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‘No Accountability, No Plan to Victory’: Capitol Hill Bipartisan Bill Falls Apart

On Saturday, House Speaker Mike Johnson announced that Republicans would propose their Israel-only funding bill (H.R. 7217) as a rejection to the larger bipartisan bill. The Biden administration said that the Israel-only bill was a “cynical political maneuver” and “strongly [opposed] the ploy”.

Lawmakers in DC released a large bipartisan bill on Sunday. That bill aimed to reform immigration policy in a decade with $20 billion (out of $118 billion in total for funding for Ukraine and Israel). On Wednesday the US Senate blocked the bill, but is open to hearing a revised version of the legislation which includes Ukraine and Israel aid but not immigration reform.

On Wednesday, Gerry Wilkins, a political consultant and candidate for US House Alabama District 6, spoke with Sputnik’s Fault Lines. Wilkins said that US voters in Alabama aren’t interested in aiding Ukraine with “no accountability, no plan to victory”.

“I think Speaker Johnson has a very difficult time ahead. When you look at the majority in the House. But he does need to bring a standalone Israel bill, a standalone border security bill. And we've got to stop lumping all of this stuff together. I can tell you that the people do not want, in my district, to continue funding this Ukraine war with no accountability, no plan to victory,” Wilkins explained.

“That's just a nonstarter for people in Alabama, especially when we have an invasion going on at the southern border.”

The political consultant sounded off the steps that he would like the US government to take in addressing security at the US-Mexico border, including an end to what is called “catch and release”---a system in which an illegal immigrant is released to the community while they await hearings in immigration court instead of detaining them.

“We need to reimplement the stay in Mexico policy,” Wilkins urged. “We need to end catch and release. We need to activate the National Guard at all of our border states. And we need to put a stop to this. And we have the technology to do it. And then we need to go after these cartels that are perpetrating this human trafficking and this fentanyl that is just pouring into our country.”

Wilkins then reaffirmed that there is a strong allyship between the US and Israel which has been active since the Vietnam War. Despite a difference in politics between US President Joe Biden and Israeli Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the US has continued to funnel billions of dollars to aid Israel in their conflict at the Gaza Strip.

But now, half of US adults believe Israel has “gone too far” in their military campaign in Gaza as the death toll has risen to 27,000 people, with two-thirds of those victims being women and children.

“So clearly, you know, Israel is a separate issue from Ukraine. And I'm completely in support of helping Israel, they’re our greatest ally in the Middle East, their strategic importance to us. So, I do think that needs to be a priority for us,” he said.

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“And I also understand those that are concerned about the fiscal component to it, because, I mean, goodness, we're approaching $35 trillion national debt right now. And every dollar we're spending, we're borrowing. So it's clearly an issue we have to address. And we have a very tight majority. And there's different opinions on this, but I think there are ways to navigate it,” Wilkins added.

“And the fact that they're trying to say, this is a border bill when they want to send another $68 billion to Ukraine. It’s ridiculous,” the analyt emphasized.

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25,000 Artifacts Unearthed in Historic Saudi Arabia City

These discoveries highlight the vast trading connections of Jeddah.

Archeologists have unearthed roughly 25,000 artifacts in the second-largest city in Saudi Arabia. These findings include: more than 11,400 pieces of pottery, more than 11,300 animal bones, more than 1,700 shells, almost 700 building materials as well as 200 glass artifacts, and approximately 70 metal artifacts, according to the Jeddah Historic District Program (JHD).

The pottery fragments are dated between the 16th and 20th centuries, some of which were imported from Europe, Japan and China. These include “a variety of ceramic vessels and pieces of high-quality porcelain,” archeologists said, some of which were made in the Chinese province of Jiangxi.

Ebony pillars that were found on the sides of the mihrab were also analyzed. It’s believed that these likely date back to the 7th and 8th centuries. And the origin of the wood that was used for this part of a mosque came from the Ceylon Island, which is now known as Sri Lanka.

Tombstones made from materials including Mangabi stone, marble and granite were also uncovered in different locations throughout Jeddah. The tombstones could date back to the 8th and 9th centuries AD, and display the inscriptions of names, epitaphs and verses from the Quran.

"From the 7th century AD it was established as a major port for Indian Ocean trade routes, channeling goods to Mecca. It was also the gateway for Muslim pilgrims to Mecca who arrived by sea," the UNESCO said.

Researchers first began excavating in Jeddah in January of 2020. With the goal being to unveil the historical significance of four areas: Othman bin Affan mosque, Al-Shona, a segment of the Northern Wall, and Al-Kidwah.

"These twin roles saw the city develop into a thriving multicultural center, characterized by a distinctive architectural tradition, including tower houses built in the late 19th century by the city's mercantile elites, and combining Red Sea coastal coral building traditions with influences and crafts from along the trade routes," the agency added.

The historic site is located on the eastern shore of the Red Sea. Beginning in the 7th century AD, it was established as a major port for Indian Ocean trade routes, as well as a gateway for Muslim pilgrims to Mecca. The sea port is protected by UNESCO and includes souks, mosques,

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and about 650 traditional buildings pushed together in a tight area which make up a staggering display.

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The Big US Apology

US State Department deputy principal spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday that while Iraq "understood" that there would be a response to the deaths of three US soldiers, they did not notify them beforehand.

On Tuesday, US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby apologized for incorrectly telling the press that the US had notified Iraq in advance of its recent strikes on Iraqi territory.

"I deeply apologize for the error and I regret any confusion that it caused. It was based on information we had or that was provided to me in those early hours after the strikes. Turns out that information was incorrect and I certainly regret the error and I hope that you'll understand there was no ill intent behind it, no deliberate intent to deceive or to be wrong," Kirby said at a press briefing.

In January, three US soldiers were killed in a drone strike on a US garrison on the border of Jordan and Syria. The US retaliated on February 2 by striking what it said were Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) targets in Syria and Iraq, which included 85 targets.

Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder explained that the US chose not to give Iraq a warning of their strikes to protect American forces in the country.

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

Iraq and Syria have condemned the US strikes on their territories, and the Iraqi parliament's Security and Defense Committee called for an agreement to withdraw the international coalition troops from the country.

How Hillary Clinton kicked off years of anti-Russia hysteria before Tucker Carlon's interview with Vladimir Putin.

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Security analyst Mark Sleboda joined Sputnik's Fault Lines program Wednesday to examine the media response to Tucker Carlson's interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and host Jamarl Thomas noted the special influence of Hillary Clinton in fueling anti-Russia hysteria.

"This all goes back to Hillary Clinton if I'm being honest… The Democratic position [was that] it was Vladimir Putin who took Donald Trump under his wing and carried him, like the footprints thing, where Jesus carried the person when they only saw one set of footprints and that Putin is the reason that Trump got in office," noted Thomas.

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Democrats have increasingly favored accusing their political opponents of ties to Russia since 2016, when members of the Clinton campaign devised the tactic as a way to explain the candidate's unanticipated loss to Trump in the presidential election.

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"What we're witnessing is multiple world governments telling people you don't have the right to hear a conversation between two people that we don't like right now," analyst Steve Poikonen told Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Wednesday.

"We're going to fundamentally destroy the concept of journalism in the press in order to keep you from hearing this conversation," Poikonen said, summarizing the mindset of Western rulers as journalist Tucker Carlson prepares to release his interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin. He also noted the US repression of journalist Julian Assange and the US ally Israel's targeted killings of journalists in Gaza.

"I think that you have to look at every single instance of the state abusing its perceived authority or power to interfere with a journalist or their actions as part of the whole war on Julian Assange, WikiLeaks and journalism in general," Poikonen added.

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A Threat from Zelensky? Ukraine puts Tucker Carlson on "kill list"

Netizens are enraged US journalist Tucker Carlson has been added to a Ukrainian "kill list" because of the interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow. The controversial site Mirotvorets compiles the personal information of journalists and other prominent figures who are deemed to be "enemies of Ukraine."

Western corporate media often dismisses the significance of the Mirotvorets page, but the site is operated by figures with close connections to Ukrainian lawmakers. Journalists Vladlen Tatarsky and Darya Dugina were killed by Ukrainian terrorists after appearing on the website.

More recently, author Gonzalo Lira died in a Ukrainian prison where he was being held after engaging in prominent public criticism of the Kiev regime. The incident garnered minimal comment from the Biden administration, even though Lira was an American citizen.

Although the Zelensky regime enjoys American military and financial aid, that doesn't stop Ukraine from listing US citizens on the "kill list".

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Meanwhile, the White House has remained mum about US citizens' presence on the assassination list.

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Tucker Carlson Threatened With Death, Sanctions for Putin Interview: Netizens React

The US journalist has faced threats to his life for undermining Western regime narratives with his interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

News spread Wednesday that US journalist Tucker Carlson has been added to a Ukrainian “kill list” as the reporter prepares to release an interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

The disturbing development was noted by users on social media, who shared screenshots of the entry for Carlson on the Mirotvorets webpage (actually, the prominent journalist was added to the notorious "kill list" back in 2023).The controversial site compiles the personal information of journalists and other prominent figures who are deemed to be “enemies of Ukraine.”

Users pointed out that Carlson’s entry has existed on the site for some time, but news of Carlson’s interview brought renewed attention to the fact that figures associated with the Kiev regime have apparently been monitoring the journalist for over a year.

Western corporate media often dismisses the significance of the Mirotvorets page, but the site is operated by figures with close connections to Ukrainian lawmakers. Journalists Vladlen Tatarsky and Darya Dugina were killed by Ukrainian terrorists after appearing on the “Peace Maker” section of the website.

More recently, author Gonzalo Lira died in a Ukrainian prison where he was being held after engaging in prominent public criticism of the Kiev regime. The incident garnered minimal comment from the Biden administration, even though Lira was an American citizen.

