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Scott Ritter: Tucker-Putin Interview Shows Americans 'Hungry for Information' From Russia

On Thursday, independent media personality and former Fox News host Tucker Carlson aired an interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Despite condemnation from the mainstream media, the interview quickly gained hundreds of millions of views across multiple platforms.
The success of the Tucker-Putin interview was the result of Americans being "hungry for information about what Russia is thinking," former US Marines Corps intelligence officer and author Scott Ritter told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Monday.
"They are worried about the consequences of condemning Russia out of hand and rushing to a war based upon words Russia is not allowed to say for us to consider," he added.
Earlier, Ritter spoke about attempts to punish Tucker for giving the interview, including former Belgian prime minister and current member of the European Parliament who suggested Carlson could face sanctions for giving the interview.
"For what sin?" Ritter asked. "For the sin of letting a Russian president speak?"
The interview has over 198 million views on X, more than 15 million views on YouTube, plus an unknown amount across other platforms including Carlson's website.
Ritter noted that Tucker's interview is protected by free speech, which "does not automatically equate to wise speech," he argued.
"But the thing about free speech is that the antidote to bad speech is better free speech," Ritter explained. "Meaning, that if you have a problem with what somebody's saying [...] come up with better ideas and put them out there."
While Ritter called Tucker an "idiot" for not being better prepared for the interview, he said that the important thing is that Putin got to speak to the American people through their own lens.
"[Putin's] words are resonating because [Americans are] going, 'Wait a minute. I was told that this guy is the personification of evil. I was told he doesn't want a negotiated settlement. I was told that he deliberately invaded, that he wants to invade NATO,'" Ritter explained. "And [Putin is] saying that he is more than happy to sit down at the table and talk if anybody will talk, that the problem here isn't Putin, the problem is the United States [...] and the light bulb is going off around America."
Earlier, despite his criticisms, Ritter said he hopes a future President will recognize the service he [Tucker Carlson] did for the world and "[bring] him to the White House and put the Presidential Medal of Freedom around his neck."

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‘Ground is Shifting Under Biden’s Feet’ After Hur Report

Last week, special counsel Robert Hur released a bombshell report, declining to press charges against US President Joe Biden partially because his report said, the president would appear to the jury as an “elderly man with a poor memory” and therefore would have trouble convincing the jury of his intent.

The report also noted that he forgot when his term as Vice President ended and started, and couldn’t remember what year his son died.

Biden attempted to quell concerns about his age by calling a press conference addressing the report but proceeded to confuse Mexico and Egypt while speaking to reporters. While Democratic leaders and administration officials were quick to defend the President, the cracks have started to show.

Independent journalist and author Dan Lazare told Sputnik’s The Final Countdown on Monday that the “Biden administration is in real trouble,” and that “the ground is shifting beneath Biden’s feet.”

On Monday, Vice President Kamala Harris told a US media outlet she is “ready to serve” while slamming the report as “wrong” and “politically motivated.”

Earlier in the week, former First Lady and 2016 democratic nominee Hillary Clinton admitted that Biden’s age is an issue. Finally, the New York Times editorial board released its opinion that Biden “needs to do more to show the public that he is capable of holding office until age 86” when his potential second term would end. It called on him to “hold regular news conferences” and said it looks like he is hiding “or worse, being hidden.”

Lazare argued that is impossible for the Biden campaign. “Biden cannot go on that kind of tour,” he said. “He can't sit down with Hannity or go on Fox News or do anything like that because he'll only make things worse.[...] It’ll become completely clear that he doesn’t know what’s going on around him.”

Co-host Ted Rall asked how Republicans should tread the line between criticizing the president and being sensitive to people who have experienced dementia in their own families. “They can say, ‘look, that guy’s too old, he’s senile.’ and jump up and down [...] [Or] is the best tactic to basically express sympathy and say, ‘look this can happen to any of us. We have sympathy for the president and his family [...] but the needs of the country come first,’ and maybe they should call for Harris to take over knowing full well [that] politically she is unpopular.”

That doesn’t sound like something former US President and presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump would do, Lazare said, “But I think the idea of calling on Kamala Harris to take over makes a great deal of sense because her poll ratings are abysmal.”

However, co-host Angie Wong, a Republican, argued that she “would love Biden to remain on the ticket in November. That’ll be fantastic for Donald Trump and [in down-ballot races].”

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Rafah Invasion to 'Complicate' Things for Israel 'Enormously'

Early on Monday, Israel launched a bombing campaign near the Rafah border with Egypt, an area Palestinians in Gaza were told to flee to during earlier stages of Israel's campaign.
More than 67 Palestinians were killed, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has promised a coming ground invasion in Rafah. While Netanyahu has promised that civilians will be given "safe passage" he has not indicated where the 1.7 million people may go.
Dr. Hasan Unal, a professor of political science and international relations at Baskent University in Turkiye, told Sputnik's Fault Lines that Israel's actions in Rafah will "complicate the situation for Israel enormously" noting that even its staunchest ally, the United States has expressed concerns publicly about the operation.
The situation is likely to turn world opinion against Israel more than it already has, Unal argued. "In Bosnia [...] when the Western channels [started] broadcasting all the ugly pictures coming, streaming out of Bosnia, which in the end was recognized [...] by the international court as genocide. [...] the public began to clamor for action by their governments.
"There's a growing risk [that Biden could pay] quite a big price for [his] unconditional support to Israel," he added.
Unal also noted that an invasion of Rafah has long been a red line for Egypt, and it may cause them to leave the 1978 Camp David agreement, which would be "a big diplomatic blow to Israel and also to the United States," Unal also mentioned that Saudi Arabia has already reportedly pulled back from plans to normalize relations with Israel.
Moving forward, Unal said he does not see things moving in a better situation as long as Netanyahu and his government are in charge in Israel. "But if we talk about what needs to be done, that is clear.[...] you need a ceasefire. What the terminology is not terribly important, but then, you [need] a two-state solution."
But that will be difficult because of Israel's settler policy, Unal argued. "[Israel] would have to take out many of the settler groups that have been, basically, sprawled around the West Bank and so forth. How are they going to create [a] viable corridor between Gaza and the West Bank territories in another question."
While the prospects for peace are "quite bleak" and haven't improved since the Hamas October 7 attack, Unal noted that the event put the conflict "onto the world radar quite firmly" and that the situation is "not sustainable" for Israel.

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"You can continue to kill Palestinians all the time, but up to what point? The whole world is not pitted against you."
The success of the Tucker-Putin interview was the result of Americans being "hungry for information about what Russia is thinking," former US Marines Corps intelligence officer and author Scott Ritter told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Monday.

