if it reaches the House of Representatives.

"That's not taking people [migrants] out of the pipeline, that still advantages organized crime, that still incentivizes people that get in the pipeline, the smugglers are going to take advantage of that," Vitiello said of the bill.

Vitiello, who is running for the US Senate from the state of Virginia, said it looks doubtful that the bill will pass Congress.

The proposed legislation has received much backlash from Republicans and even from several Democrats in both the Senate and the House of Representatives over disagreements on the border policy measures, which makes the future of the legislation uncertain.

According to Senator James Lankford, who is one of the key Republican negotiators on the supplemental bill, the changes to US border policy proposed in the bill include limits on the use of parole catch-and-release at the border that is expected to stop more than half-a-million border crossings each year.

The proposed legislation would also include enhanced measures to deport migrants who enter the United States illegally, tighter restrictions on US asylum eligibility for migrants, $650 million to build more border wall and a mandated shutdown of the border to illegal migrants when the daily average number of illegal crossings exceeds 5,000.

"Under this new authority, you still have to make it to the port [of entry]," Vitiello said. "That's going to be an advantage for the cartels because they control the traffic, they control the pipeline, all the corrupt cops, all of the smugglers, all of the people that stuffed them [migrants] into tractor trailers. Those people [migrants] are still going to be at risk."

Vitiello pointed out that no laws were changed under former President Donald Trump and he was able to get illegal immigration down to 50 year lows on the US border with Mexico.

The White House has rejected the idea that the US president should take unilateral executive action to secure the border.

The CBP documented more than 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded. The Biden administration has also experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the southern border.

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Iran Says Ready to Respond to Atacks, Aggression Under International Law - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, February 6 (Sputnik) - Iran says it will not hesitate to exercise its rights under international law and the UN charter to respond firmly if the nation faces any threat, attack, or aggression impacting its security, national interest, or people, Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations Amir Saeid Iravani said during a UN Security Council meeting.

"I would like to say that if Iran faces any threat, attack or aggression affecting its security, national interest, or people, it will not hesitate to exercise its inherent rights under international law and the UN charter to respond firmly," Iravani said on Monday.

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Iravani made the remarks in response to the January attack that killed three US soldiers at a base in Jordan on the border with Syria and prompted the United States to launch airstrikes last Friday on 85 targets that were allegedly affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Iran-supported militias in Iraq and Syria.

However, Iran has denied playing any role in the attack and insisted that resistance groups in the Middle East do not receive any instructions from Tehran.

Both Iraq and Syria condemned the US strikes on their territory and the Iraqi parliament's Security and Defense Committee called for a quick signing of an agreement on the withdrawal of the international coalition troops from the country.

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White House Threatens to Veto Standalone Israel Aid Bill House Plans to Vote on This Week

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will veto a standalone bill in the House of Representatives to provide Israel additional security assistance should the measure reach his desk, the White House Office of Management and Budget said in a press release.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson notified his House colleagues over the weekend that there will be a vote this week on a standalone $17.6 billion Israel aid bill.

"The Administration strongly opposes House passage of HR 7217, making emergency supplemental appropriations to respond to the attacks in Israel for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2024, and for other purposes...If the President were presented with HR 7217, he would veto it," the release said on Monday.

The White House explains that the Biden administration already spent months working with a bipartisan group of US senators to reach a deal on the national security supplemental bill that includes funding for Israel.

On Sunday, the Senate rolled out the $118 billion national security supplemental bill that includes some $60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine, $14 billion for Israel, and some $20 billion for border security, among other priorities.

Johnson rejected the measure, adding that it would be "dead on arrival" if it reaches the House.

The supplemental deal has been criticized by many Republicans, and several Democrats, in Congress because of disagreements with the border policy proposals in the measure.

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RFK Jr. Says Tucker Carlson Has Every Right to Interview Russian President Putin

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) - Independent US presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said in a statement via X that he believes journalist Tucker Carlson has every right to interview Russian President Vladimir Putin amid reports that he arrived in Moscow.

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"The legacy media is in shambles because we've caught onto their lies and propaganda. Tucker Carlson has every right to interview Putin. We need more transparency instead of less," Kennedy said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that he had nothing to say about Carlson's potential interview with Putin.

Over the weekend, the Russian-language Telegram news channel Mash reported that Carlson arrived in Moscow on Thursday and was spotted attending a ballet at the Bolshoi Theatre on Saturday.

Carlson said in an interview with the Swiss magazine Die Weltwoche in September 2023 that he planned to interview Putin but was stopped by the US authorities.

Carson gained fame as a host of the nightly political talk show Tucker Carlson Tonight on Fox News, broadcast from 2016 to 2023. After Fox News abruptly terminated his contract, Carlson begun running the Tucker on Twitter show. During his career, Carlson has done interviews with former US President Donald Trump, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Argentine President Javier Milei and other politicians, as well as with world-renowned celebrities.

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Pentagon Says Decision Not to Warn Iraq of Strikes Ahead of Time Done to Protect US Forces

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) – The United States decided not to give Baghdad advance warning of its recent strikes on Iraqi territory in order to protect US forces in the country, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said.

Earlier on Monday, US State Department deputy principal spokesperson Vedant Patel admitted that Washington did not warn Baghdad prior to the strikes, contrary to an earlier statement by Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby.

"Our forces have been attacked in Iraq, in Syria and now Jordan, and we've been very clear that we will take necessary and appropriate actions to respond, and we will continue to protect our forces," Ryder said during a press briefing on Monday when asked why the US did not notify Iraq ahead of time.