Although the Zelensky regime enjoys American military and financial aid, that doesn't stop Ukraine from listing US citizens on the "kill list".

Meanwhile, the White House has remained mum about US citizens' presence on the assassination list.

It also emerged Wednesday that Carlson may be subject to Western sanctions for conducting the interview with President Putin.

Reporting in US media, based on interviews with current and former members of the European Parliament, confirmed that Carlson could be legally punished for his act of journalism. Former Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, now a member of the European Parliament, described Carlson as “a mouthpiece” for Putin and former US President Donald Trump.

“As Putin is a war criminal and the EU sanctions all who assist him in that effort, it seems logical that the External Action Service examine his case as well,” said Verhofstadt.

Former EU parliament member Luis Garicano agreed with Verhofstadt’s assessment. “He is no longer a newsman, but a propagandist for the most heinous regime on European soil and the one which is most dangerous to our peace and security,” said Garicano.

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Carlson's interview with President Putin is set to be released Thursday. Stay with Sputnik for breaking news on this story as it develops.

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How Hillary Clinton Kicked Off Years of Anti-Russia Hysteria Before Tucker Carlon's Putin Interview

The Democratic Party politician helped inaugurate a new period of neo-McCarthyism in the United States.

Hostility towards Russia has grown steadily in US media discourse since former President Donald Trump's electoral victory in 2016. The businessman's triumph was a seismic moment in politics which, along with Brexit in the United Kingdom, fundamentally reshaped the political conversation in the West.

Now, with US-Russia relations at their lowest point since the Cold War, observers are taking a look back to understand how Russophobia grew to such epic proportions in the Western world.

Security analyst Mark Sleboda joined Sputnik's Fault Lines program Wednesday to examine the media response to Tucker Carlson's interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and host Jamarl Thomas noted the influence of one person in particular in fueling anti-Russia hysteria.

"This all goes back to Hillary Clinton if I'm being honest," said Thomas as Sleboda noted that Russophobia limited Trump's options in diplomacy with Russia during his presidency. "The Democratic position [was that] it was Vladimir Putin who took Donald Trump under his wing and carried him, like the footprints thing, where Jesus carried the person when they only saw one set of footprints and that Putin is the reason that Trump got in office."

"And Hillary Clinton breathlessly told everybody this in fact, that's what she ran on after the fact she lost," Thomas added. "That was one of the things that she basically blamed. Democrats believe it to this day and they believe it because from their point of view, there was no way that this incompetent man beat our most qualified woman in the history of women in regards to politics," the host pointed out.

"That skew is there because Hillary Clinton seeded the population with that nonsense. It's unfortunate, to be honest," Thomas insisted.

Sleboda agreed with the assessment, adding, "there's no question she [Clinton] was a big player."

"I mean, and she didn't stop at slurring Donald Trump, of course," Sleboda noted. "She slurred members of her own party who were – Tulsi Gabbard – who were running for president, as a Russian agent simply because Tulsi Gabbard had positions on foreign policy that were critical of existing US foreign policy, including on events that led up to this conflict in Ukraine."

"So, Hillary Clinton is just so pro-hegemon, you know, US playing the role of world hegemon that she's willing to slur even members of her own party," the analyst concluded, "as being Putin's puppets, much less, of course, Donald Trump."

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Democrats have increasingly favored accusing their political opponents of ties to Russia since 2016, when members of the Hillary Clinton campaign devised the tactic as a way to explain the candidate's unanticipated loss to Donald Trump in that year's presidential election.
"Within 24 hours of her [Clinton's] concession speech, [Campaign manager Robby] Mook and [John] Podesta assembled her communications team at the Brooklyn headquarters to engineer the case that the election wasn't entirely on the up-and-up," according to an account by journalists Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes.
"For a couple of hours, with Shake Shack containers littering the room, they went over the script they would pitch to the press and the public. Already, Russian hacking was the centerpiece of the argument."
Senator Bernie Sanders has also engaged in the McCarthy-esque argument. "Who's paying you?" the Vermont politician who aligns with the Democratic Party angrily asked when confronted by a former campaign chief over his vote to arm Ukrainian neo-Nazis.
As relations between the US and Russia sink even lower amid the United States' failed effort to defeat Russia in the US-backed proxy war in Ukraine, one increasingly senses that liberals have picked up the "neo-McCarthyist" mantle of demonizing Russia, as host Melik Abdul pointed out. The only way to secure peace and prevent World War III may lie in electing, or reelecting, a president unbeholden to the US' political and foreign policy establishment.

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'Losing the Narrative': Freakout Over Tucker Carlson Signals Collapse of Western War Propaganda

The Western propaganda machine is losing its potency as the United States' anti-Russian proxy war in Ukraine fails.
Western mainstream media isn't what it used to be. Some 20 years ago, US regime propagandists lied the United States into the Iraq War with ease. Saddam Hussein was "Hitler," we were told. He wanted to conquer the world. He was making nukes. Americans bought the story unquestioningly.
Such has not been the case with the latest war effort. Americans are intensely divided. Congress is unable to pass requisite funding. And the US proxy regime is failing on the battlefield. Increasingly, it seems the propagandists in Washington and Langley are no longer up to the task.
Amidst the collective Western freakout that journalist Tucker Carlson will share his interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin and provide Western audiences the opportunity to hear the unfiltered message of the US enemy du jour, analyst Steve Poikonen joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Wednesday to discuss the sad state of affairs.
"We're going to fundamentally destroy the concept of journalism in the press in order to keep you from hearing this conversation," Poikonen said, summarizing the mindset of Western rulers. "What we're witnessing is multiple world governments telling people you don't have the right to hear a conversation between two people that we don't like right now."

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“I think that you have to look at every single instance of the state abusing its perceived authority or power to interfere with a journalist or their actions as part of the whole war on Julian Assange, WikiLeaks and journalism in general,” Poikonen added.

Julian Assange, the renegade founder of the website WikiLeaks, has been held in the HM Belmarsh high-security prison in the United Kingdom for almost five years. The journalist was arrested after Ecuadorian President and suspected CIA asset Lenin Moreno revoked his asylum agreement after he’d spent seven years seeking refuge in the country’s embassy in London. Assange believes the United States seeks to sentence him to life in prison or even submit him to the death penalty.

Host Wilmer Leon noted that US ally Israel is also deliberately targeting and killing journalists in its assault on Gaza while the United States itself operates a “massive biosurveillance structure” more sophisticated than that run by any secret police in history.

“The United States government/the West realizes it is losing the narrative, it is losing the public opinion,” said Leon. “When you look at the polls, Americans want us out of Ukraine, Americans don't want their money to go there, Americans are opposed to the genocidal actions of the Zionist government in Israel. They're losing the narrative, they're losing in the court of public opinion.”

“And all Tucker Carlson is doing is now adding more information to that information war, and the United States is losing it.”

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Biden Mistakenly Refers to Deceased European Leaders in Series of Slipups

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden was caught a second time this week mistakenly referring to a deceased European leader, according to a White House pool report.

"When I first got elected president, I went to a G7 meeting with the seven heads of state in Europe and Great Britain. I sat down and I said, ‘Well, America’s back’ and the president of France looked at me and said, ‘for how long.’ I never thought of it this way. Then Helmut Kohl of Germany looked at me and said, ‘what would you say Mr. President, if you picked up the London Times tomorrow morning and learned that 1,000 people had broken down the doors, the doors of the British Parliament and killed some [people] on the way in [to] deny the prime minister to take office," Biden said at a Wednesday campaign event.

He mistakenly referred to former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who died in 2017, rather than former German Chancellor Angela Merkel at two campaign events in New York on Wednesday. He also confused the chancellors during a third event on Wednesday, according to the White House pool.

On Sunday, Biden confused former French President Francois Mitterrand, who died in 1996, for French President Emmanuel Macron when recounting a 2021 encounter with France’s leader.

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Szijjarto Says 'Unacceptable' Nord Stream Blasts Not Investigated

NEW YORK CITY, February 8 (Sputnik) - The absence of any serious investigation into the Nord Stream blasts is unacceptable, and Hungary urges other countries to take this issue seriously, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto told RIA Novosti after Sweden terminated its probe into the explosions.

On Wednesday, the Swedish Prosecutor's Office announced the termination of its investigation into the blasts, ruling it does not belong to its jurisdiction. Sweden has handed the materials on the issue to Germany for its investigation into the matter, Swedish public prosecutor Mats Ljungqvist said.

"Hundreds of days have been passed, and no serious investigation has taken place yet. No details have been revealed yet. And I think it's unacceptable," Szijjarto said.

The minister called it "a terrorist attack against a strategic infrastructure in Europe."

"An attack against the safe supply of energy of ours, which is a strategic issue, and the matter of European security. And the fact that no investigation has taken place is very irresponsible and from our perspective, it's really unacceptable. Therefore we urge authorities, be them national or international to take the seriously," Szijjarto said.

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UPDATE: Five US Marines Confirmed Dead in California Helicopter Crash – Marine Corps

(Update: adds Biden statement in para 4)

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) – The US Marine Corps confirmed on Thursday that five Marines died in a helicopter crash on Tuesday in California, according to a release.

“Five Marines with Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 361, Marine Aircraft Group 16, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing have been confirmed deceased following a CH-53E helicopter crash on Feb. 6, 2024,” the release stated.

The Marines were killed during a training flight and there are currently efforts to recover their remains and equipment. There is also an investigation into the crash underway.

US President Biden said he and the first lady were “heartbroken at the loss” of the Marines and thanked the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department, the US Air Force Auxiliary-Civil Air Patrol, and other federal, state, and local agencies supporting search and recovery efforts.

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Biden to Host Jordanian King at White House on Monday – Press Secretary

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) – US President Biden will host Jordan's King Abdallah at the White House on Monday, Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a press release.
"The President and the First Lady look forward to welcoming His Majesty King Abdullah II ibn Al Hussein and Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to the White House on February 12, 2024," Jean-Pierre said.
The leaders will discuss deepening the US-Jordan bilateral relationship and resolving Israel's war on Gaza.