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"They are worried about the consequences of condemning Russia out of hand and rushing to a war based upon words Russia is not allowed to say for us to consider," he added.

"[Putin's] words are resonating because [Americans are] going, 'Wait a minute. I was told that this guy is the personification of evil. I was told he doesn't want a negotiated settlement. I was told that he deliberately invaded, that he wants to invade NATO,'" Ritter explained. "And [Putin is] saying that he is more than happy to sit down at the table and talk if anybody will talk, that the problem here isn't Putin, the problem is the United States [...] and the light bulb is going off around America."

Ritter said he hopes a future US President will recognize the service Carlson did for the world and "[bring] him to the White House and put the Presidential Medal of Freedom around his neck."

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Independent journalist and author Dan Lazare told Sputnik's The Final Countdown on Monday that the "Biden administration is in real trouble," and that "the ground is shifting beneath Biden's feet," following the release of special counsel Robert Hur's report and Biden's subsequent disastrous press conference.

Recently, cracks have begun to show in Biden's support structures, hinting that some may be pushing for a change.

The New York Times editorial board released its opinion that Biden "needs to do more to show the public that he is capable of holding office until age 86" when his potential second term would end. It called on him to "hold regular news conferences" and said it looks like he is hiding "or worse, being hidden."

Lazare argued that is impossible for the Biden campaign. "Biden cannot go on that kind of tour," he said. "He can't sit down with Hannity or go on Fox News or do anything like that because he'll only make things worse.[...] It'll become completely clear that he doesn't know what's going on around him."

Read more in the full article, including how Lazare believes Republicans should handle Biden's condition.

Dr. Hasan Unal, a professor of political science and international relations at Baskent University in Turkiye, told Sputnik's Fault Lines that Israel's actions in Rafah will "complicate the situation for Israel enormously" noting that even its staunchest ally, the United States, has expressed concerns publicly about the operation.

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“In Bosnia [...] when the Western channels [started] broadcasting all the ugly pictures coming, streaming out of Bosnia, which in the end was recognized [...] by the international court as genocide. [...] the public began to clamor for action by their governments.

“There's a growing risk [that Biden could pay] quite a big price for [his] unconditional support to Israel,” he added.

Unal said the situation requires a cease-fire and a two state solution, but said that will be difficult under Netanyahu’s government and with the illegal settlements in the West Bank. “[Israel] would have to take out many of the settler groups that have been, basically, sprawled around the West Bank and so forth. How are they going to create [a] viable corridor between Gaza and the West Bank territories in another question.”

While the prospects for peace are “quite bleak,” Unal noted that the October 7 attack put the conflict “onto the world radar quite firmly” and that the situation is “not sustainable” for Israel.

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‘No One Left to Have Children’: Ukraine Conscription Efforts to Decimate Birth Rates

According to Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, Ukraine has lost more than 383,000 since the launch of Russia's special military operation.
Ukraine cannot afford to lose more young people to the frontlines, otherwise, there won't be enough to have children and replenish the population, international relations and security analyst Mark Sleboda told Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Tuesday.
While discussing the state of the Ukrainian frontline and the mass conscription law being considered by the country’s Parliament, Sleboda explained that Ukraine already had a declining population before NATO's proxy war launched in the country.
“Once you got into the '90s and particularly the mid-'90s, people were not having children. The result of that is a demographic narrowing at the lower age group,” Sleboda explained. “There are four times as many people in the 35 to 45 age bracket, [and more in] the 45 to 55 age bracket, than in the 18 to 30 age bracket,” the analyst clarified.
There are roughly 3.5 times more Ukrainians in the 35-55 age groups combined than the 18-30 age group and 2.3 times more in the 35-45 group alone, according to the CIA data. Additionally, the number of 18 and 19-year-olds were estimated as 2/5 of the 15-19 group in that calculation.
“[Ukraine] can literally not afford to lose any more young people because then there will be no one left to have children,” Sleboda stated. “And I hate to tell you, large numbers of their women went to Europe and are going to have European babies and are not coming back,” he noted, adding that it was “a bit distasteful” but “true.”
Nonetheless, Ukraine has to go forward with the mass conscription planif it wants to replace its massive losses, particularly in Avdeyevka, according to the analyst. “However bad you think [Avdeyevka] is, it’s much worse,” Sleboda emphasized, saying that newly-appointed Ukrainian

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Commander-in-Chief Alexander Syrsky is repeating Ukraine's failed strategy in Artemovsk (Bakhmut) and is doubling down on the increasingly encircled city.

"Syrsky [...] is stripping troops from every other front, pulling the very last strategic reserves from the country [...] and is sending them into Avdeyevka, which means it's not just about keeping the troops that are there, it is about throwing, at least I would say 10,000, reinforcements into the situation.

Sleboda noted that even without the latest conscription law being adopted, Ukraine is already forcing men to the front, focusing on the villages in Western Ukraine. "The conscription has focused on small villages rather than Kiev and other big cities to try to limit the potential for political protests," he explained. "That is why you're starting to see videos now of locals, even in West Ukraine, trying to fight in the streets [against] the conscription officials."

Earlier this week, videos appeared on Telegram showing villagers in a town in the Odessa region fighting against conscription officers.

Sleboda also pointed to the number of Ukrainian women who have been killed on the frontlines "not just in rear positions, but in front trench positions" and videos of mentally disabled people that have been conscripted, which "Kiev regime forces" then "make videos of them harassing and torturing these poor mentally disabled people."

The situation is so dire in Ukraine, that Sleboda said that even Western media is being forced to accept it. "Just chart the rapidity of 'Ukraine is winning' to 'it's a stalemate,' to 'Oh my God, we're losing,'" he explained. "You've seen the change in the media, which is not to say that it's not still full of propaganda, but, there is a bit more despondency [that] matches up with reality."

He later noted that NATO "does not have the ability" to build up another army for Kiev that matches the one that was largely destroyed in Ukraine's failed 2023 counteroffensive.

"That leaves them with a defensive strategy going forward for the foreseeable future, where their entire goal is simply to raise the costs on Russia, to make Russia bleed so that Russia is satisfied with less," Sleboda explained. "That's all they have left."

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Israel Faces 'No Repercussions' From 'Toothless' White House

Early Monday morning in Gaza, Israel intensified its bombing campaign in the last remaining haven for Palestinians, Rafah, a small city on the border of Egypt where an estimated 1.4 million Gazans have been displaced.

Israel is likely to continue its actions in Gaza despite protests from the international community because it is "living in a parallel reality," where it faces "no repercussions, the bombs keep being delivered, the guns keep being delivered, the aid keeps being [delivered]," journalist and editor of The Cradle Esteban Carrillo told Sputnik's Fault Lines on Tuesday.