In January, three US soldiers were killed in an attack on a US base in Jordan, and the US in response launched airstrikes last Friday against some 85 targets that it said belong to Iran's Revolutionary Guard and affiliated militias in Iraq and Syria.

Iran has denied playing any role in the attack in Jordan and insists that resistance groups in the Middle East do not receive any instructions from Tehran.

Both Iraq and Syria condemned the US strikes on their territory, and the Iraqi parliament's Security and Defense Committee called for the quick signing of an agreement on the withdrawal of the international coalition troops from the country.

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US Attacks in Syria, Iraq Represent Grave Violation of Sovereignty – China's UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 6 (Sputnik) – The recent US attacks against targets in Syria and Iraq represent a grave violation of the sovereignty of both countries, China's ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun said.

"The recent US airstrikes on multiple locations in Syria and Iraq have cost heavy casualties. Those acts constitute a grave violation of the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Syria and Iraq," the ambassador said during a UN Security Council meeting on Monday.

He added that the US actions will certainly exacerbate the current violence in the Middle East.

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Biden Disappointed Senate Border Deal Has Nothing For 'Dreamers' - White House Press Pool

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters that he is disappointed that the bipartisan deal reached on the Ukraine aid-border security bill includes nothing to help so-called Dreamers receive US citizenship, according to the White House press pool.

DACA was launched by the Obama administration in 2012. It permits children of illegal immigrants who were brought to the United States under the age of 16 to remain in the country, provided they arrived by 2007. The program does not currently provide permanent lawful status to its recipients but has protected some 700,000 young people from deportation.

The press pool also reported on Monday that Biden expressed optimism that the supplemental bill will get the 60 votes needed to pass the Senate.

On Sunday, the Senate, after weeks of negotiations with the White House, released the $118 billion national security supplemental bill that includes some $60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine, $14 billion for Israel, and some $20 billion for border security, among other priorities. US House Speaker Mike Johnson rejected the measure, adding that it would be "dead on arrival" if it reaches the House.

According to Republican Senator James Lankford, one of the key negotiators of the supplemental bill, the changes to US border policy proposed in the bill includes limits on the use of parole catch-and-release at the southern border, which is expected to stop over half-a-million border crossings each year.

The proposed legislation would also include enhanced measures to deport migrants who enter the United States illegally, tighter restrictions on US asylum eligibility for migrants, $650 million to build more border wall, and a mandated shutdown of the border to illegal migrants when the daily average number of illegal crossings exceeds 5,000 for a week.

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US on Track to Produce 80,000 of 155mm Artillery Shells by October 2024 – Senior Official

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) – The United States is on track to increase the production of 155mm artillery shells to about 80,000 per month with the current amount of funding, but would require more to produce 100,000 a month, Assistant Army Secretary for Acquisition, Logistics and Technology Douglas Bush said during a discussion hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"We are on a path to get to around 80,000 a month [by October 2024] with the funding we have. We do need Congress and the supplemental to provide additional funding to get us to that 100,000 a month [by 2025]," Bush said on Monday.

Bush added that the United States is going to come out of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine with a much "healthier organic" industrial base for all kinds of conventional munitions, including 155mm shells.

According to the Pentagon, the United States alone has provided Ukraine with nearly 2 million 155mm artillery shells since the beginning of the conflict while producing only 28,000 155mm shells per month as of October 2023.

At the same time, beginning in 2022 Russia ramped up its 155mm munition production to more than 100,000 a month. The New York Times reported in September that Russia has produced seven times more artillery shells than the United States and Europe combined.

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Russia Says US Airstrikes in Iraq, Syria Deliberately Stoke Conflict - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, February 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is intentionally aggravating tensions in the Middle East with targeted airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said during a United Nations Security Council meeting.

"It's clear that American airstrikes are specifically, deliberately aimed to stoke the conflict," Nebenzia said on Monday.

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Biden on Trump's Calls to Hold Debate: 'I Would Want to Debate Me Too'

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said that he would want to debate himself if he were in former US President Donald Trump's position, when asked about the former president's calls to clash on the debate stage.

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"If I were him I would want to debate me too," Biden said on Monday.
Trump has nothing else to do, Biden added.
Both Biden and Trump are on track to win their respective parties' presidential nominations. However, there are still numerous nominating contests prior to the party conventions this summer.
Trump leads Biden by five percentage points in a hypothetical, head-to-head matchup, according to an NBC News poll released on Sunday.
Trump has so far declined to participate in Republican Party debates for the 2024 race. Last month, former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley — Trump's lone challenger for the nomination — called for a debate with either Trump or Biden.

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Pentagon Says Aware of Drone Attack That Killed SDF Troops in Syria on Sunday

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Defense is aware of a recent drone attack that killed several members of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Patrick Ryder said on Monday.
"I'm aware of one [attack] yesterday February 4. This was a one-way attack drone that landed several kilometers from MSS Green Village, also in Syria," Ryder said during a press briefing.
Ryder added that there were no reports of US injuries or damage to those facilities in Green Village.
The SDF media center reported earlier in the day that a drone attack on a training base housing US troops in the Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor killed at least six members of the SDF. The SDF claims it has evidence to confirm that so-called Iranian-backed militias were behind the drone attack.
Iran has repeatedly rejected accusations from Western countries over Tehran's alleged involvement in the Houthi attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea. In addition, Iran emphasized that resistance groups in the Middle East, such as the Houthis, do not receive any instructions from Iran.
The Syrian Democratic Forces, which is led by Kurdish fighters and backed by the United States, operates in northeastern Syria allegedly to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State(banned in Russia).