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Szijjarto on US Warning About Sweden's NATO Bid: Hungary is Not 51st State

NEW YORK CITY, February 8 (Sputnik) - Hungary is a sovereign nation and does not care about US instructions on how to proceed with the ratification of Sweden's NATO membership bid, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto told RIA Novosti.
On Wednesday, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan warned that the US "patience" can't be unlimited as it relates to advancing Sweden's NATO accession.
"First of all, I want to make clear that everyone has to understand that Hungary is a sovereign country. And it's not only that everybody has to understand but everybody has to respect it. Regardless of whether it is a superpower of the East or superpower of the West or any other countries, they have to respect that Hungary is a country and the Hungarian parliament is a sovereign entity. And we will never be ready to act according to instructions coming from anywhere in the world. Never ever," Szijjarto said.
Such statements are "absolutely unnecessary, and absolutely showing disrespect towards Hungary," the minister stressed.
"We never criticize decisions of the United States. We never criticize decisions of the Congress. We never interfere with what they put on the agenda or what they don't. And this is the expectation of ours, towards others as well. So we don't care to be honest of such kind of instructions. Because we are not the 51st state, but a very sovereign country," he added.

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US Strikes Three Houthi Missiles in Yemen – Central Command

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) – The US Central Command said Thursday that it had conducted preemptive strikes against three Houthi cruise missiles in Yemen on February 7.

"On Feb. 7, at approximately 9:00 p.m. (Sanaa time), US Central Command (CENTCOM) forces conducted self-defense strikes against two Houthi mobile anti-ship cruise missiles prepared to launch against ships in the Red Sea. Later that day, at 11:30 p.m. (Sanaa time), CENTCOM forces conducted a second strike against a Houthi mobile land attack cruise missile prepared to launch," US Central Command stated in a social media post.

It added that these missiles were located in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen and posed an "imminent threat" to US Navy ships and commercial vessels.

Over the past month, the US and its allies have been launching strikes on the Houthis in an

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attempt to stop their attacks on ships transiting in the Red Sea. The group has said it will escalate their attacks until Israel ends its war on Gaza.

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Szijjarto on Carlson's Putin Interview: 'Exciting' Thing, 'Let's See Impact'

NEW YORK CITY, February 8 (Sputnik) - Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto told RIA Novosti that Tucker Carlson's interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin is an "exciting thing" and suggested waiting for reactions it will cause.

The interview will air Thursday at 6:00 p.m. EST (23:00 GMT).

"Of course, it's an exciting thing, no question, because if Tucker Carlson makes an interview with President Putin, that's exciting. So we are curious what the President will say in the interview and let's see the impact," Szijjarto said.

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Nothing Can be Ruled Out in Trump Trials, Including Conviction, Jail Time - Ex-Lawyer

NEW YORK CITY, February 8 (Sputnik), Lenka White - A prison sentence remains one of the possible outcomes of former President Donald Trump's legal woes because juries are people and not computers, his former attorney Joe Tacopina told Sputnik.

"So you have to not exclude the possibility that there will be conviction in one of these cases and with that comes potential punishment, including jail time, but that's a possibility," Tacopina said in an interview. " I'm not saying it's likely to happen or not likely to happen. It's just a possibility … It's not computer science. It's people, and people have to come together to make a decision."

Tacopina noted that multiple factors can influence the way a jury member votes, including personal issues, animus or bias, making it difficult to predict the outcome of any case.

He also pointed out that three of the four criminal cases against Trump are taking place in predominantly Democrat cities, and these politically unfavorable venues further add to the uncertainty in these cases.

Trump is facing felony counts in Washington, DC, Atlanta, New York and Fort Pierce, Florida. Of these four cities, only Fort Pierce has more registered Republicans than Democrats.

Tacopina withdrew from Trump's legal team on January 15. He had represented Trump in a criminal case in Manhattan and in an appeal of the verdict in a lawsuit put forward by writer E. Jean Carroll. A jury found Trump liable for sexually abusing Carroll, and ordered him to pay her $5 million.

Overall, Trump faces a total of 91 charges in four criminal cases, which the Republican politicians call an attempt by the Democratic establishment to prevent him from returning to the

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White House. The most serious charges carry penalties of up to 20 years in prison. If sentences are imposed consecutively rather than concurrently, he could end up facing more than 700 years in prison.

Tacopina is described as one of the most accomplished trial lawyers, with a long list of criminal case victories, representing, among others, former baseball star Alex Rodriguez, Fox News star Sean Hannity and Rihanna's husband rapper A$AP Rocky.

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Former Trump Attorney Says Politicization of Justice System 'Very Dangerous'

NEW YORK CITY, February 8 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The involvement of politics in the US judicial system is an extremely dangerous and unhealthy situation, former Trump attorney Joe Tacopina told Sputnik.

"When you have the judicial system being affected by politics, it's not a healthy mix. It's a very dangerous elixir," Tacopina said in an interview.

Even without being a Trump supporter, one can see that there is a lot of politics involved in his cases, Tacopina said.

"In one way or another, it's just a byproduct of the former President being charged with four different indictments. So it's a pretty difficult time in this country," the lawyer said.

Tacopina is a New York Trial attorney described as one of the most accomplished lawyers, with a long list of criminal case victories, representing, for example, former baseball star Alex Rodriguez, Fox News star Sean Hannity and Rihanna's husband rapper A$AP Rocky.

Tacopina withdrew from Trump's legal team on January 15, after representing Trump in a criminal case in Manhattan and in an appeal of the verdict in a lawsuit put forward by the writer E. Jean Carroll.

Overall, the former president is facing a total of 91 charges in four criminal cases, which Republicans have called an attempt by the Democratic establishment to prevent him from returning to the White House. If the punishment were to be determined by adding up the terms, he could be behind bars for more than 700 years.

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Tacopina Says Leaving Trump Legal Team Was 'Hard Decision,' but Won't Rejoin

NEW YORK CITY, February 8 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Attorney Joe Tacopina told Sputnik that his decision to withdraw from former President Donald Trump's legal team was a tough one, but he will not rejoin.

"No, I won't rejoin, that's for sure. I made a decision … It was a hard decision," Tacopina said in an interview.

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The lawyer said he has his own reasons, and in some ways the decision was natural. Tacopina, however, declined to go into his "personal decision."

He also expressed belief that it is not appropriate for lawyers who withdraw their representation to later comment on their former client. Tacopina said that it is not right when a lot of Trump's former attorneys go on television and negatively talk about him, or other members of his team, or his advisers.

Tacopina withdrew from Trump's legal team on January 15. He had represented Trump in a criminal case in Manhattan and in an appeal of the verdict in a lawsuit put forward by writer E. Jean Carroll.

In the Manhattan trial, Trump is accused of hiding hush-money payments to porn star Stormy Daniels during the 2016 presidential campaign.

Along with the hush money case, Trump faces criminal charges for his alleged mishandling of classified documents, purported efforts to overturn the 2020 election and election interference in Georgia.

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Nothing Can be Ruled Out in Trump Trials, Including Conviction, Jail Time - Ex-Lawyer

NEW YORK CITY, February 8 (Sputnik), Lenka White - A prison sentence remains one of the possible outcomes of former President Donald Trump's legal woes because juries are people and not computers, his former attorney Joe Tacopina told Sputnik.

"So you have to not exclude the possibility that there will be conviction in one of these cases and with that comes potential punishment, including jail time, but that's a possibility," Tacopina said in an interview. " I'm not saying it's likely to happen or not likely to happen. It's just a possibility … It's not computer science. It's people, and people have to come together to make a decision."

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Americans Believe Justice System Weaponized - Ex-Trump Attorney

NEW YORK CITY, February 8 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Many people in the United States believe that the US judicial system has been weaponized, former Trump attorney Joe Tacopina told Sputnik.

"Smart people actually think that the justice system has been weaponized. And it is a bad, bad feeling to have when you are supposed to live in the most free country in the world," Tacopina said in an interview.

The attorney expressed hope that the over-politicized nature of Trump's legal cases will serve as a warning for the future.

"Hopefully it serves as a bit of a deterrent. Because it's not healthy for this country if we're now going to have sitting presidents going after political opponents, if that would become a new norm," Tacopina said.

Tacopina said he is not opining whether President Joe Biden is after Donald Trump or vice versa but it is the impression that many people have, the lawyer continued.

"Once you have that, you lose faith in the justice system," Tacopina warned.

Tacopina withdrew from Trump's legal team on January 15. He had represented Trump in a criminal case in Manhattan and in an appeal of the verdict in a lawsuit put forward by the writer E. Jean Carroll.

In the Manhattan trial, Trump is accused of hiding hush-money payments to porn star Stormy Daniels during the 2016 presidential campaign.

Overall, Trump faces a total of 91 charges in four criminal cases, which his Republican supporters call an attempt by the Democratic establishment to prevent him from returning to the White House. The most serious articles threaten Trump with 20 years in prison. If the punishment is determined by adding sentences, he could end up behind bars for several centuries.

Tacopina is described as one of the most accomplished trial lawyers, with a long list of criminal case victories, representing, among others, former baseball star Alex Rodrigues, Fox News star Sean Hannity and Rihanna's husband rapper A$AP Rocky.

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

No Lawyer in US History Ever Worked With Case Like Trump's - Ex-Attorney

NEW YORK CITY, February 8 (Sputnik), Lenka White - No legal lawyer in US history has ever worked on a case like that of former President Donald Trump, his ex-attorney Joe Tacopina told Sputnik.

Tacopina withdrew from Trump's legal team on January 15.

"There has been no case like this, not only for me but for any other in the history of this country," Tacopina said in an interview.