"[US Secretary of State] Antony Blinken can travel to Israel, ten, 12, 15 times and he is going to get the same response every time because everything you hear from the White House is completely toothless."

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On Monday, reports leaked out in US media that US President Joe Biden had become increasingly frustrated with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, even using what was described as a “derogatory term” in their conversations. Nevertheless, White House officials have repeatedly denied there are any red lines that Israel could cross that would cause the administration to cut off aid.

Carrillo noted that the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) has been pushing Gazas further and further south, into a smaller area, and now there is nowhere left to flee.

“Palestinians were initially told to evacuate the North and then Israel flattened the North and then evacuated Gaza City, which was in central Gaza. ‘Go to Khan Yunis’ [the IDF said]. Then what happened? The Israeli army goes into Khan Yunis [...] and then when [the IDF] were going into Khan Yunis, they were telling [Gazans to] go to Rafah,” Carrillo recounted. “Rafah is literally the last place where the Palestinians could run to from the attacks, from the bombs [...] This is now, without a doubt, the most densely populated area in the world. And, the Israelis are dropping bombs.”

While Israel has said publicly that there are safe areas for Palestinians to flee to, Carrillo said there are no realistic options. “I would like to see an Israeli official point to a place in Gaza that is safe for the Palestinians to move to because there are none,” he asserted.

“The plan here is to ethnically cleanse Gaza[...] to push them into the Sinai desert, into Egypt and say ‘Now they are their problem [...] whoever cries for the Palestinians, they can take care of them," he explained.

Carrillo added that the comments from European Union’s top diplomat and former chief Josep Borrell comments criticizing international aid to Israel was a surprise, noting that he seemed “to grow a conscience out of nowhere.”

“If you believe that too many people are being killed, maybe you should provide less arms in order to prevent so many people being killed,” Borell told reporters after a meeting of EU development aid ministers.

The US is Israel’s biggest provider of aid, sending $3.8 billion annually. In addition, the US Congress is currently debating a bill that includes an additional $14 billion in aid for Israel, as well as roughly $60 billion for Ukraine and several billion for Taiwan and other US allies in the Asian Pacific.

“I think, Rafah is becoming sort of a red line, [although] for many, the red line was crossed a long time ago,” Carrillo explained.

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Settler Sanctions Being Done ‘In Lieu’ of What the US ‘Ought to be Doing’

Earlier this month, US President Joe Biden issued an executive order targeting Israeli settlers in the West Bank accused of attacking Palestinians in the occupied region. It imposed financial sanctions and visa bans on four individuals while keeping open the possibility to expand them. Weeks later, it was reported that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu protested the order when speaking to Biden on the phone and Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich called on

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Israeli banks to ignore the order and told reporters that “it is not possible for an Israeli citizen with Israeli money in an Israeli bank to be deprived of rights and assets due to an American order.” However, Israeli banks complied with the order.

“Evading such sanctions regimes can expose banks to significant risks, including compliance risks, money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism risks, legal risks, and reputation risks," the Bank of Israel said in a statement.

The move by the Biden administration is woefully inadequate, according to Dr. Radhika Desai, a professor of Political Studies and director of the Geopolitical Economy Research Group at the University of Manitoba, who spoke with Sputnik’s The Critical Hour on Tuesday.

“The US is imposing these sanctions in lieu of what it ought to really be doing, which is [stop] funding Israel sufficiently so that it hurts and Israel stops raining genocide on Gaza,” Desai said, adding earlier that Israel would have to halt its actions “if the US said, 'look, Mr. Netanyahu, either you comply with us, or your funding stops.’”

However, the US is not doing this because, Desai says, Israel “is a critical part of the infrastructure of US dominance, and that infrastructure has already become so diminished that they can’t afford to lose Israel.”

The actions of the Netanyahu government aren’t necessary to protect that asset, Desai argues, which are only being taken to protect the Netanyahu administration, which “relies on the worst elements in Israeli society.”

“Before this war began,” Desai continued. “Mr. Netanyahu was facing protests [from] a very wide range of Israeli society,” referring to the judicial reform protests that shook the country for months before the October 7 attack.

This has turned countries in the region against the US, including Saudi Arabia, which has “begun to realize that simply allying, in a subservient way, to the United States does not serve its purposes,” the professor clarified.

Israel is likely to continue its actions in Gaza despite protests from the international community because it is “living in a parallel reality,” where it faces “no repercussions, the bombs keep being delivered, the guns keep being delivered, the aid keeps being [delivered],” journalist and editor of The Cradle Esteban Carillo told Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Tuesday.

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“[US Secretary of State] Antony Blinken can travel to Israel, ten, 12, 15 times and he is going to get the same response every time, because everything you hear from the White House is completely toothless.”

Carrillo noted that the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) has been pushing Gazas further and further south, into a smaller area, and now there is nowhere left to flee.

Israel has said publicly that there are safe areas for Palestinians to flee to, Carrillo challenged them to show one. “I would like to see an Israeli official point to a place in Gaza that is safe for the Palestinians to move to, because there are none,” he asserted.

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Carillo added that condemnation of the Rafah bombings from Western countries may be a sign that international opinion is shifting even further against Israel.

“I think, Rafah is becoming sort of a red line, [although] for many, the red line was crossed a long time ago,” Carrillo explained.

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“The US is imposing [sanctions against Israeli settlers] is in lieu of what it ought to really be doing, which is [stop] funding to Israel sufficiently so that it hurts and Israel stops raining genocide on Gaza,” Dr. Radhika Desi of the University of Manitoba, told Sputnik’s The Critical Hour on Tuesday, adding earlier that Israel would have to halt its actions “if the US said, 'look, Mr. Netanyahu, either you comply with us, or your funding stops.’”

Earlier this month, US President Joe Biden imposed sanctions on four Israeli settlers. The action was condemned by Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who called on Israeli banks to ignore the order. Nevertheless, the Bank of Israel announced that financial institutions in the country have to comply with Biden’s order.

However, the US is taking more drastic action because, Desai says, Israel “is a critical part of the infrastructure of US dominance, and that infrastructure has already become so diminished that they can’t afford to lose Israel.”

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At Least 10 People Injured After Car Crashes Into Hospital in Austin, Texas- Police

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - At least 10 people have been injured after a vehicle crashed into St. David's North Austin Medical Center ER, police said.
"Initial triage and treatments underway. #ATCEMS Command reporting 10 patients for transport and 1 adult patient with CPR in progress. Avoid the are," Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services posted on Facebook(META banned organization in Russia) on Tuesday.
According to police, there is no threat to the general public and the incident does not appear to be an intentional act.
"There is no threat to the general public. Based off preliminary information and details gathered at this time, this incident does not appear to be an intentional act," Austin Police said on X.
"APD officers continue to assist our first responder partners, and the investigation is ongoing."