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) -

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UKRAINE TERRORIST ATTACK IN LYSYCHANSK

* Ukraine's attack on a bakery in the city of Lysychansk in the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) is a "monstrous terrorist act," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.
* Russia calls for an urgent UN Security Council meeting in response to Ukraine's strike on a bakery in Lysychansk, the Russian mission to the United Nations said.
* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemns all attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, spokesman Stephane Dujarric told Sputnik, commenting on Ukraine's deadly attack on a bakery in the city of Lysychansk.
* The Swiss Foreign Ministry on Monday called for the respect for the international law when commenting on the recent attack of the Ukrainian armed forces on a bakery in the city of Lysychansk in the LPR that killed 28 people.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The European Parliament, the Council of the EU and the European Commission will start consultations on preparation of an official document to regulate the 50 billion euros ($54 billion) for Ukraine, the parliament's spokesman, Jaume Duch, said.
* Ukraine has lost up to 290 soldiers in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* Georgia has detained a minibus with six explosive devices that was heading from Odesa to Voronezh in order to carry out a terrorist attack, the State Security Service of Georgia said.
* The French Foreign Ministry has not presented any evidence to prove that the French citizens killed in Ukraine were "humanitarian workers," the Russian embassy in Paris said.
* The Russian Embassy in the United States wants to meet with officials from the White House and State Department to discuss an investigation into the terrorist attack against an Il-76 plane, a source familiar with the matter said.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* If Europe makes a decision on issuing bonds for Ukraine, using Russian assets as financial support for debt repayment, then it will be illegal and will have long-lasting judicial consequences, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
* New EU sanctions against Russia will affect dozens of individuals and legal entities, economic measures are also being developed, but are unlikely to be ready by February 24, Bloomberg reported, citing people familiar with the matter.
* The European union is preparing the new sanctions package against Russia that will include restrictions against individuals and entities, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.

RUSSIA-UAE PRESIDENTIAL TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday held a phone conversation with UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss bilateral relations, the Kremlin said.
* Putin and Al Nahyan discussed steps on providing additional humanitarian support to the Gaza Strip during a phone conversation on Monday, the Kremlin said.
* Putin thanked Al Nahyan for his mediation efforts related to the exchange of prisoners of war (POW) between Moscow and Kiev, the Kremlin said.

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ISRAEL INVASION OF GAZA

* Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu estimated on Monday that his country's troops had defeated 18 out of Hamas' 24 battalions, one battalion more than on Sunday.

* A UN food convoy heading to the northern part of the Gaza Strip was shelled by Israeli warships, and no one was injured, UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Director Thomas White said.

* Israeli troops have detained Dr. Haider Al-Qaddura, an executive committee member of the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) who also serves as the general manager of Al-Amal Hospital, as well as Maher Atallah, the hospital's administrative director, PRCS said.

* Some 8,000 displaced Palestinians were evacuated from the Al-Amal hospital and the PRCS headquarters in Khan Yunis, the PRCS said.

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Preview – Nevada Gears Up For Primary Elections, Republican Caucuses This Week

WASHINGTON, February 6 (Sputnik) - The US state of Nevada is preparing to hold both a primary election and Republican Party caucuses this week as part of the 2024 presidential race.

Nevada will hold primary elections on Tuesday, in which US President Joe Biden will seek to further cement his claim to the Democratic Party's nomination. Biden faces challenges from US Congressman Dean Phillips and writer Marianne Williamson.

Former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley will also run in the primary, despite the Nevada Republican Party's plan to hold caucuses on Thursday. Former US President Donald Trump will participate in the caucuses.

However, Trump supporters may use the "none of these candidates" option on the Republican primary ballot to express opposition to Haley.

Trump has so far won every Republican Party nominating contest, narrowing down the field of candidates to just him and Haley. Biden has also won every Democratic Party nominating contest, including winning the New Hampshire primary as a write-in.

Registered party members are eligible to participate in the Nevada primaries; the state allows same-day voter registration. The Republican caucuses are limited to registered party members, although the deadline to register for participation was January 9.

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Pentagon Says Still Assessing Casualties From US Strikes in Iraq, Syria on Friday

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is still assessing the number of casualties in its strikes conducted in Iraq and Syria last week, Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Patrick Ryder said on Monday.

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Late on Friday, the US Central Command said that the United States conducted its first retaliatory strikes against 85 targets allegedly linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and affiliated militia groups in Iraq and Syria by using B1 strategic bombers and 125 precision munitions within about 30 minutes. Joint Chiefs of Staff Director of Operations Douglas Sims said that the US struck three adversary facilities in Iraq and four in Syria.

"The number of casualties is still being assessed," Ryder said during a press briefing.

Ryder added that it is "fair" to conclude that there were casualties in the strikes.

The Iraqi military issued a statement saying the US strikes on targets in Iraq represent a violation of the country's sovereignty and undermine the Iraqi government's efforts to stabilize the situation, which can have unforeseen consequences for the country and the region.

Syria has similarly strongly condemned the US strikes, saying they will only escalate regional tensions.

Moreover, Iran has repeatedly rejected accusations from Western countries over Tehran's alleged involvement in the Houthi attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea. In addition, Iran emphasized that resistance groups in the Middle East, such as the Houthis, do not receive any instructions from Iran.