The opportunity to work on a case this big was a once in a lifetime opportunity, he stated, adding that it was exciting to work on something so "historical and groundbreaking."

"We have never seen cases with political ramifications like this case, that were so politically motivated," the attorney stressed.

Tacopina said that the political base in Trump's cases changes the whole standard process of normal legal steps or scenarios he was used to.

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

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US Air Force to Order Nearly $140Mln in Special Ammunition - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force is going to order nearly $140 million in special ammunition from Global Military Products and Northrop Grumman Systems, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Global Military Products [of] Tampa, Florida and Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation [of] Radford, Virginia will compete for each order of the $133.9 million ...contract for special ammunition and weapons systems requirements," the release said on Wednesday.

Work on the orders is scheduled to take nine months with an estimated completion date of November 19, 2024, the Defense Department said.

The US Army Contracting Command based at Rock Island Arsenal in the state of Illinois will supervise work on the production as the contracting activity, the Defense Department added.

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US Govt. Gives 17 Companies $499Bln Deal to Protect Programs From Attacks - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - Seventeen companies and research institutions are sharing a new, almost half a billion dollar contract to design and build anti-tamper solutions for a broad range of US military programs to protect them from hostile cyber-attacks, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Battelle Memorial Institute [of] Columbus, Ohio; Boeing [of] St. Louis, Missouri; Charles Stark Draper Laboratory [of] Cambridge, Massachusetts; Chip Scan [of] Rockaway Beach, New York; General Dynamics Mission Systems [of] Dedham, Massachusetts; GE Aviation Systems [of] Grand Rapids, Michigan [and] Honeywell International [of Clearwater, Florida" were among the companies named, the release said on Wednesday.

The other companies were identified as Idaho Scientific of Boise, Idaho; Kratos SRE of San Diego, California; L3Harris Technologies of Palm Bay, Florida; Lockheed Martin of Orlando, Florida; Mercury Systems of Andover, Massachusetts; Microsemi SOC of San Jose, California; Northrop Grumman Systems of Linthicum Heights, Maryland; Radiance Technologies of Huntsville, Alabama; Raytheon of McKinney, Texas and Sabre Systems of Warminster, Pennsylvania, the release continued.

All 17 companies "were awarded a $499 million ...contract for the design, build, test, and delivery of functioning anti-tamper solutions ...to be integrated into a broad range of Department of Defense programs," the release said.

The development of these solutions will enable the necessary protection of critical program information from adversarial tamper efforts, the Defense department said. Work on the programs is scheduled to take six years and is expected to be completed by February 28, 2030, the release said.

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US Navy Buys $193Mln More Missile Testing Equipment From Lockheed Martin - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin Space has won an almost $194 million contract extension from the US Navy to design and build equipment for missile flight tests, the US Defense Department announced.

"Lockheed Martin Space [of] Littleton, Colorado is awarded a $193,791,834 ...modification contract for the design, development, build, and integration of equipment for missile flight test demonstrations and fielding," the Defense Department said in a release on Wednesday.

Most of the work on the project will be performed in Denver, Colorado (67%); Huntsville, Alabama (16%) and Sunnyvale, California (11%), the release said.

The contract extension is scheduled to last two years and work on it is expected to be

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completed on February 25, 2025, the release added.

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US Special Counsel Concludes Probe Into Biden's Handling of Classified Materials - Letter

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - Special Counsel Robert Hur completed his investigation into US President Joe Biden's mishandling of classified materials, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a letter to lawmakers.

"In accordance with [federal law], I write to inform you that Special Counsel Robert K. Hur has concluded his investigation," the letter, sent Wednesday, said.

Hur submitted his final report to the US Justice Department on February 5, the letter said. The White House continues to review the report for executive privilege consistent with constitutional prerogatives, the letter said.

On Tuesday, US media reported that the Justice Department will not pursue any criminal charges in connection with the case, despite Hur's report being critical of Biden's handling of classified materials.

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UN Agency Handouts $140 eWallets to Migrants in Mexico- Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, February 8 (Sputnik)- The UN's International Organization of Migration (IOM) hands out "$140-worth eWallets" to migrants located in Mexico, the IOM Spokesperson Zoe Brennan said on Wednesday.

"IOM's eWallets aim to provide life-saving support to extremely vulnerable migrants in Mexico. This includes single caregivers, pregnant women without prenatal care, families with school-aged children or where a member is under medical treatment for chronic illness or disability, adults over 60 years, and single women who have been victims of a serious crime," IOM Spokesperson Brennan shared with Sputnik in a statement.

"Migrants receive the equivalent of USD 140 per family member (up to 4) for a maximum of three months. IOM provided 1,573 eWallets during 2023," the statement added.

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.

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

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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.

The Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has reported more than 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded in the United States. The Biden administration has also experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal immigration on the southern border, numbering at least eight million.

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US Immigration Officers Remove Man Wanted in Russia for Child Exploitation - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers removed a man who was wanted in Russia for child exploitation, ICE's Seattle Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) office said in a statement.

ICE removed 45-year-old Igor Lekomtsev, who entered the United States on a tourist visa in April 2017, on January 26, the statement said on Wednesday. Lekomtsev is wanted in Russia on charges related to child exploitation, the statement said.

ERO Seattle arrested Lekomtsev in July 2020 after discovering his wanted status in Russia, the statement said.

"Fortunately, ERO officers were able to arrest this individual and determine that he was wanted in Russia for a particularly disturbing crime," ERO Seattle Field Office Director Drew Bostock said in the statement.

Non-citizens will not hide from their victims in the US, Bostock added.

Officers of the Russian Internal Affairs Ministry's INTERPOL National Central Bureau brought Lekomtsev to Moscow, the ministry said in a statement. Lekomtsev is wanted in connection with crimes against a 9-year-old boy in the city of Tyumen, the statement said.

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US Military Sealift Capabilities Now Screaming National Vulnerability - Congressman

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - US capability to move the troops and logistics support it needs across the oceans in any conflict with Russia or China is woefully inadequate and suffering critical shortages and "screaming vulnerabilities," House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mike Gallagher warned on Wednesday.

"Almost 90% of all Army and Marine Corps equipment supporting large-scale overseas operations will be transported by ship," Gallagher wrote in a letter to Transportation Command Chief General Jacqueline Van Ovost and Department of Commerce Marine Administration head Ann Phillips.

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A senior official responsible for US military sealift capability described the current situation as a "screaming national security vulnerability," Gallagher wrote.

"In responding to a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, US forces will depend on a fleet of sealift vessels to move equipment across the region. However ..the United States' sealift fleet has continued to age and go underfunded, appearing woefully inadequate for the daunting task of providing logistical support to troops thousands of miles away from the homeland," the letter said.

The situation has now led to "a perfect storm" in which the United States appears unprepared to carry out major sealift operations during a crisis, Gallagher cautioned.

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Treasury Dept. Sanctions 'Los Choleros' Gang, Its Leader Over Rise of Violence in Ecuador

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) – The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned Ecuador's "Los Choneros" gang and its leader over their involvement in the acute rise in violence in the country.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned one of Ecuador's most violent gangs, Los Choneros, and its leader, José Adolfo Macías Villamar (also known by the alias "Fito"), pursuant to counter narcotics authorities," OFAC's statement said on Wednesday.

The sanctions have been imposed on the gang and its leader over their participation in the steep rise in violence in Ecuador, alongside other drug trafficking gangs, the statement added,

Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson noted in the statement that drug trafficking gangs, many with ties to powerful Mexican cartels, threaten the livelihoods of Ecuadorans and the entire region.

The US stands in support of Ecuador as it fights drug trafficking, works on curbing the proliferation of prison gangs and prison violence, and seeks to regain control of the country's streets, Nelson added.

In early January, violent unrest erupted in Ecuador after two gang leaders escaped from a Guayaquil prison. On January 8, Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa declared a state of emergency to activate the armed forces. On the night of January 9, criminals started burning cars and buses, as well as exploding improvised bombs. Several police officers were kidnapped. Gunmen also burst into the headquarters of the TC Television broadcaster but were later detained.

Following the developments, Noboa declared a state of internal armed conflict in the country and ordered the army to neutralize 22 criminal groups numbering tens of thousands of members.

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US Charges 3 People in Alleged Scheme to Transfer Tech to China, Iran - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has charged three individuals in connection with two alleged schemes to transfer sensitive technologies for the benefit of Chinese and Iranian governments, the Justice Department said.

"In two separate cases out of US Attorneys' Offices on opposite coasts, several individuals are charged – one of whom was arrested yesterday – in connection with sophisticated schemes to transfer sensitive technology, goods, and information for the benefit of hostile foreign adversaries, in violation of US law," the Justice Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

Abolfazi Bazzazi and his son Mohammad Resa Bazzazi, two Iranian nationals, were charged in the Eastern District of New York with conspiring to export aerospace equipment to the Iranian government in connection with an alleged conspiracy to illegally export US goods and technology, the release said.

Additionally, in the Central District of California, Chenguang Gong of San Jose, California was arrested for the alleged theft of trade secrets developed for the US government to detect nuclear missile launches and track ballistic and hypersonic missiles, said the release. Gong is a native Chinese national who became a US citizen in 2011 and previously sought to provide China with sensitive information.

If convicted, the Bazzazis face a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison for the conspiracy charge and up to 10 years in prison for smuggling goods from the United States. Gong potentially faces up to 10 years in federal prison and fines of up to $5 million.

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UPDATE-2:US Debt Set to Increase to Record 116% of GDP by End of 2034-Congressional Budget Office

(Updates with additional details in para 6)

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - The US national debt is estimated to increase to a record 116% of the gross domestic product (GDP) by the end of 2034 and will continue to grow afterward, according to a new Budget and Economic Outlook report published by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) on Wednesday.

"Debt held by the public increases from 99 percent of GDP at the end of 2024 to 116 percent of GDP - the highest level ever recorded - by the end of 2034. After 2034, debt would continue to grow if current laws generally remained unchanged," the report said.