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US House Speaker Johnson Says Mayorkas Deserved to Be Impeached For Refusing to Do His Job

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson in a statement said Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayokras deserved to be impeached by the House for refusing to do his job.

"Alejandro Mayorkas deserves to be impeached, and Congress has a constitutional obligation to do so. Next to a declaration of war, impeachment is arguably the most serious authority given to the House and we have treated this matter accordingly," Johnson said on Tuesday after the vote. "Since this Secretary refuses to do the job that the Senate confirmed him to do, the House must act."

On Tuesday evening, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for his alleged failure to secure the United States' borders from illegal immigration, making him the second sitting Cabinet secretary ever to be impeached.

House lawmakers passed the resolution with a 214-213 vote after the effort failed in a vote last week.

The resolution accuses Mayorkas of willful and systemic refusal to comply with and enforce immigration laws.

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Biden Says Mayorkas Impeachment 'Baseless' and 'Unconstitutional'

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in a statement that the impeachment of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas is a "baseless" and "blatant act" of unconstitutional partisanship.

"History will not look kindly on House Republicans for their blatant act of unconstitutional partisanship that has targeted an honorable public servant in order to play petty political games," Biden said on Tuesday. "Sadly, the same Republicans pushing this baseless impeachment are rejecting bipartisan plans Secretary Mayorkas and others in my administration have worked hard on to strengthen border security at this very moment — reversing from years of their own demands to pass stronger border bills. "

Earlier, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution to impeach Mayorkas for his alleged failure to secure the United States' borders from illegal immigration.

The resolution accuses Mayorkas of willful and systemic refusal to comply with and enforce immigration laws.

The measure now heads to the Democrat-majority Senate, which will hold an impeachment trial

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against Mayorkas.

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US Prosecutors Reveal Hunter Biden Had Pictures of Cocaine in His Phone - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Federal prosecutors revealed evidence from Hunter Biden's cell phone that shows pictures of cocaine and drug paraphernalia, court documents revealed.

The US President Joe Biden's son is facing charges over his alleged illegal purchase of a firearm. Hunter Biden refuses to plead guilty to allegedly lying about his drug use while filling out a form when purchasing a gun in October 2018.

"Prior to October 12, 2018 (the date of the gun purchase), the defendant took photos of crack cocaine and drug paraphernalia on his phone," the court documents stated on Tuesday.

The court documents include four photos of "apparent" cocaine, crack cocaine and drug paraphernalia.

The court documents also show that Hunter Biden routinely sent text messages about purchasing drugs prior to the day he purchased the gun.

Hunter Biden also sent a message to his then-girlfriend about his drug use, saying days after he purchased a gun "I was sleeping on a car smoking crack on 4th street and Rodney."

The court documents show an exchange between Hunter Biden and his girlfriend about his drug addiction.

"You have lost your mind hunter...you are in a huge denial about yourself...,' Hunter Biden's girlfriend said in a text message on October 23, 2018.

In November 2018, Hunter Biden sent text messages to his girlfriend saying he is a "drunk" and an "addict." In December 28, 2018, he sent a separate text message to an individual stating that he will "... get sober when I want to get sober."

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US House Passes Resolution to Impeach Mayorkas for Failing to Secure Border

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a resolution to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for his alleged failure to secure the United States' borders from illegal immigration, making him the second sitting Cabinet secretary ever to be impeached.

House lawmakers passed the resolution to bring articles of impeachment against Mayorkas in a vote of 214-213 on Tuesday, after the effort failed in a vote last week.

The resolution accuses Mayorkas of willful and systemic refusal to comply with and enforce immigration laws.

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"If Secretary Mayorkas truly wished to do his duty by the American people, he would start enforcing our laws and demand the Biden Administration take the actions House Republicans have clearly laid out to secure the border in HR 2. As it stands, Secretary Mayorkas has demonstrated no intention to begin complying with our laws and defending our communities," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the resolution.

Last week, the effort failed to pass the US House of Representatives, in part because Scalise was absent from the vote, due to receiving treatment for blood cancer. The measure now heads to the Democrat-majority Senate, which will hold an impeachment trial against Mayorkas.

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Falcon 9 Booster Ready to 'Go Fly' Unmanned Moon Mission This Week - SpaceX

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The Falcon 9 booster carrying six robotic scientific payloads to the Moon on the Intuitive Machines (IM) Odysseus lander is ready to be launched as planned on Wednesday shortly after Tuesday midnight, SpaceX said.

"SpaceX is targeting Wednesday, February 14 for a Falcon 9 launch of the Intuitive Machines IM-1 mission to a lunar transfer orbit from Launch Complex 39A at Kennedy Space Center in Florida," the company said in a press release on Tuesday. "The instantaneous launch is at 12:57 am ET [Eastern Time]."

The mission is part of NASA's commercial lunar payload services initiative and the Artemis campaign, the release said.

The mission's Nova-C lander is expected to land on the Moon on Thursday, the release said.

It will carry experiments to explore plume-surface interactions, space weather/lunar surface interactions, radio astronomy, precision landing technologies, and a communication and navigation node for future navigation technologies, the release added.

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Austin Released From Hospital, Recovering Remotely Before Return To Pentagon-Statement

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Secretary of Defense Austin was discharged from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, the Department of Defense said in a statement.

"Following consultation with medical staff, Secretary Austin was released from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center today at approximately 3:30 pm," the statement said on Tuesday.

The statement said that Secretary Austin is recovering well and has resumed his full functions and duties at 5 pm today day.

"On the advice of his doctors, Secretary Austin will recuperate and perform his duties remotely from home for a period before returning to work at the Pentagon later this week," the statement

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Washington, Beijing Risk Conflict Over Lack of Contact on S. China Sea Incidents - General

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Lack of communication between the United States and China over incidents in the South China Sea could get both countries into a conflict that the United States does not seek, US Space Forces commander in the Indo-Pacific region Anthony Mastalir said.

"My biggest concern is that some miscalculation in the South China Sea [coupled with] lack of communication between Beijing and Washington [with] unintended consequences could get us into a conflict that the United States does not seek," Mastalir told the Air and Space Forces Association air warfare symposium in Aurora, Colorado, on Tuesday.

Mastalir said the US and Chinese military commands had been working to improve their direct communications to prevent such incidents from getting out of hand.

The number of such deliberately close encounters instigated by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force pilots flying over international waters in the region had grown in number in recent months, US Pacific Air Forces Headquarters Chief of Staff Colonel David Berkland told the symposium.

"We have seen an increase in the [number of] intercepts conducted by the PLA Air Force, sometimes firing across the noses of our aircraft," he said.