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Over 100 Russians Imprisoned in US on False Charges - Ambassador Antonov

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Monday that 115 Russian nationals are imprisoned in the United States on false charges.

"There are about 115 individuals here in the United States. They were extradited to the United States or arrested here on false charges," Antonov said.

Antonov also said Russian diplomats are working hard to bring back home the falsely imprisoned Russian nationals.

"We will not rest until all our fellow citizens return home to their families," Antonov added.

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Biden Says Concerned About King Charles After Cancer Diagnosis

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday that he is concerned about UK King Charles III in the wake of his cancer diagnosis.

"I'm concerned about him. Just heard about his diagnosis," Biden told reporters.

He also expressed hope that he would speak with the King soon.

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The Royal Family said on Monday that King Charles has been diagnosed with a form of cancer.

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Schumer Begins to Advance $118Bln Supplemental Bill, Says Votes Set for Wednesday

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Monday that lawmakers will hold votes on a $118 billion supplemental funding bill on Wednesday, after Schumer filed cloture on a motion to advance the legislation.

"In a few moments, I will file cloture on the motion to proceed to the vehicle of the national security supplemental... Senators should expect the first vote on this bill to come Wednesday," Schumer said during floor remarks. Following his speech, Schumer filed cloture on the motion.

On Sunday, US Senate negotiators released the bill text for the legislation, which provides tens of billions of dollars in aid to Ukraine and Israel, as well as border and national security efforts.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that the legislation will be dead on arrival in the US House of Representatives.

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Ambassador Antonov Visits Russian National Klyushin in US Prison

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov visited Russian national Vladislav Klyushin at the Fort Dix prison in New Jersey, where he is serving a nine-year sentence for hacking and illicit trade.

"He [Klyushin] feels normal and does not have any difficulties. He behaves with dignity and understands that he must endure these years. Misses his family very much," Antonov said.

The Russian ambassador pointed out that Klyshin is imprisoned in a facility for 300 people, divided into compartments for 12 individuals.

"The case is a mess, extremely politicized, no evidence of guilt has been presented. He was imprisoned only because he is Russian," Antonov said. "We feel Russophobia everywhere."

Antonov noted that Klyushin had already served three years from the nine-year sentence.

On September 7, 2023, a US court sentenced Klyushin to nine years in prison. The defense sought a three-year sentence to include time served in Switzerland and in the United States. US prosecutors asked that Klyshin be sentenced to 14 years in prison.

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Almost 60% of US Voters Believe Biden in Mental Decline Ahead of 2024 Election - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) – Some 59% of US voters believe that US President Joe Biden is getting increasingly less mentally sharp as he is set to run for reelection in November, according to a poll by Rasmussen Reports out Monday.

One-third of respondents, or 33%, disagreed with the majority about Biden's mental health, but most suspect the mass media are covering up the president's cognitive decline, Rasmussen Reports said in a press release accompanying the poll.

The poll was conducted among 943 US adult voters on January 28-30. The margin of sampling error is +/- 3 percentage points with a 95% level of confidence.

In January, an ABC News/Ipsos poll revealed that only 28% of Americans believe that Biden has the mental sharpness required to serve as president. White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre responded that the poll's findings of President Biden's low sharpness and physical health are confusing taking into account what he had achieved in the last three years.

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State Dept OKs Possible $908Mln Sale of Standoff Missiles to Netherlands - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has approved a possible $908 million sale of Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles with Extended Range to the Netherlands, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency said on Monday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of the Netherlands of Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles with Extended Range and related equipment for an estimated cost of $908 million. The Defense Security Cooperation Agency delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale today," the release said.

The Dutch government has requested to buy 120 AGM-158B/B-2 Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles with Extended Range (JASSM-ER) All-Up-Rounds; 15 AGM-158 Inert JASSMs with Test Instrumentation Kits; two AGM-158 JASSM Separation Test Vehicles; one AGM-158 Instrumented Test Vehicle; and two JASSM Jettison Test Vehicles, according to the release.

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Blinken Discusses Humanitarian Goals for Gaza With Saudi Crown Prince - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh and during the discussions highlighted the importance of addressing Gaza's humanitarian needs and preventing the spread of the conflict, the State Department said on Monday.

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"The Secretary underscored the importance of addressing humanitarian needs in Gaza and preventing further spread of the conflict," the State Department said in a statement.

Blinken and bin Salman discussed regional coordination for a lasting resolution to the Gaza crisis that ensures enduring peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians, the statement said.

The two officials also discussed the importance of building a more integrated and prosperous region and reaffirmed the strategic partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia, the statement said.

In addition, Blinken and bin Salman talked about the need to ease tensions in the Middle East, including stopping Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and to achieve progress in the Yemen peace process, the statement added.

Blinken is on a four-day trip to the Middle East that includes stops in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Israel and the West Bank from February 4-8, according to the statement.

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US State Dept. Says Distrusts Russian Claims Ukraine Shot Down Il-76 Using Patriot Missile

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) – The United States does not consider Moscow's evidence about Ukraine's role in the downing of a Russian plane carrying Ukrainian prisoners of war with a US-made Patriot missile worthy of credibility, State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

“Is it the same level of credible evidence that makes Russia claim that they have Crimea or that all the territory that they took from Ukraine is theirs,” Patel said during a press briefing when asked to comment on Russia’s evidence that Ukraine shot down a Russian plane with 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war on board with a Patriot missile.