Commenting on the report, Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget President Maya MacGuineas said in a statement that both the Social Security retirement and highway trust funds will become insolvent and will require painful across-the-board cuts within the next decade.

MacGuineas pointed out that interest on the national debt has already topped US federal spending on children or Medicaid and is estimated to exceed spending on national defense in

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2025 reaching $1 trillion by 2026.

In addition, MacGuineas called the US fiscal situation "precarious" and called on Congress to "wake up."

In his statement on the CBO economic projections, House Speaker Mike Johnson called the figures of the national debt and deficit “unprecedented and dangerous” and noted that contrary to President Joe Biden’s claims the debt problem lies with spending, not revenue.

As of February 5, the US total public debt stood at an all-time high of $34.154 trillion, according to the data published by the Department of the Treasury.

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US CENTCOM Says Carried Out Strike in Iraq That Killed Kataib Hezbollah Commander

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - The US military carried out a unilateral strike in Baghdad that killed the Kataib Hezbollah commander behind the militant attacks on US forces across the Middle East, US Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a press release.

"At 9:30 p.m. February 7, US Central Command (CENTCOM) forces conducted a unilateral strike in Iraq in response to the attacks on US service members, killing a Kata’ib Hezbollah commander responsible for directly planning and participating in attacks on US forces in the region," the release said on Wednesday.

CENTCOM added that there are no indications of collateral damage or civilian casualties at this time.

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Blinken Says Israel Must Take Necessary Steps to Protect Civilians in Rafah Operation

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) - Israel must take necessary steps to protect Palestinian civilians as it expands its military operation in Gaza's Rafah, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

Earlier, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected Hamas demands for a Gaza ceasefire and said Israeli forces will push further into Rafah.

"We want to make sure that in anything that's done in any military operations, the situation for civilians is first and foremost in mind, and that the necessary steps are taken to make sure that they're protected and they have the assistance they need," Blinken said regarding Rafah.

Blinken noted that he shared with the Israelis several ways they can better avoid civilian casualties.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in an earlier statement said he is concerned about the possibly tragic consequences that would result from the Israeli military’s plans to focus on Rafah.

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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 27,700 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, local authorities said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 8 (Sputnik) -

ISRAEL INVASION OF GAZA

* The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) will be underfunded to the tune of $65 million by the end of February after many countries suspended payments to the organization over accusations that its several staff members have links to Palestinian movement Hamas, The New York Times reported, citing UNRWA's internal accounting documents.
* The implementation of a possible ceasefire agreement in the Gaza Strip will be gradual and will depend on the actions of Israel, Khaled Qaddoumi, Hamas' representative in Tehran, told Sputnik.
* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he is concerned about the possibly tragic consequences that would result from the Israeli military's plans to focus on Rafah.
* Israel will never agree to ceasefire proposals made by the Hamas movement, which include withdrawal of the Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip, NBC News reported, citing a source connected to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office.
* The Palestinian resistance will not accept any truce proposal that will not include an Israeli ceasefire, the withdrawal of its army from the Gaza Strip and the reconstruction of the enclave, Ismail al-Sandawi, a representative of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement, told Sputnik.

CONFLICT IN URKAINE

* A meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, hosted by the United States, will take place in Brussels on February 14, NATO said on Wednesday.
* NATO is not interfering in the issue of possible replacement of Ukrainian Armed Forces Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.
* US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that there is no alternative to the United States' continued provision of military assistance, including artillery and air defense, to Ukraine.
* US House lawmakers are demanding that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin provide them with documents related to US military assistance to Ukraine after a watchdog report found that the United States has failed to track more than $1 billion in military gear provided to Kiev.
* Ukraine's parliament adopted in the first reading a bill on toughening of mobilization, Ukrainian lawmaker Oleksiy Goncharenko said.

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PUTIN-ERDOGAN MEETING

* Preparation for the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan continues, and its date will be agreed upon, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik on Wednesday.
* Putin's visit to Turkey will likely take place in late April or early May, a Turkish diplomatic told Sputnik.

US SUPPLEMENTAL FUNDING BILL

* The US Senate on Wednesday blocked a $118 billion supplemental funding bill with aid for Ukraine and Israel, as well as immigration reforms and national security measures.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN AZERBAIJAN

* Azerbaijan's incumbent President Ilham Aliyev is leading in the early presidential election with over 92% of the vote, Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairman Mazahir Panahov said on Wednesday.
* The total voter turnout in the early presidential election in Azerbaijan on held Wednesday reached 76.73%, Farid Orujov, who heads the information center of the Central Election Commission (CEC), said.

VIOLENCE IN PAKISTAN

* Another explosion occurred in Pakistan and the death toll has risen to 25 while 40 people have been injured, Pakistani TV channel GEO reported on Wednesday.
* Pakistan expects that there could be more explosions during the elections period, and the police have been put on alert, press secretary of the acting Prime Minister of Balochistan Province Babar Yousafzai told Sputnik.

CAR EXPLOSION IN IRAQ

* A car explosion in eastern Baghdad on Wednesday killed three people and injured two more, an Iraqi security source told Sputnik.
* Iraq's major militant group Kataib Hezbollah confirmed that a car explosion in Baghdad killed one if its leaders.

INVESTIGATION INTO NORD STREAM 2 ATTACKS

* Russia considers Sweden's decision to end the investigation of the Nord Stream 2 pipelines explosions "illogical" and believes that Stockholm is afraid of the truth, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Wednesday.
* The German government is interested in investigating the sabotage at the Nord Stream pipelines, German government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit said.
* Denmark's investigation into the explosions at the Nord Stream pipelines has not been formally completed, a police representative told Sputnik.
* Sweden's refusal to investigate the Nord Stream pipelines explosions is noteworthy, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
* Russia will monitor how and where investigations into the explosions at the Nord Stream

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pipelines will be conducted, so far the West has refused to share information with us, Peskov said.
* Sweden announces the termination of the investigation into the explosions at the Nord Stream gas pipelines, the Swedish Prosecution Authority said.

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Blinken Says Raised Concerns With Netanyahu About Israeli Rhetoric that Inflames Tensions

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that during his meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu he raised "profound concerns" regarding actions and rhetoric by Israeli government officials that inflame tensions.
"In my discussion today with the Prime Minister and senior officials I also raised our profound concerns about actions and rhetoric, including from government officials, that inflame tensions that undercut international support, and place greater strains on Israel's security," Blinken said during a press briefing in Tel Aviv.

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US Fed to Respond to Slow Economic Growth in 2024 by Reducing Interest Rates - CBO

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve will begin reducing interest rates in the middle of 2024 in response to the projected slowing of economic growth this year, Congressional Budget Office (CBO) Director Phillip Swagel said on Wednesday.
"Economic growth is projected to slow in 2024 amidst increased unemployment, and lower inflation. CBO expects the Federal Reserve to respond by reducing interest rates starting in the middle of the calendar year," Swagel said during a press conference.
Earlier on Wednesday, the CBO published updated budget projections for the next decade. The US national debt is estimated to increase to a record 116% of the gross domestic product (GDP) by the end of 2034 and will continue to grow afterward, while the size of the budget deficit will reach $2.6 trillion by the same year.
Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said last week that US interest rate cuts might not begin in March as initially expected given that inflation has proven stickier than anticipated after the US central bank left rates at a range of between 5.25%-5.5% for a fourth month in a row.

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Ex-Panama President Martinelli Seeks Political Asylum at Nicaragua's Embassy - Letter

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Former Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli is seeking political asylum at the Embassy of Nicaragua in Panama, Nicaragua's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a letter on Wednesday.

"This Ministry informs that the Ex-President Ricardo Martinelli has solicited asylum at the Embassy of the Republic of Nicaragua in Panama, for considering himself subject to a politically motivated persecution, and over an imminent risk to his life, physical integrity and security," the letter said.

In accordance with the 1928 Asylum Convention and the 1933 Political Asylum Convention to which Nicaragua adheres, Managua has decided to approve Martinelli's request, the letter said.

The Nicaraguan government believes that asylum is a "humanitarian institution" and everyone can be protected under it, regardless of nationality, the statement said.

In early June 2023, despite an ongoing investigation over his alleged involvement in a 2010 money laundering scheme, Martinelli won the primaries for the Realizando Metas (RM) party under which he would run for the May 2024 elections.

However, on February 2, the Panamanian Supreme Court sentenced Martinelli to ten years and six months in prison for money laundering, a ruling that could prevent him for running in the upcoming elections.

Martinelli has denied the allegations and called the court's ruling the worst judicial outburst in Panama's history.

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Blinken Urges Israel to Expedite Humanitarian Aid to Gaza, Strengthen Deconfliction

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that Israel should expedite the flow of humanitarian assistance from Jordan to the Gaza Strip while emphasizing the need to strengthen deconfliction and improve coordination with humanitarian providers.

"Israel should expedite the flow humanitarian assistance from Jordan, it should strengthen deconfliction and improve coordination with the humanitarian providers," Blinken said during a press briefing.

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Clear Non-Starters Exist in Hamas' Response to Proposed Hostages Deal - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Clear non-starters exist in Hamas' response to the proposed hostages deal but the United States will continue in its efforts to reach an agreement,

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US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.
"What I can tell you about these discussions is that while there are some clear non-starters in minister's response, we do think it creates space for agreement to be reached. And we will work at that relentlessly until we get there, " Blinken said during a press briefing.