Berkland said the Chinese PLA pilots had sometimes practiced "unprofessional" conduct and "unsafe geotelemetry" in their close encounters with US aircraft.

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South Korea, US Must Maintain Air, Space Dominance to Deter Pyongyang - Officer

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States and South Korea must maintain air and space military superiority over the entire Korean peninsula in order to deter Pyongyang's leaders from launching any aggressive attack, a prominent South Korean air force officer and diplomat told the Air and Space Forces Association (AFA) air warfare symposium in Aurora, Colorado.

"If deterrence fails, we have to be dominant in air and space power," Republic of Korea Colonel Jongseo Park, Air and Space Attache at the Embassy of South Korea told the symposium. "Our air bases are primary targets."

Park warned that North Korea's military threat to the South was growing as it has aggressively and successfully expanded and upgraded its missiles and nuclear weapons capabilities.

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Pyongyang was pursuing an effective first strike capability employing nuclear weapons, he said.

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US Watchdog Says Unable to Verify Ukraine's Healthcare Salary Expenses

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The Office of the Inspector General at the US Agency for International Development (USAID) said in a new report that the agency did not take necessary steps to verify the accuracy of health care salary reports provided by the government of Ukraine (GoU) in 2022.

"[T]he Agency did not verify the accuracy of salary expenditure reports. By not verifying the GoU salary reports, USAID risks supporting ineligible expenditures. Because the data GoU uses to produce the salary reports cannot be traced to source documents, the amounts submitted for reimbursement may not be accurate or supportable," the report said on Tuesday.

Among other discrepancies, the Inspector General's office found that the Ukrainian government expenditure reports for the year 2022 showed lower staff numbers for June than for each month from January through April while the amount claimed was the highest of all months.

Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukraine conflict in February 2022, the United States has directed $22.9 billion in direct budget support to Ukraine, of which $1.7 billion was transferred through the World Bank's Single Donor Trust Fund to reimburse the Ukraine government for the salaries of healthcare workers employed between January and July 2022, according to the report.

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Hardline US Policies After Ukraine Conflict Could Raise Chance of War With Russia - RAND

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - A hardline strategy by the United States after the conclusion of the conflict in Ukraine could make war with Russia in Europe more likely, the US think tank RAND Corporation (deemed an undesirable organization in Russia) said in a report.

"A hardline postwar US strategy in Europe could make conflict with Russia more — not less — likely," the report said on Tuesday.

Hardline policies, such as further military buildup in Europe, are unlikely to be necessary to effectively deter a Russian attack on a NATO country, the report said. Such policies could increase the risk of conflict with Russia, potentially through Kremlin misperception of US intentions, the report said.

A "longer, more violent" conflict in Ukraine could have long-term and irreversible negative consequences for US interests, the report also said. The US has policy options to encourage Russia and Ukraine to pursue a ceasefire sooner rather than later, the report said.

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Canada Foreign Ministry Asks for More Time to Answer Questions in Hunka's Case - Stepanov

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Global Affairs Canada has requested more time to prepare answers posed by Russia after Canada decided not to extradite Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

"The Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a meeting with the [Russian] Embassy's Minister-Counselor asked for additional time to prepare an answer on the substance of our questions concerning the 'Hunka case,'" Stepanov said.

The Russian ambassador said the questions inquired whether Canada's law enforcement agencies will study Hunka's past, his involvement in massacres and in genocide under Canadian laws; whether the Canadian authorities will pull up the story of Hunka's status in Canada and how he obtained Canadian citizenship; and whether Hunka wrote down that he was a member of the Nazi Waffen SS unit on the application form when he arrived in Canada.

Canada has rejected Russia's request to extradite the Ukrainian Nazi veteran, who received a standing ovation in the Canadian parliament in September, Stepanov confirmed to Sputnik.

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US House Minority Leader Says All Options on Table to Hold Ukraine, Israel Aid Bill Vote

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries said during a press conference that House Democrats will use all available legislative tools to bring a $95 billion supplemental funding bill with Ukraine and Israel aid to the floor.

"All options are on the table," Jeffries said on Tuesday, when asked about plans to bring the bill to the House floor for a vote.

Democratic lawmakers will hold conversations on Tuesday and Wednesday to discuss precise steps forward, Jeffries said.

An "overwhelming majority" of House Democrats are ready and willing to support the legislation, Jeffries said.

Earlier on Tuesday, the US Senate passed a $95 billion supplemental funding bill, which includes approximately $60 billion for Ukraine and $14 billion for Israel.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson reportedly said on Tuesday that he does not have plans to bring the legislation to the House floor. However, a congressional source told Sputnik on Tuesday that the House of Representatives could divide the bill into separate portions.

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Blinken Says Human Trafficking Fuels Crime and Corruption, Distorts Economies

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Human trafficking serves as a catalyst for crime, corruption and violence, and distorts economies, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during the annual meeting of the President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

"As President Biden says, 'human trafficking is a stain on our society's conscience.' Trafficking also fuels crime. It fuels corruption. It fuels violence. It distorts our economies, it harms our workers," Blinken said on Tuesday.

Blinken pointed out that US government agencies and partners have been working tirelessly to prevent human trafficking, protect victims, prosecute responsible individuals, crack down on goods made with forced labor and strengthen efforts against online exploitation and abuse of children.

The meeting of the Task Force was the third during the Biden administration, according to a State Department statement.

The Task Force coordinates US federal government efforts to prevent and respond to human trafficking, with senior White House officials and principals from some 20 federal agencies discussing key efforts during the meeting.

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House Speaker Johnson Says No Plans to Bring Senate Foreign Aid Bill to Vote

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters he does not plan to bring the Senate's $95 billion foreign aid bill to the floor for a vote.

"I certainly don't," Johnson said when asked if he plans to bring the bill on the floor for a vote.

Johnson added that he is currently focused on dealing with immediate budget deadlines in the House.

Earlier in the day, the Senate passed the $95 billion foreign aid bill that includes $60 billion for Ukraine aid, $14 billion for Israel, among other funding for US national security priorities, but excludes border policy reforms.

Congressional sources told Sputnik that there is no timeline set on when the Republican-majority House of Representatives may hold a vote on the Senate's foreign aid bill, but it 's possible it could be divided for separate votes to make passage easier.

Late Monday, Johnson issued a statement expressing opposition to the Senate's foreign aid bill, adding that the House will have to continue to work "its own will on these matters" since the bill fails to address the United States' most pressing issue: border security. Johnson has suggested the Senate consider border security legislation that has already cleared the House.

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US to Send Experts to Kiev Next Month to Assist in Developing Ukraine's Defense Industry

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The US State Department and non-governmental organization US Institute of Peace (USIP) will send a team of experts to Kiev next month to assist in developing efficient oversight and regulation policies of Ukraine's defense industry, US Assistant Secretary for Bureau of Political-Military Affairs Jessica Lewis said during a panel discussion.