Using the same argumentation Patel also dismissed Russian claims that Ukraine used the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System in its strike on a bakery in Lysychansk. Earlier in the day, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the attack that killed 28 people, including 1 child.

Six Russian crew members, three Russian servicemen, and 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war aboard the airplane were killed after a missile hit the Il-76 airplane over the Belgorod Region on January 24. The aircraft was en route for a planned prisoner exchange that was subsequently canceled.

The Russian Investigative Committee said on Thursday that the Ukrainian armed forces used the MIM-104A guided missile of the Patriot system to shoot down the plane.

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US Didn't Warn Iraq in Advance of Strikes, Contrary to Prior Statement - State Department

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The United States did not provide advance notice to Iraq before its recent strikes on Iraqi territory, contrary to last week's statement by Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby, US State Department deputy principal spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

"Iraq, like every country in the region, understood that there would be a response after the deaths of our soldiers. As for this specific response on Friday, there was not a pre-notification. We informed the Iraqis immediately after the strikes occurred," Patel said.

Last week, Kirby said that the United States had informed the Iraqi government about its operation prior to conducting the strikes.

In January 2024, three US soldiers were killed in an attack on a US base in Jordan, which further spiraled tensions as the US retaliated by striking what it said were Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) targets in Syria and Iraq.

Iran has denied playing any role in the attack in Jordan. Tehran says that resistance groups in the Middle East do not receive any instructions from Iran.

Both Iraq and Syria condemned the US strikes on their territory, and the Iraqi parliament's Security and Defense Committee called for the quick signing of an agreement on the withdrawal of the international coalition troops from the country.

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US to Redirect Humanitarian Aid to Gaza Via UNICEF, WFP - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The United States will redirect its humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip via established partners in the region such as the World Food Program (WFP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), US State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

"We're going to take steps to ensure that aid can flow through other appropriate partners who do work in the region like the World Food Program, like UNICEF, like other NGOs, and we'll continue to have this conversation not just with Congress but with donor countries as well," Patel said during a press briefing.

The remarks come after UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini had said Israel shared with the agency data on the alleged involvement of some of its staff in the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel and vowed to hold accountable anyone involved in it.

The United States, Finland, Italy, Australia, Canada, Japan and the United Kingdom have since suspended funding for UNRWA.

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Blinken, Saudi Crown Prince Discuss Need for 'Enduring End' to Gaza Crisis - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met on Monday with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud in Riyadh for talks on regional issues including the need for an enduring solution to the conflict in Gaza and escalating tensions in the Red Sea, the State Department said.

"The secretary underscored the importance of addressing humanitarian needs in Gaza and preventing further spread of the conflict. The Secretary and Crown Prince continued discussions on regional coordination to achieve an enduring end to the crisis in Gaza that provides lasting peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians alike," the State Department said in a readout.

Additionally, the release said that Blinken and Prince Mohammed discussed ways to build a more prosperous and integrated region, reaffirmed the strategic partnership between Saudi Arabia and the US, and explored ways to lessen the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, according to the readout.

The visit by Blinken is part of a four-day trip to the Middle East that includes stops in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Israel and the West Bank from February 4-8, marking his fifth trip to the region since the October 7 attack on Israel.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from Gaza and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. 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 27,300 people have been killed so far in the 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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Majority of US Voters Want to See Verdict in Trump Election Case Before 2024 Vote - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - A majority of US voters want the verdict in former President Donald Trump's trial for his alleged efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election before this year's vote, a CNN poll revealed on Monday.

Sixty-four percent of respondents said they would either prefer to see a verdict reached before the 2024 presidential election or that it is essential that a verdict is reached before then, a release on the poll said.

The poll results showed that fewer people expect Trump would be willing to accept a potential election loss this year than in 2020, with only 25% of the public saying they believe he would accept the results if he loses, the release said.

This represents a 12% decrease from 2020, when 37% of Americans believed the same in

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October 2020, the release said.
However, a majority of the US public regardless of their political affiliation said they believe all candidates should accept the result of the US elections, with 86% asserting the loser is obligated to concede once results are certified, the release said.
Trump is facing four federal charges: conspiracy to defraud the United States; conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding; obstruction of an official proceeding; and conspiracy to disenfranchise voters. Trump has pleaded not guilty to all four charges. The trial date was originally set for March 4 but was postponed last week.

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Russian Embassy Seeking Meeting With Biden Admin Over Il-76 Terrorist Attack - Source

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The Russian Embassy in the United States wants to meet with officials from the White House and State Department to discuss an investigation into the terrorist attack against an Il-76 plane, a source familiar with the matter said.
"The embassy is seeking a meeting at the State Department and White House," the source told reporters.
Russia wants to raise the issue of a "probe into a terrorist attack by Ukraine," the source said.
On January 24, Ukrainian forces shot down an Il-76 military transport plane, killing six Russian crew members, three Russian servicemen and 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war aboard. The aircraft was en route for a planned prisoner exchange that was subsequently canceled.
Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the IL-76 aircraft was targeted by a US-made - and supplied - Patriot air defense system, citing the findings of Russian investigators. Kiev was aware that the plane was carrying their prisoners of war, the Russian president said.
Putin accused Kiev of trying to provoke Russia into a retaliatory response, but emphasized that Moscow would not stop POW exchanges despite the deadly provocation.