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Beijing Rejects New Claim Chinese Hackers Breached US Infrastructure - Embassy

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - China rejects the Biden administration's new claim that Chinese hackers have effected a significant breach into US infrastructure systems, the Chinese Embassy in Washington said in a statement to Sputnik on Wednesday.
Earlier in the day, the US government put out a cybersecurity advisory claiming Chinese hackers have at times secretly hidden in US infrastructure systems for up to five years, prepared to conduct cyberattacks if the two countries ever went to war.
"We oppose any groundless smears and accusations against China," Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu said. "China is a major victim of cyber attacks... China does not encourage, support or condone attacks launched by hackers."
In addition, China holds a firm stance against all forms of cyber attacks and resorts to lawful methods in tackling them, Liu added.
The United States should reflect on itself instead of scapegoating others, the spokesperson said, citing a recent analysis report by the 360 Digital Security Group, which disclosed in detail the US government's global implementation of its cyber deterrence strategy and indiscriminate cyberattacks against US allies and other countries.

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US Senate Blocks $118Bln Foreign Aid, Immigration Reform Bill

(Updates with more details, background in paras 2, 5-7)
WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday blocked a $118 billion supplemental funding bill with aid for Ukraine and Israel, as well as immigration reforms and national security measures.
Senators blocked a motion to invoke cloture on a motion to proceed to the legislative vehicle for the bill in a vote of 49-50, with 60 votes required to pass. US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer voted against the bill in a procedural move to allow for reconsideration of the bill.
On Sunday, Senate negotiators released a bill text for the $118 billion supplemental funding legislation, following months of bipartisan talks on the matter. The Biden administration initially requested supplemental funding from the US Congress in October.
The Senate is now set to consider a revised version of the legislation, which includes Ukraine

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and Israel aid but not immigration reforms. The revised bill provides $95.34 billion in funding, including more than $60 billion for Ukraine and $14 billion for Israel.

However, US Senator Mike Lee said on Wednesday that Republican members of Congress should oppose further Ukraine aid unless it is attached to border security measures.

"We shouldn't send more [money] to Ukraine. But if Congress is bent on doing that, Republicans shouldn't support it without HR2 and language conditioning any Ukraine funds on the achievement of border-security benchmarks," Lee said in a statement via social media platform X.

US Senator J.D. Vance said on Wednesday that the "Ukraine first" package gives away all leverage to achieve border security. Vance also criticized Senate leadership for not granting lawmakers more time to review the legislation.

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San Francisco Braces for Minor Flooding Until Saturday Morning - National Weather Service

SAN FRANCISCO, February 7 (Sputnik) - A coastal flood advisory is in effect until 10:00 a.m. on Saturday for the San Francisco Bay shoreline and North Bay shoreline with anticipated minor coastal flooding, the National Weather Service said on Wednesday.

The flooding is expected to impact roads, parks and lots, among other areas, the National Weather Service said.

Residents are encouraged to exercise caution, plan for extra travel time, watch out for possible road closures and not drive around barricades or through unknown water depths, the National Weather Service added.

Tidal levels are higher than expected, with the main flood risk between 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. during high tide, according to the National Weather Service.

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US Agencies Say China Hackers Prepositioning on IT Networks to Attack in Case of Conflict

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - CISA, NSA, and the FBI said on Wednesday in a cybersecurity advisory that alleged state-sponsored cyber actors from China are actively attempting to position themselves on IT networks, at times hiding there for up to five years, to get ready for disruptive cyberattacks in case of a crisis or a conflict.

"The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), National Security Agency (NSA), and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) assess that People's Republic of China (PRC) state- sponsored cyber actors are seeking to pre- position themselves on IT networks for disruptive or destructive cyberattacks against US critical infrastructure in the event of a major crisis or conflict with the United States," the advisory said.

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The US agencies are concerned about the potential for these actors to use their network access for disruptive effects in the event of potential geopolitical tensions and/or military conflicts, they stated.

They assess that Chinese hacking group Volt Typhoon has compromised the IT environments of multiple critical infrastructure organizations both in the continental and non-continental US and its territories, including Guam.

"The U.S. authoring agencies have recently observed indications of Volt Typhoon actors maintaining access and footholds within some victim IT environments for at least five years," the advisory said.

China says it firmly opposes and combats cyber attacks in all forms, and itself is among the major victims of such attacks.

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US Senate Blocks $118Bln Foreign Aid, Immigration Reform Bill

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday blocked a $118 billion supplemental funding bill with aid for Ukraine and Israel, as well as immigration reforms and national security measures.

A motion to invoke cloture on the motion to proceed to the legislation failed to receive the 60 required votes, although voting continues.

On Sunday, Senate negotiators released a bill text for the $118 billion supplemental funding legislation, following months of bipartisan talks on the matter. The Biden administration initially requested supplemental funding from the US Congress in October.

The Senate is now set to consider a revised version of the legislation, which includes Ukraine and Israel aid but not immigration reforms. The revised bill provides $95.34 billion in funding, including more than $60 billion for Ukraine and $14 billion for Israel.

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US Debt Set to Increase to Record 116% of GDP by End of 2034 - Congressional Budget Office

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The US national debt is estimated to increase to a record 116% of the gross domestic product (GDP) by the end of 2034 and will continue to grow afterward, according to a new Budget and Economic Outlook report published by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) on Wednesday.

"Debt held by the public increases from 99 percent of GDP at the end of 2024 to 116 percent of GDP - the highest level ever recorded - by the end of 2034. After 2034, debt would continue to grow if current laws generally remained unchanged," the report said.

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Commenting on the report, Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget President Maya MacGuineas said in a statement that both the Social Security retirement and highway trust funds will become insolvent and will require painful across-the-board cuts within the next decade.

MacGuineas pointed out that interest on the national debt has already topped US federal spending on children or Medicaid and is estimated to exceed spending on national defense in 2025 reaching $1 trillion by 2026.

In addition, MacGuineas called the US fiscal situation "precarious" and called on Congress to "wake up."

As of February 5, the US total public debt stood at an all-time high of $34.154 trillion, according to the data published by the Department of the Treasury.

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White House Says Ukrainian Forces Beginning to Worry About Potential Ammunition Shortages

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian forces are beginning to become concerned about potential ammunition shortages amid a lack of action by Congress to approve additional security assistance, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"Battlefield commanders are making some really tough decisions right now," Kirby told reporters. "We know that in some units they are marshalling their ammunition very, very closely because they're beginning to get worried about running out."

Kirby added that Ukrainian forces are also assessing the availability of their longer range systems that they are using on the battlefield.

In December, the Biden administration ran out of funding to provide security assistance to Ukraine and Congress has yet to approve more funding.

Congress has been involved in a weeks-long debacle over the bipartisan deal reached on a national security supplemental package that includes some $60 billion for Ukraine.

The measure received no support from Republican leadership in the Senate and House of Representatives, which creates further uncertainty about when the United States will be able to provide additional aid to Ukraine.

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UN ‘Strongly Condemns” Deadly Attacks in Pakistan Day Before Elections - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) – The United Nations “strongly condemns” the terrorist attacks that occurred a day before elections, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

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"We strongly condemn the horrific attacks and the bomb explosions that we saw earlier today that killed many-many people and injured many more a day before the elections," Dujarric told reporters.

He expressed confidence that these attacks are "clearly related" to the elections.

"Secretary-General [Antonio Guterres] wants to emphasize the right of Pakistanis to participate in elections that are free from fear, from intimidation and, frankly, from violence," Dujarric said.

The UN will continue to stand in solidarity with the government and people of Pakistan in their efforts to address extremism and terrorism, he added.

Earlier in the day, media reported that several explosions occurred in Balochistan in southwestern Pakistan, just a day before the Pakistani general election. The total death toll has risen to 25, and another 40 people were injured, reports added.

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US Deficit to Reach $2.6 Trillion in 2034 – Congressional Budget Office

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) – The US deficit is expected to grow from $1.6 trillion in 2024 to $2.6 trillion in 2034, according to a new Budget and Economic Outlook report published by the Congressional Budget Office on Wednesday.

"The deficit totals $1.6 trillion in fiscal year 2024, grows to $1.8 trillion in 2025, and then returns to $1.6 trillion by 2027. Thereafter, deficits steadily mount, reaching $2.6 trillion in 2034.," the report said.

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US Debt Set to Increase to Record 116% of GDP by End of 2034 - Congressional Budget Office

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"Debt held by the public increases from 99 percent of GDP at the end of 2024 to 116 percent of GDP - the highest level ever recorded - by the end of 2034. After 2034, debt would continue to grow if current laws generally remained unchanged," the report said.

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US Homeland Security Chief Says No Known Credible Threats to Super Bowl Game on Sunday

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The authorities have not detected any credible threats to the Super Bowl football game on Sunday in Las Vegas, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on Wednesday.

"There are no known credible, specific threats to the Super Bowl or to Las Vegas at this time," Mayorkas said during a press conference.

However, law enforcement agencies are vigilant and prepared to respond to any threats, Mayorkas added.

Las Vegas is hosting the Super Bowl game between the Kansas City Chiefs and San Fancisco 49ers on Sunday at Allegiant stadium.

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US Marine Corps Says Missing Helicopter Found, Search for 5 Marines Continues

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) – The US Marine Corps said on Wednesday that it is searching for five missing marines who were on board a helicopter that was “reported overdue” the previous night and has been located by civil authorities in Pine Valley, California.

“The U.S. Marine Corps is searching for five U.S. Marines assigned to Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 361…,” the Marine Corps said in a press release. “The Marines were flying a CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter during a routine training flight from Creech Air Force Base to Marine Corps Air Station Miramar on Feb. 6, 2024, when the aircraft was reported overdue. The aircraft was located by civil authorities in Pm- e Valley, California at 9:08 AM PST on February 7, 2024.”

The missing marines were assigned to the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing which is currently managing all search and rescue operations in coordination with San Diego County’s federal, state, and local agencies.

The incident is the latest one following an F/A-18 fighter jet crash at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in San Diego that resulted in the death of a pilot.

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Venezuelan Opposition Leader Says All Parties but Maduro Committed to Barbados Agreement

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) – All the parties tied by the Barbados Agreements are complying with it except for Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, the opposition candidate of the 2024 election Maria Corina Machado said on Wednesday.