"I know the State Department next month with USIP will be sending a team of senior level experts to Kyiv to begin working with Ukraine's Ministry of Strategic Industries to assist in the development of transparent and efficient policies and processes for governing, regulating and overseeing Ukraine's defense industrial pace," Lewis said on Tuesday.

In December, the White House said it would seek to help bolster Ukraine's defense industrial base.

The White House added that the State Department would send an adviser to Kiev to assist with Ukraine's transition to an interoperable military force, combat corruption, and attract foreign investment in critical industries.

The Biden administration believes cooperation with Kiev on its defense industry will help support Ukraine's economy and defense.

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Austin to Be Released in Good Condition From Hospital on Tuesday - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is expected to return home from hospital later on Tuesday following medical treatment at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Defense Department deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh said.

"Secretary Austin is still at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and is in good condition," Singh said during a press briefing on Tuesday. "We anticipate Secretary Austin will be released from the hospital later today."

Austin is still scheduled to participate in the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, which is scheduled to take place virtually on Wednesday and deliver the opening remarks, Singh added.

Earlier this week, Austin was hospitalized for the second time since January and transferred his powers to Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks, who still retains them.

Austin was initially hospitalized on January 1 over complications following a December surgical procedure to treat cancer. The Defense Department failed to communicate Austin's hospitalization to the White House for several days, prompting a Pentagon Inspector General probe and bipartisan calls to resign.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) -

NATO
* The United States does not expect Ukraine to receive an invitation to join NATO during the alliance's upcoming summit in July, US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said on Tuesday.
* President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he would never walk way from NATO in light of former President Donald Trump's earlier criticism of the alliance.
* Ambassador Smith said Trump's remarks about the alliance are irresponsible and pose risks to US and allied soldiers.

US NATIONAL SECURITY BILL
* The US Senate passed a bill on the $95 billion supplemental aid package for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.
* President Joe Biden on Tuesday called on the US House of Representatives to proceed with urgency on bill after the Senate passed the measure.
* US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said he believed that the bill would also be passed by the House if brought to the floor by Speaker Mike Johnson.

MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT
* The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said they carried out strikes on "terror targets" in Rafah, killing 100 and injuring 230 Palestinians, the Al Mayadeen broadcaster reported on Tuesday.
* The South African government has made an "urgent request" to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) over Israel's decision to expand its operation in Gaza to the southern city of Rafah, the presidential office said on Tuesday.
* Israel proposes establishing tent cities in Gaza as part of evacuation from Rafah to be financed by the United States and the Gulf countries ahead of its planned military operation in the city located on the border with Egypt, The Wall Street Journal reported.
* Russia is suggesting holding an intra-Palestinian dialogue that will involve all Palestinian fractions to overcome internal disputes, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
* The Hamas movement welcomes Russia's proposal to hold an intra-Palestinian dialogue on condition if the conversation is serious, Mohammad Nazzal, a member of the movement's political office, told Sputnik.
* Israel attacked with missiles Syria's Aleppo airport from the territory of Lebanon on January 12, Rear Adm. Vadim Kulit, deputy head of the Russian Defense Ministry's Center for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria, said.

OPEC REPORT
* OPEC has downgraded its forecast for the United States' oil production in 2024 and expects it

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at the level of 13.24 million barrels per day, according to the organization's new report published on Tuesday.
* The oil production in OPEC countries have decreased by 350,000 barrels per day in January and averaged at 26.3 million barrels per day, the report said.
* OPEC expects Russia's crude oil and condensate production to decrease by 80,000 barrels per day to average 10.8 million barrels per day in 2024, the report said
* OPEC has kept its forecast for global oil demand for 2024 unchanged, expecting an increase by 2.2 million barrels per day to 104.4 million barrels per day, the report said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* Ukraine has lost up to 325 soldiers in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday.
* International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi is expected to visit Russia in late February, a source familiar with the matter told Sputnik.

CANADA REFUSES EXTRADICTING NAZI VETERAN HUNKA
* Canada has refused to extradite Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.
* The absence of an extradition treaty between Canada and Russia is an untenable excuse for refusing to extradite Hunka and Russia will continue to pursue justice in the case, Stepanov said.
* Canada's Department of Justice cannot comment on extradition requests unless they are made public by the court, a spokesperson told Sputnik.

IMF LAUNCHES UCDF
* The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday it has launched the Ukraine Capacity Development Fund to support the country's economic reforms.
* The UCDF will provide substantial resources for the scaling up of technical assistance and training in support of the Ukrainian government's ambitious economic reform agenda, the IMF said.

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US Forces in Syria, Iraq Have Not Been Attacked Since February 4 - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - US forces have not been attacked in either Iraq or Syria since February 4, Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Tuesday.
"There has been no attack since February 4 on our troops in Iraq or Syria," Singh said.
Since the start of the Israel-Hamas war in October, US and coalition forces in the Middle East have come under more than 200 attacks, mostly in Iraq and Syria, by groups that belong to the so-called Axis of Resistance.
In response to a deadly attack on a US military outpost in Jordan in late January, the United

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States on February 2 struck more than 85 targets in Iraq and Syria allegedly linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guard and affiliated militias.

Both Baghdad and Damascus have strongly condemned the attacks on their soil.

The US and its allies have also been engaged in strikes against Houthi forces in Yemen, which have been attacking Israel-linked commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea.

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Oman Releases 2 Ex-Guantanamo Bay Detainees After Security Guarantees Expired - State Dept

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Oman has recently released two former Guantanamo Bay detainees after the security guarantees regarding the two men expired, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"With respect to the detainees that were released in Oman, we were not involved in that release," Miller said during a press briefing. "It occurred after the expiration of security guarantees made by Oman during their initial transfer into them."

On Sunday, the Taliban announced that two Afghan nationals who were held by the United States in Guantanamo Bay for 14 years were released in Oman.

The Taliban said they facilitated the release of Abdul Zahir Saber and Abdul Karim from house arrest in Oman.

The two Afghan men were transferred to Oman in 2017, where they spent seven years under house arrest.

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Trump Adviser Says Would Seek to Remove Article 5 Protections From Delinquent NATO Allies

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Donald Trump's former national security adviser Keith Kellogg told Reuters that he would suggest removing Article 5 protections for those NATO allies that spend less than 2% of GDP on defense if the former president wins reelection this year.

Ret. Lt. Gen. Kellogg declined to answer if the idea had been discussed with Trump but said they have frequently talked about the future of the alliance.

If Trump wins, he would likely suggest a NATO meeting in June 2025 to discuss the future of NATO, Kellogg said.