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Tesla Stock Now Ranks 10th on S&P 500 Index for Top US Companies

NEW YORK, February 5 (Sputnik) - Electric vehicle (EV) manufacturer Tesla's fortunes have plummeted in the beginning of 2024, with the company's stock declining to 10th place on the S&P500 index ranking for the top 500 US companies.
A series of woes for Tesla have brought its trading price to under $182 a share on the New York Stock Exchange - a far cry from its peak of just over $384 in April 2022.
On Tuesday, the stock registered a drop of nearly 7% on its value, hitting a nine-month low. Since the year began, Tesla has lost almost 27%.
Tesla now ranks right below semiconductor and infrastructure software developer Broadcom

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and eighth-ranked drug company Eli Lilly & Co.

The decrease in Tesla's stock value comes as a Delaware court rejected the company's compensation package of more than $56 billion for Chief Executive Elon Musk. US media reported over the weekend that Musk had pressured Tesla board members to accept his compensation package.

Tesla was also hit by another misfortune after German software giant SAP apparently decided to stop buying the EV brand for its company use, according to media reports. The exact reasons for the decision by SAP, which has a fleet of 29,000 vehicles, were not provided.

The reports noted, however, that Tesla changes its list prices more than other manufacturers, complicating purchasing plans. The EV maker also delivers its cars earlier than scheduled, making storage difficult for some customers, the reports added.

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Biden Admin. Says Opposes US House Effort to Impeach Mayorkas for Handling of Border

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration opposes an effort in the US House of Representatives to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for his handling of illegal immigration at the United States' southern border, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) said on Monday.

"Impeaching Secretary Mayorkas would be an unprecedented and unconstitutional act of political retribution that would do nothing to solve the challenges our Nation faces in securing the border," OMB said in a statement of administration policy.

The impeachment effort fails to meet the US Constitution's threshold for impeachable offenses, the statement said.

Later on Monday, the US House Rules Committee will consider the resolution, which accuses Mayorkas of willful and systemic refusal to comply with federal immigration laws and his oath of office.

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US Disappointed as Hungary's Ruling Party Blocks Vote on Sweden NATO Bid - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is disappointed that Hungary's ruling party boycotted the NATO bid vote, US State Department deputy principal spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

"We are disappointed that the ruling party blocked the opportunity for a vote by boycotting the session," Patel said during a press briefing.

The Hungarian parliament will convene today in an extraordinary session at the request of the country's opposition parties to discuss the ratification of Sweden's bid to become a member of

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NATO.

The ruling Fidesz party and the Christian Democratic People's Party, which hold 135 seats out of the total 199 seats in parliament, announced plans to boycott the vote - meaning a vote will not take place because of a lack of quorum.

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Blinken Congratulates Incumbent Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele on His Electoral Victory

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken conveyed his congratulations on Monday to the Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele for securing a second presidential mandate during the February 4 elections.

"I congratulate Nayib Bukele on his electoral victory as President of El Salvador. The United States commends the work of electoral observers and looks forward to working with President-elect Bukele and Vice President-elect Felix Ulloa following their inauguration in June," Blinken said in a statement.

The Nuevas Ideas party that Bukele represented won an overwhelming victory in Sunday's elections with 70.25% of the ballots processed, whereby Bukele secured 83% of the vote. The Farabundo Marti Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) party won 139,025 votes and the rightist Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) came in third with 122,926 votes.

Blinken said that the United States values its relationship with El Salvador and its people, built on shared values, regional ties and family connections.

The events that unfold in El Salvador have a direct impact on the United States, Blinken said,

The United States and El Salvador must work together to achieve the full potential in their relationship and overcome global and hemispherical obstacles, Blinken said.

The United States looks forward to prioritizing good governance, inclusive economic prosperity, fair trial guarantees and human rights in El Salvador under the existing Root Causes Strategy, Blinken added.

On Wednesday, US Congresswoman Ilhan Omar requested that Blinken review the United States' relationship with El Salvador ahead of the country's elections on the basis of alleged threats to democracy.

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UN Not Involved in Putin’s Visit to Turkey But Looks Closely to Its Outcome - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is not involved in the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Turkey, but is looking closely to the outcome of the meeting, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Monday.

“We are not involved in this bilateral visit, but obviously, we are looking closely to what comes

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out," Dujarric said when asked whether the United Nations is involved in possible talks on reviving the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

A diplomatic source in Ankara told Sputnik in late January that Putin may visit Turkey on February 12, but other dates were also being considered.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said last week that the date of Putin's trip to Turkey will be announced in a timely manner and the Ukraine conflict will be on the agenda of Putin's talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

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US House Republican Leadership Team Says Opposes Senate Supplemental Funding Bill

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The US House Republican leadership team said on Monday that House Republicans will oppose a $118 billion supplemental funding bill proposed in the US Senate, which includes billions of dollars in foreign aid alongside border and national security measures.

"House Republicans oppose the Senate immigration bill because it fails in every policy area needed to secure our border and would actually incentivize more illegal immigration," the leadership team said in a statement. "Any consideration of this Senate bill in its current form is a waste of time. It is DEAD on arrival in the House. We encourage the US Senate to reject it."

The statement was issued by House Speaker Mike Johnson, Majority Leader Steve Scalise, Majority Whip Tom Emmer and House Republican Conference Chairwoman Elise Stefanik.

The bill expands work authorizations for illegal immigrants while failing to include critical reforms to asylum policies, the statement said.