On October 17, the Venezuelan government and the opposition Unitary Platform of Venezuela resumed talks in Barbados by signing partial agreements to promote political rights and electoral guarantees, as well as to protect the country's assets abroad. The parties agreed,

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among other things, to facilitate the holding of inclusive elections in Venezuela in the second half of 2024 under close international monitoring.

"I'm very grateful to see that this approach to Venezuela is still bipartisan, that we are all committed to a true negotiation process and the respect for the Barbados Agreement," Machado told the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC).

However, the opposition representative said that Maduro is not as committed to the agreement as other parties as he isn't abiding by it.

Machado said that such was the reason for her appearance before the HFAC, further noting that there still is a window of time allowing for the political process to resume in the country.

"Meanwhile, I keep on working hard on creating strength and organizing our citizens network here and abroad," Machado continued.

Machado won Venezuela's opposition primary in October 2023 with nearly 93% of the vote. However, on January 26, the country's Supreme Court announced that she had been disqualified and would be unable to run for the next 15 years.

In response, the US State Department said it would not renew its general license set to expire in April that allows crude purchases from Venezuela unless there is progress between President Maduro and the opposition.

Venezuela dismissed the US warning as "blackmail."

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Former Hunter Biden Associate Tony Bobulinski to Testify in Impeachment Probe - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Former Hunter Biden business associate Tony Bobulinski is slated to testify next week in the House of Representatives impeachment inquiry against President Joe Biden, Fox News reported on Wednesday.

Bobulinski worked with Hunter Biden to create SinoHawk Holdings with the Chinese energy company CEFC in 2017, when he met Joe Biden. The current US president has repeatedly denied any involvement in his son's business endeavors.

Despite Biden's claims, text messages quoted in the report reveal that Joe Biden met with Bobulinski after his term as US vice president ended.

The messages, which date back to May 2017, detail meeting arrangements between Joe and Hunter Biden, as well as the latter's brother Jim Biden with Bobulinski.

US House lawmakers are investigating Biden and his family for alleged criminal activity, including various financial crimes and corruption. The House probe is intended to help determine whether further impeachment proceedings against Biden are warranted.

Bobulinski's appearance is expected to take place next week on February 13 at 10:00 a.m. ET and is expected to take eight hours, sources familiar with the matter told Fox in the report.

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Three Seahawk Anti-Submarine Combat Helicopters Complete Testing For Greece - Sikorsky

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Sikorsky has completed testing of the integrated mission systems and sensors aboard three new MH-60R Seahawk helicopters for the Greek Navy, its parent company Lockheed Martin announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"Sikorsky has completed testing of the integrated mission systems and sensors aboard three MH-60R Seahawk helicopters purchased by the Hellenic Navy," the release said.

The tests were completed in early December 2023 and they confirmed that the three helicopters were effective air weapon systems capable of performing anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and anti-surface ship missions from land or naval ships, Lockheed Martin said.

"Commonality of these Hellenic Navy MH-60R Seahawk aircraft with 330 MH-60R and 250 MH-60S Seahawk aircraft, and with the global Black Hawk helicopter fleet, enables Sikorsky and the US Navy to continue sustaining and upgrading this proven weapon system for maximum threat deterrence and operational capability," Sikorsky President Paul Lemmo said in the release.

The first three MH-60R helicopters will arrive in Greece in 2024 and four more will be sent in 2025, Lockheed Martin said.

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US Senate Appropriations Panel Releases Ukraine, Israel Aid Bill Without Border Measures

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Appropriations Committee on Wednesday released a revised version of the supplemental funding legislation, which includes billions of dollars in aid for Ukraine and Israel without including immigration reform measures.

"Senate Democrats will continue to work to deliver solutions to address needs at our border - and if our Republican colleagues won't even debate bipartisan border policy, then we must proceed with the rest of the supplemental package and get aid to our allies and to innocent civilians in urgent need," Senate Appropriations Committee Chair Patty Murray said in a statement.

The revised legislation provides $95.34 billion in funding, including more than $60 billion in aid for Ukraine and $14 billion for Israel, the statement said.

The legislation includes $2.44 billion for US Central Command operations, amid heightened tensions in the Middle East. The bill also provides $9.15 billion in humanitarian aid for civilians in Gaza and the West Bank, Ukraine and other conflict zones, the statement said.

On Sunday, Senate negotiators released a version of the legislation that also included immigration reform measures to address an increase in illegal immigration under the Biden administration. However, Republican members of Congress are poised to block the bill.

US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Wednesday that the Senate will first vote on the original supplemental funding bill, and then vote on the version without immigration reforms if the original bill fails.

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Elon Musk Calls EU's Proposed Sanctions, Travel Ban Against Tucker Carlson 'Disturbing'

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Elon Musk said on Wednesday that the travel ban proposed by EU lawmakers against Tucker Carlson following his interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin is 'disturbing' and if enacted would 'greatly offend' the citizens of the United States.

"If true, this would be disturbing indeed. One may agree with Tucker or not, but he is a major American journalist and such an action would greatly offend the American public," wrote Musk on social media platform X.

According to reports, EU lawmakers are said to be seeking sanctions and a travel ban against Carlson for his interview with President Putin.

On Tuesday, Carlson announced that he organized an interview with Putin in Moscow out of a journalistic obligation to inform Americans about the realities of the conflict in Ukraine and its consequences.

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Schumer Confirms Plan to Hold Vote on Separate Foreign Aid Package Without Border Measures

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told reporters on Wednesday that he plans to hold a vote on a separate foreign aid package without any border security measures later in the day if a vote on a broader supplemental package fails as expected.

""Republicans said they would only do Ukraine and Israel, humanitarian aid with border (measures). Then they said they would not do it with border (measures). Well, we're going to give them both options. We'll take either one. We just hope they can come to 'Yes' on something," Schumer said.

Schumer explained in subsequent remarks on the Senate floor that if Republicans block the broader supplemental package, he will give them a chance to move forward on a new bill that only includes foreign aid and does not contain any border reforms.

On Sunday, the Senate, after weeks of negotiations with the White House, released the text of the $118 billion national security supplemental bill that includes some $60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine, $14 billion for Israel, and policy changes to address the crisis on the US southern border.

Republican leaders in the Senate and House of Representatives have rejected the supplemental bill over concerns it would not do anything to deter the record levels of migrant arrivals the US-Mexico border.

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Schumer blames Trump for influencing Republicans to reject the broader supplemental bill, but the former US president, although he does oppose the bill, pointed out that Biden inherited a border plan that worked and suggested the White House could use executive authorities to address the problem.

According to Republican Senator James Lankford, one of the key negotiators of the broader supplemental package, the changes to US border policy proposed in the broader bill include limits on the use of parole catch-and-release at the southern border that could 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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EU Lawmakers May Put Travel Ban on Tucker Carlson Following Putin Interview - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - US journalist Tucker Carlson may face a travel ban and other restrictive measures from European Union lawmakers for his decision to interview Russian President Vladimir Putin, Newsweek reported on Wednesday.

Guy Verhofstadt, a member of the European Parliament and former prime minister of Belgium, has urged the European Union to consider imposing a travel ban on Carlson, the report said.

Verhofstadt labeled Carlson as "a mouthpiece" for Putin as well as for former President Donald Trump, the report said.

Similar demands to restrict Carlson's right to travel and therefore practice journalism were voiced in the United States by establishment-linked media personalities like Bill Kristol and by outlets like CNN and MSNBC. Kristol called on US lawmakers not to allow Carlson entry in the United States.

On Tuesday, Carlson announced that he organized an interview with Putin in Moscow out of a journalistic obligation to inform Americans about the realities of the conflict in Ukraine and its consequences.

Carlson's decision comes at a time of heightened tensions amid announced massive NATO exercises and troop deployments around Russia as well as statements by NATO members like the United Kingdom that they may send troops to Ukraine.

The interview will likely be published on February 8 and will be posted on X and TuckerCarlson.com, the journalist's website.

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Congress Panel Shocked at 'Disgusting' Conditions, Sewage in US Army Barracks - Hearing

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - US service members stationed at 5,000 bases across the United States sometimes find themselves living in "disgusting" conditions with human excreta and broken sewage lines around them, and an enormous backlog of $134 billion in repairs and maintenance to deal with, senior Biden administration officials and members of Congress acknowledged on Wednesday.

"We face a growing $134 billion maintenance backlog," Assistant Secretary of Defense for Installations, Energy and Environment Brendan Owens told a hearing of the House Armed Services Readiness Subcommittee.

The Department of Defense had to manage 500 installations and bases and 2 million service personnel but appropriations for maintenance and living conditions were regularly slashed in order to purchase more military hardware instead, including more F-35 Joint Strike Aircraft, Owens acknowledged.

"This is disgusting: This is unsatisfactory. ...Would any of you want your children in these conditions [living in buildings] with mold, with feces, with broken sewage lines? I wouldn't," subcommittee chair Representative Michael Waltz told the hearing.

Over the past five years, the Defense Department had invested an average of $14.6 billion a year to build new facilities, $15.3 billion a year to maintain and repair buildings and infrastructure and $2 billion a year on environmental restoration, Owens said.

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US House Lawmakers Will Pass Mayorkas Impeachment Articles on Next Attempt - Johnson

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will pass articles of impeachment against US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas in the next attempt, House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday.

“We will pass those articles of impeachment. We’ll do it on the next round,” Johnson said during a press conference.

On Tuesday, House lawmakers blocked passage of a resolution with articles of impeachment against Mayorkas, whom Republicans accuse of willfully failing to enforce federal laws to protect the United States’ borders from illegal immigration.

The failed vote was a “setback,” Johnson said. However, lawmakers have a duty to hold Mayorkas accountable, Johnson added.