NATO could subsequently become a "tiered alliance," with some members enjoying greater protections depending on their compliance with defense spending requirements, the former chief of staff of the National Security Council under Trump said.

"If President Trump is re-elected, once the election is done, I would give everyone what we call a warning order. I would probably say this is where we are going to go to allow them

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preparations so we can discuss it in June," Kellogg said in the interview.

He called it "a very adult conversation to have" and "one of the many conversations in national security that need to be had."

Kellogg warned that if Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty was not honored, the protections provided by Article 5 should not be taken as automatic. Article 3 says that allies must maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.

In addition to losing Article 5 protections, delinquent allies would also risk losing access to training or shared equipment resources, Kellogg said.

Member countries should feel free to exit NATO, he added.

On Saturday, at a rally in South Carolina, Trump said that during his presidency, the leader of an unspecified NATO nation had asked him whether the United States would protect that or other countries in the event of a possible attack by Russia if they do not meet their defense spending obligations. Trump responded he would not and would encourage Russia to "do whatever the hell they want," stressing that NATO members "got to pay."

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Canada Sends Over 600 CAF, RCAF Members to Alaska's Global Resolve 2024 Military Exercises

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – Canada will send over 600 military personnel from its ground and air forces to take part in Alaska's Global Resolve 2024 military exercises, the Department of National Defense said on Tuesday.

"Over 350 Canadian Army soldiers will begin practicing their cold weather combat skills in a joint exercise at the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center (JPMRC) in Fort Wainwright, Alaska from February 13 to 22, 2024," the ministry said in a statement.

In addition, the Royal Canadian Air Force will also deploy nearly 165 personnel from Canadian Forces Base 1 Wing (Kingston) to participate with three CH-147 Chinook and six CH-146 Griffon helicopters, the statement said. Another 100 Canadian Armed Forces personnel are set to take part in the exercises in other capacities, the statement continued.

National Defense noted that most of the servicemen to be deployed are from the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry based in Edmonton, Alberta.

Global Resolve 2024 exercises will involve more or less 10,000 military personnel from several countries, including the United States, South Korea, and Mongolia. Around 8,000 soldiers will take part in offensive and defensive exercises.

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US Concerned by Political Situation in Senegal After Presidential Vote Delay - State Dept

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WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is extremely concerned by the current situation in Senegal following the postponement of the presidential election, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"We are extremely concerned about … the political situation in Senegal," Miller said, adding that Secretary of State Antony Blinken conveyed US concerns to Senegal's President Macky Sall during a phone conversation this morning. "We want to see a return to elections, we'd like to see them on February 25. If they don't take place on February 25, we want to see them take place as soon as realistically possible after that."

Last week, the Senegalese security forces clashed with demonstrators who came to the parliament to protest against the postponement of the presidential election.

Earlier this month, Senegal's parliament passed a law postponing the presidential election scheduled for February until December 15, 2024, with opposition lawmakers forcibly removed from the chamber before the vote. The government on Tuesday suspended mobile internet access for the second time this month, citing the dissemenation of "hate messages" on social media.

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White House Says Opposes US House Bill to End Ban on LNG Exports

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration opposes legislation in the US House of Representatives to end a ban on liquid natural gas (LNG) exports and reform the permitting process, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) said on Tuesday.

"The Administration strongly opposes passage of HR 7176, legislation to change the procedures for approval of the import and export of natural gas under the Natural Gas Act," OMB said in a statement of administration policy.

The legislation would undermine the United States' ability to ensure that the export of LNG is consistent with its economic, foreign policy and environmental interests, the statement said.

The bill eliminates the US Energy Department's requirement to authorize the export of LNG to any country with which the US does not have a free trade agreement (FTA).

The US House of Representatives is set to consider the legislation, dubbed the Unlocking our Domestic LNG Potential Act, later this week.

"We should be unleashing American energy production and providing our allies with a secure energy source, not making it harder to produce by adding permitting red tape, threatening our energy and national security, and killing American jobs," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the bill.

The Biden administration's policy is a ploy to satisfy "radical climate activists" who want to halt US energy production, the statement said. Banning LNG exports will increase dependency on China and empower adversaries like Russia and Iran to control LNG prices on the global market, the statement added.

In January, the White House announced a temporary pause on pending LNG export decisions

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to non-FTA countries until the Energy Department can update the underlying analyses for authorizations.

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State Dept. Says 'Critical' Israel to Allow US Flour Enter Gaza

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – The US views it as critical that flour purchased by Washington for starving Gazans be allowed into the enclave by Israel amid media reports that the shipment has not been allowed through by Israeli authorities for several weeks, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"It is critical that this flour makes it to Gaza. It's critical that people have access to the nourishment that it would provide, and we are engaging with the government of Israel to try and make sure that flour can continue to get in," Miller said during a press briefing.

The United States has funded a shipment of flour that would provide food for 1.5 million Gazans for five months, but it remains undelivered, Miller added.

Axios reported earlier on Tuesday that Israeli ultranationalist Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich is blocking a US shipment of flour to Gaza because its recipient is the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

In January, UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini said that Israel shared with the agency data on the alleged involvement of some of its staff members in the October 7 Hamas attack against Israel and vowed to hold accountable anyone involved in "acts of terror." The United States, Finland, Italy, Australia, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, and some other countries have since suspended funding for UNRWA.

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US Congressman Says Requesting House Speaker Allow Reform Amendments to FISA Bill

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Andy Biggs and other House Republicans held a press conference on Tuesday, where they called for further reforms to legislation to extend Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Section 702 authorities.

"As we go forward, I'm requesting that the Speaker take his base bill — the leadership base bill — and allow us to add a rational amendment process, where we can do things like ask for warrants," Biggs said during a press conference.

The US House Judiciary and Intelligence Committees both passed FISA extension and reform bills, which were combined into a proposal unveiled earlier this week, dubbed the Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act.

The legislation does not include a warrant requirement for Section 702 authorities, which allow the US government to spy on noncitizens located abroad. However, lawmakers have been

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pursuing reforms to the authority, after an investigation revealed that the US government abused the surveillance power hundreds of thousands of times.

FISA must not be extended or reauthorized without reforms and protections for US constitutional rights, Congressman Bob Good said in a statement. Good said that House lawmakers will reportedly enter into a secret session to debate the legislation.

The US House of Representatives is set to consider the new FISA extension bill later this week, according to House Majority Leader Steve Scalise's schedule for the lower chamber of Congress. FISA Section 702 is "vital" to US national security, Scalise said in a statement on the bill.

House lawmakers will consider amendments to the bill to address "significant issues" raised by members, the statement said.