The legislation also includes loopholes that grants too much discretionary authority to US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, the statement said. Mayorkas has proven he is willing to "exploit every measure possible" to keep the United States' borders open, the statement said.

Moreover, the bill fails to stop the Biden administration's abuse of parole authority and provides taxpayer money to fly and house illegal immigrants, the statement said.

The legislation includes tens of billions of dollars in aid for Ukraine and Israel and funding for national security measures as well.

House lawmakers may consider a standalone Ukraine aid bill, but Republican support for such a measure is waning, a congressional source told Sputnik on Monday.

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House May Push for Standalone Ukraine Aid Bill, But Republican Support Waning - Source

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WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The House of Representatives may consider a standalone bill to provide additional funding for Ukraine aid, but Republican support on this initiative is waning, a congressional source told Sputnik on Monday.

On Sunday, the Senate, after weeks of negotiations with the White House, released the $118 billion national security supplemental bill that includes some $60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine, $14 billion for Israel, and some $20 billion for border security, among other priorities. US House Speaker Mike Johnson rejected the measure, adding that it would be "dead on arrival" if it reaches the House.

"It's possible, although the GOP appetite for more [funding] for Ukraine is finally beginning to wane," the source said about the likelihood of a standalone Ukraine aid bill. "I think the Speaker [Johnson] would need to decide if he wants to put a bill on the floor that potentially more Democrats might support than Republicans."

The Biden administration ran out of funding for Ukraine aid in December and has been urging Congress to urgently approve more funding amid Russia's special military operation.

Johnson already notified his House colleagues that there will be a vote this week on a standalone $17.6 billion Israel aid bill.

Although the deal reached on the national security supplemental bill was a bipartisan effort, it has received lots of backlash from Republicans, and several Democrats, in both the House and Senate over disagreements on the border policy proposal, which makes the future of this legislation uncertain.

According to Republican Senator James Lankford, one of the key negotiators of the supplemental bill, the changes to US border policy proposed in the bill includes limits on the use of parole catch-and-release at the southern border, which is expected to stop over half a million border crossings each year.

The proposed legislation would also include enhanced measures to deport migrants who enter the United States illegally, tighter restrictions on US asylum eligibility for migrants, $650 million to build more border wall, and a mandated shutdown of the border to illegal migrants when the daily average number of illegal crossings exceeds 5,000 for a week.

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FDA Suffers Backlog in Drug Import Inspections to US Since COVID-19 Pandemic - Report

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has fallen seriously behind in monitoring the flow of drugs and other medications imported into the United States, which now comprise 50% of the total medications, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Monday.

"[B]eginning in March 2020, FDA postponed most inspections because of the COVID-19 pandemic," the report said. "The postponement of inspections led to a backlog of establishments never inspected or not inspected by FDA within five years - categories for which FDA considers inspections mandatory."

The GAO concluded that this backlog could extend the interval between inspections and

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reduce the resources the FDA has available for other high-priority inspections, the report said.
Also, vacancies among investigators available to conduct foreign inspections represent another challenge GAO identified in multiple reports, the report said.
The FDA has experienced persistent vacancies among staff who specialize in foreign inspections, including staff in foreign offices located in China and India, the report said.
The FDA investigators may be less likely to see the true day-to-day operating environment of foreign establishments as compared to domestic, the report also said.
The FDA has relied on translators provided by the foreign establishments being inspected, which investigators noted can raise questions about the accuracy of information FDA investigators collect, the report added.

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US Envoy Lenderking to Travel to Gulf to Address Regional Tensions - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking is set to travel to the Gulf this week to address regional tensions, such as the urgency of halting Houthi attacks impacting navigation in the Red Sea and hindering Yemen's peace process, the State Department said in a statement on Monday.
"US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking is traveling to the Gulf this week to meet with partners in the region to discuss the urgent need to reduce regional tensions, including cessation of Houthi attacks, which are undermining both freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and progress on the Yemen peace process," the statement said.
According to the statement, the United States is collaborating closely with its partners to bolster peace efforts under UN auspices and address the intricate humanitarian and economic crises impacting the Yemeni people.
"Special Envoy Lenderking will meet with regional counterparts to discuss the necessary steps to de-escalate the current situation, stop the ongoing Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, and renew focus on securing a durable peace for the people of Yemen," the statement added.
In November 2023, Yemen's Ansar Allah movement, also known as the Houthis, vowed to attack any ships associated with Israel until it halts military actions in the Gaza Strip. This led US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to announce the creation of a multinational operation to secure navigation in the Red Sea. The US and the UK later launched major strikes against Houthi positions in a bid to degrade the rebels' ability to target commercial vessels.
In January 2024, three US soldiers were killed in an attack on a US base in Jordan, which further spiraled tensions as the US retaliated by striking targets in Syria and Iraq.

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University of Florida Database Records 69 Unprovoked Shark Bites, 10 Fatalities in 2023

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The University of Florida's International Shark Attack File (ISAF) database recorded 69 unprovoked shark bites and ten fatal bites around the world in 2023, the Florida Museum of Natural History said on Monday.

ISAF, which is housed at the state-sponsored museum in the city of Gainsville, monitors and documents shark attacks throughout the world.

"There was an increase in the number of unprovoked shark attacks worldwide and an uptick in fatalities in 2023 compared to the previous year," ISAF said in a statement. "Although this is higher than the previous five-year average of 63 attacks, the data remain consistent with long-term trends."

Fatal bites doubled from five incidents in 2022 to ten in 2023, the statement said.