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UN Chief Says Houthi Attacks, Climate Change Decrease Global Trade Via Suez, Panama Canals

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) - Houthis attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea coupled with climate change have led to a significant decrease in global trade via the Suez and the Panama canals, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday.

"Trade via the Suez Canal is down by 42% since the start of Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea more than three months ago," Guterres said during a UN General Assembly meeting.

Guterres warned that low water levels, which he claimed were a consequence of climate change, caused a 36% decrease in trade via the Panama Canal in the month of January.

"Whether the cause is conflict or climate, the result is the same: disruption to global supply chains and increased costs," Guterres said.

The world faces a development emergency and developing economies are particularly vulnerable to the disruptions and need additional support, Guterres added.

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Guterres Says New Domains of Conflict Create New Ways of Violence

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) – New domains of conflict are developing without limitations and creating new ways of violence, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday.

"New potential domains of conflict, and weapons of war, are being developed without guardrails, creating new ways to kill each other – and for humanity to annihilate itself," Guterres said at the UN General Assembly meeting.

He stressed that conflict proliferation leads to the higher importance of humanitarian aid. However, funding of those needs is not sufficient, he added.

Guterres also pointed out that humanitarian workers put their own lives at risk in order to save other people. "I pay tribute to their heroic efforts and to those aid workers who have paid the ultimate price, most recently and tragically in Gaza," he added.

About a dozen Western donor countries suspended funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) following Israel's claims that some of the UN aid agency's staff were involved in the October 7 Hamas attack. UNRWA promised to investigate the allegations but warned that lifesaving assistance to Gazans was about to end.

The New York Times reported earlier this week, citing UNRWA's internal documents, that the agency will be underfunded to the tune of $65 million by the end of February.

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US 2023 Trade Deficit Down Most in 3 Years Despite Increase in December - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The US trade deficit widened marginally to $62.2 billion in December but still finished 2023 at its lowest in three years, Commerce Department data revealed on Wednesday.

The trade deficit was up 0.6% from a revised $61.9 billion in November, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, a unit within the Commerce Department, said.

But on an annual basis, the shortfall shrank nearly 19% to $177.8 billion from 2022. That was the lowest trade deficit figure since the economic upheaval and supply disruptions from the implemented COVID-19 measures that drastically hurt exports in 2021 and 2022.

Exports have, however, been on an uptrend since the start of last year as the United States led the world in recovery from effects of the pandemic measures.

"The exports of goods from the United States saw a significant increase, with total goods exports rising by $3.1 billion to reach $171.2 billion," the Bureau of Economic Analysis said in a statement accompanying the release of the December trade data.

The growth was driven by several sectors such as industrial supplies and materials, consumer goods and food, food and beverages, the Bureau of Economic Analysis said.

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Sullivan on Carlson-Putin Interview: We Believe Pro-Ukraine Arguments Proving Successful

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday that the United States has been successful so far in bolstering pro-Ukraine arguments, when asked about an upcoming interview between US journalist Tucker Carlson and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"With respect to this interview: we've heard voices in the United States, in Europe and elsewhere around the world casting doubt or casting aspersions on our collective support for Ukraine," Sullivan said during a press conference. "We have consistently made the case about why standing up and supporting Ukraine is in the fundamental national security interests of the United States and of the trans-Atlantic alliance, and I believe that we have continued to prevail in that argument."

On Tuesday, Carlson announced that he organized an interview with Putin in Moscow out of a journalistic obligation to inform Americans about the realities of the conflict in Ukraine and its consequences.

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Sullivan Says US Patience With Hungary Regarding Sweden NATO Bid 'Can Not Be Unlimited'

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - The United States cannot maintain unlimited patience with Hungary as it relates to advancing Sweden's NATO membership bid, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday.

"Our patience on this can't be unlimited," Sullivan said during a press conference, when asked about Hungary delaying Sweden's entry into NATO.

Sullivan emphasized that it is a matter of credibility and obligation for Hungary to approve Sweden's NATO membership.

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UN Secretary-General Says Troubling That Peace Missing in 'All Its Dimensions'

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday that peace is missing in all of its dimensions and the situation is even more troubling given that this is so at a time when nearly half of the people in the world will participate in elections.

"As I scan the landscape of today's world, the one thing missing most dramatically is peace. And by that, I mean peace in all its dimensions," Guterres said during a UN General Assembly meeting. "This is especially troubling in a year when half of humanity will go to the polls."

Guterres noted that the geopolitical divisions marking evens throughout the world are growing and so is the dysfunction of the UN Security Council.

The United Nations is now preoccupied with its internal case of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) being accused by Israel of several of its staff participating in Hamas' attack on the country on October 7, 2023, Guterres said.

The United Nations is also focusing much of its attention on the current war in the Gaza Strip, with many of its agencies trying to elevate the dire humanitarian situation in the Palestinian enclave as a result of the Israeli blockade and military operations. More than 27,000 Palestinians have been killed and some 70,000 others have been wounded since October 7.

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Sullivan Says No Alternative to US Providing Ukraine Military Aid, Including Artillery

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) – US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday that there is no alternative to the United States' continued provision of military assistance, including artillery and air defense, to Ukraine.

"At the end of the day, there is no alternative to the United States stepping up to the plate and providing a level of resources that allow Ukraine to have the artillery, the air defense systems,

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and the other capabilities they need," Sullivan said during a joint press conference with NATO Chief Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels, Belgium.

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Blinken Affirms US Support for Israel in Meeting With Netanyahu - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and reiterated the United States' support for Israel's efforts to prevent a recurrence of attacks similar to that conducted by Hamas on October 7, the State Department said on Wednesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel. The Secretary reaffirmed the United States' support for Israel's right to ensure the terrorist attacks of October 7 are never repeated and stressed the importance of taking all possible steps to protect civilians in Gaza," the State Department said in a statement.

According to the statement, Blinken and Netanyahu discussed efforts to release the remaining hostages held by Hamas in Gaza and the importance of increasing humanitarian aid for displaced civilians in the Palestinian enclave.

In addition, Blinken discussed with Netanyahu the United States' vision for durable peace and security in the region, the statement said.

"The Secretary reiterated the United States' support for the establishment of a Palestinian state as the best way to ensure lasting peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians alike and greater integration for the region," the statement said.

Moreover, Blinken emphasized during the discussions the urgent need to de-escalate tensions in the West Bank and prevent the conflict from spreading, the statement added.

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UN Chief: UNSC Dysfunction is Deepening, World Needs Mechanisms as in Cold War

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday that the deepening dysfunction within the UN Security Council is more dangerous because the world lacks the mechanisms to manage conflict that existed during the Cold War.

"Today's dysfunction is deeper and more dangerous. During the Cold War, well-established mechanisms helped manage superpower relations. In today's multipolar world, such mechanisms are missing. Our world has entered an age of chaos," Guterres told the General Assembly.

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Guterres Says Artificial Intelligence Must Not Replace Human Agency

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) – Artificial Intelligence (AI) must not replace human agency and should always remain under human control with a universal approach to mitigate risks of disinformation, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday.
"Artificial Intelligence must not replace human agency. It was created by humans and must always be under human control," Guterres said during a General Assembly plenary meeting. "But AI is already creating risks around disinformation, privacy, and bias. Technology must reduce inequalities, not reproduce them – or pit people against each other. AI will affect all of humankind, so we need a universal approach."

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Guterres Says 'Totally Unacceptable' Africa Still Waiting for Permanent Seat at UNSC

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) – United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday that it is "totally unacceptable" that the African continent is still waiting for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council.
"First and foremost, the United Nations Security Council must be able to take decisions and implement them. And it must become more representative. It is totally unacceptable that the African continent is still waiting for a permanent seat," Guterres said during a General Assembly plenary meeting.

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UN Chief Concerned Over Israeli Plans to Focus on Rafah, as It Would Worsen Nightmare

UNITED NATIONS, February 7 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday he is concerned about the possibly tragic consequences that would result from the Israeli military's plans to focus on Rafah.
"I am especially alarmed by reports that the Israeli military intends to focus next on Rafah – where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have been squeezed in a desperate search for safety," Guterres told the General Assembly. "Such an action would exponentially increase what is already a humanitarian nightmare with untold regional consequences."

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Russia Boosts Cooperation With China in Arctic Expansion - Strider Report

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Russia has dramatically increased its cooperation with China on military and economic expansion in the Arctic region amid alleged geopolitical isolation and comprehensive sanctions imposed by the collective West over the conflict in Ukraine, a Strider Intelligence report said on Wednesday.

"The report demonstrates how the war in Ukraine and continued geopolitical isolation are forcing Moscow to adjust its strategy to develop and control the Arctic. Specifically, the report highlights Moscow's increased reliance on PRC [People's Republic of China]-owned companies and private investment to help develop the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and infrastructure for energy exploration, processing and transportation," a release on the report said.

Strider COO Eric Levesque pointed out that the development marked a "strategic pivot" for Russia, which had previously sought to limit China's involvement in the Arctic for years.

Levesque said this new stage of Arctic expansionism was an example of the "no-limits" partnership between Russia and China and allowed Beijing to gain a major foothold in the region.

Russia's use of cross-border partnerships and private sector engagement in Arctic development was a more effective approach than that taken by the West, Levesque added.

Strider Technologies is a research and consulting firm that delivers actionable data and technology advice to organizations and government agencies to identify risks and capitalize on trends in the era of global competition. The firm claims to combine open-source data and AI to deliver strategic intelligence.

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US Military Helicopter Goes Missing With 5 Marines on Board - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 7 (Sputnik) - Rescue crews in the US state of California are searching for a missing helicopter with five marines on board, ABC reported on Wednesday.

The CH-53 Super Stallion helicopter went missing on Tuesday night after it had departed Creech Air Force Base near Las Vegas, Nevada, and headed to Miramar Air Station in San Diego, California, the report said.

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