A majority of shark bites worldwide, 52%, occurred in the United States and 40% of fatal bites occurred in Australia, the statement said.

Researchers focus on unprovoked shark attacks - defined as an incident in a shark's natural habitat that occurs without provocation, such as approaching or baiting sharks - to best understand the animals' natural behavior, the statement also said.

ISAF recorded 22 shark attacks that were intentionally or unintentionally provoked, the statement added.

The provoked attacks most commonly occurred while spearfishing, according to the statement.

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Russia Requests Urgent UNSC Meeting Over Deadly Lysychansk Strike - Mission

UNITED NATIONS, February 5 (Sputnik) - Russia calls for an urgent UN Security Council meeting in response to Ukraine's strike on a bakery in Lysychansk, the Russian mission to the United Nations said on Monday.

"Russia has requested an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council in connection with the attack by the Ukrainian armed forces on Lysychansk," First Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy wrote on his Telegram channel.

Russia expects the meeting to be scheduled for 15:00 New York time (20:00 GMT) on February 6.

Ukraine struck the crowded bakery on Saturday, collapsing the building and trapping some 40 civilians under the rubble, the LPR military commander's office told Sputnik. At least 28 people, including a pregnant woman and one child, were killed and 10 others were injured.

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Drone Attack on Base in Syria Housing US Troops Kills 6 Members of SDF Forces

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - A drone attack on a training base housing US troops in the Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor killed at least six members of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the SDF Media Center said in a statement on Monday.

"The Iranian-backed militias used the Syrian regime-controlled areas in Deir ez-Zor as a staging ground for the terrorist attack that targeted our Commando Academy and resulted in the martyrdom of six of our commando fighters," the statement said.

Initial investigations have confirmed that the Iranian-backed militias were behind the drone attack against the SDF forces in the Al-Omar oil field in Deir ez Zor, the statement said.

The attack was aimed primarily at hindering the joint operations against terrorism, making the Islamic State terror group (outlawed in Russia) the "sole beneficiary," the statement added.

The Syrian Democratic Forces, which is led by Kurdish fighters and backed by the United States, operates in northeastern Syria allegedly to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State.

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Trump Says US Needs Separate Bill on Border, Not Tied to Aid for Ukraine, Israel

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) – A new US bill on the border and immigration should be uncoupled from the provision of foreign aid for Ukraine and Israel, former President Donald Trump said on Monday after the Senate's supplemental funding bill was unveiled on Sunday.

On Sunday, the Senate, after weeks of negotiations with the White House, released the text of its $118 billion national security supplemental bill that includes some $60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine, $14 billion for Israel, and about $20 billion for border security, among other priorities.

The proposed legislation would immediately deport migrants who enter the US illegally, further restrict asylum eligibility, provide $650 million to build more border wall, and require a shutdown of the border to asylum-seekers when illegal crossings exceed an average of 5,000 a day for at least seven consecutive days.

"Only a fool, or a Radical Left Democrat, would vote for this horrendous Border Bill," Trump said in a Truth Social post. "We need a separate Border and Immigration Bill. It should not be tied to foreign aid in any way, shape, or form!"

According to Trump, the Senate bill aims to absolve the Democrats who have created the crisis on the border and put the consequences of their "horrible job" on the shoulders of Republicans.

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House Republicans Urge Biden to Lift LNG Export Freeze - Letter

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) – Over 150 US House Republicans, including Speaker Mike Johnson, urge President Joe Biden to lift a pause on liquefied natural gas (LNG) export projects, according to a letter obtained by Fox News.

"This is economically and strategically dangerous and unnecessary," the letter said. "Under both Democratic and Republican administrations, DOE [the Department of Energy] has consistently found that U.S. LNG exports serve the 'public interest' because they contribute positive economic benefits and strengthen energy security for the American people, and also have the potential to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions."

The signatories, led by House Energy and Commerce Committee Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers, stressed that the moratorium impacts the energy security not only of the US, but its allies as well.

The lawmakers called on Biden to "expeditiously approve all pending applications to increase the global supply of natural gas." They also urged the administration to take all measures to encourage greater LNG production and to grant the export permits that allow access to global markets, according to the letter.

The Republicans also stated the pause on LNG projects could strengthen Russia. They stressed that, in December 2023, more than 87% of US LNG exports went to Europe, UK, or Asian markets, the report said.

"Such actions would undercut efforts we have made to help Europe reduce its reliance on Russian energy," the letter stated.

In January, Biden paused the approval of new LNG export projects, citing a need to better assess climate, health, and economic considerations of pending licenses. Chairman of the industry regulator in Texas, Christi Craddick, told Sputnik last week that Biden's decision is a major mistake that harms the US economy and national security.

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Guterres Condemns Strike on Lysychansk, Stands Against All Attacks on Civilians - Office

UNITED NATIONS, February 5 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemns all attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, spokesman Stephane Dujarric told Sputnik on Monday, commenting on Ukraine's deadly attack on a bakery in the city of Lysychansk.

Ukraine struck the crowded bakery on February 3, collapsing the building and trapping some 40 civilians under the rubble, the LPR military commander's office told Sputnik. At least 28 people, including a pregnant woman and one child, were killed and 10 others were injured.

"The Secretary-General condemns all attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, including the shelling of Lisichank, which reportedly killed or injured a number of civilians. Attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure are prohibited under international humanitarian law, are unacceptable and must stop immediately," Dujarric said.

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