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US Hit By Northeast Snowstorms But Prices of Natural Gas Near 3-Year Lows

NEW YORK, February 13 (Sputnik) - US natural gas prices are near three-year lows after frigid weather early this winter gave way to warmer temperatures amid generous supplies of the heating fuel.

A powerful snowstorm blanketed New York and parts of New Jersey and Connecticut on Monday, dropping a foot or more of ice on the US Northeast region and bringing freezing temperatures back after balmy conditions of late.

Yet, New York-traded natural gas futures fell to their lowest levels since mid-2020, suggesting that any weather change might be too little, too late to clear gas stockpiles that have built up in recent weeks. The 2023/24 winter season officially ends on March 19.

"Natural gas is plummeting to a level where many providers may be put out of business," Phil Flynn, energy analyst at the Price Futures Group brokerage in Chicago, said, commenting on Henry Hub gas futures contracts trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange or NYMEX.

In Monday's trade, NYMEX's most-active gas futures contract, March, settled down for a sixth session in a row, losing some 20% in that stretch.

March gas closed at $1.6890 per million metric British thermal units, compared with its last positive finish of $2.082 per mmBtu on February 5.

Monday's low for the contract was $1.655, a bottom not seen since July 2020, when it sank to $1.605.

"It's a double whammy of really strong supply, while we leave the peak of the bleak midwinter in the rearview mirror," Matt Smith, lead oil analyst for the Americas at Kpler, said in comments carried by MarketWatch.

Last week, the US Energy Information Administration reported a net draw of 75 billion cubic feet of gas for heating. While that was within market expectations, it turned out to be significantly smaller than the five-year average for gas consumption which typically came in at above 100 bcf at this time of year, said Brian Swan, senior commodity analyst at Schneider Electric,

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The underwhelming gas burn for heating led the five-year average for gas stockpiles to swell by just over 10% — approximately doubling the previous week's level, Swan noted.

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US to Explore All Options to Ensure Humanitarian Aid Keeps Flowing to Gaza - State Dept

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – The United States will explore all options to ensure the continued flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza regardless of what the final version of the national security supplemental funding bill might look like, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"We don't know what Congress ultimately will do, but we will explore any and all available alternatives to ensure that humanitarian assistance can continue to flow from the United States to innocent civilians who need it," Miller said during a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, the Senate passed the $95 billion foreign aid bill that includes $60 billion for Ukraine aid, and $14 billion for Israel, among other funding for US national security priorities, but excludes border policy reforms.

The bill contains a provision that bars the Biden administration from resuming funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) after Washington and a host of other countries had suspended financial support for the organization amid allegations that some of its staff members took part in the October 7 attack on Israel.

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Blinken on Europe Trip to Reaffirm US Commitment to Ukraine, NATO - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will reaffirm Washington's commitment to NATO and supporting Ukraine during his trip to Munich, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"While in Munich, Secretary Blinken will hold bilateral meetings with global leaders and underscore the importance of the enduring US commitment to the NATO alliance," Miller told a briefing. "The Secretary will also reaffirm the United States' enduring support for the people of Ukraine, continue discussions with partners on how to achieve lasting peace and security in the Middle East and highlight our steadfast commitment to transatlantic security."

Blinken will leave for Tirana, Albania, and Munich, Germany, on Wednesday.

Blinken will attend the Munich Security Conference in Germany, as part of a US delegation led by Vice President Kamala Harris.

This year, the Munich Security Conference will take place from February 16-18.

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Biden Urges House Speaker to Set Vote on Senate Foreign Aid Bill 'Immediately'

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Tuesday urged House Speaker Mike Johnson to immediately bring the Senate foreign aid bill to the floor for a vote.

"I urge Speaker Johnson to bring it to the floor immediately," Biden said during a press conference. "There's no question if the Senate bill was put on the floor of the House of Representatives, it would pass."

Earlier in the day, the Senate passed the $95 billion foreign aid bill that includes $60 billion for Ukraine aid, $14 billion for Israel, among other funding for US national security priorities, but excludes border policy reforms.

Congressional sources told Sputnik that there is no timeline set on when the Republican-majority House of Representatives may hold a vote on the Senate's foreign aid bill, but it 's possible it could be divided for separate votes to make passage easier.

Late Monday, Johnson issued a statement expressing opposition to the Senate's foreign aid bill, adding that the House will have to continue to work "its own will on these matters" since the bill fails to address the United States' most pressing issue: border security. Johnson has suggested the Senate consider border security legislation that has already cleared the House.

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Biden Says Will Not Walk Away From NATO After Trump's Criticism of Alliance

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he would never walk way from NATO in light of former President Donald Trump's earlier criticism of the alliance.

"I will not walk away. I can't imagine any other president walking away," Biden said during a press conference. "For as long as I'm president, if Putin attacks a NATO ally, the United States will defend every inch of NATO territory."

Biden said US adversaries have long sought to create cracks in NATO and their greatest hope is for the alliance to fall apart.

The president added that Trump's remarks on NATO were "dumb," "shameful," "dangerous" and "un-American."

Last week, Trump said during a rally in South Carolina that a leader of a NATO member state asked him whether the United States would protect that or other countries in the event of a possible attack by Russia. Trump said he would not protect NATO member states who lag in their defense spending. Trump also said he would then encourage Russia "to do whatever the hell they want," adding that NATO member states "got to pay."

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Canada's RCMP Detains Own Officer for Accessing Records Systems to Assist Foreign Actor

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) said on Tuesday that it detained one of its own officers working for the agency's Alberta branch after he accessed the institution's non-top-secret records systems to assist a "foreign actor".

"On Feb. 10th, 2024, the RCMP Federal Policing Integrated National Security Enforcement Team (INSET) arrested an Alberta RCMP frontline police officer who accessed non-Top Secret RCMP records systems in order to assist a foreign actor," the law enforcement agency said in a statement.

Accordingly, Constable Eli Ndatuje has been charged with Breach of Trust – Section 122 of the Criminal Code of Canada; Unauthorized Use of a Computer - Section 342.1(1) (a) of the Criminal Code of Canada; and, Breach of Trust in Respect to Safeguarded Information - Section 18(1) of the Security of Information Act.

The RCMP reiterated its commitment to combat interference in Canada at all levels, while leveraging all available tools. Moreover, the agency intends to pursue any form of meddling be it domestic or foreign.

The Constable is set to make a first appearance before the Calgary Provincial Court on March 11th, 2024, the statement said, adding that the investigation into Ndatuje's criminal offences is still ongoing. The RCMP does not intend to comment for as long as the probe continues.

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Pentagon Says No Timelines Set on US Force Levels in Iraq

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - There are no scheduled timelines regarding the number of US troops in Iraq, Defense Department spokesperson Pete Nguyen said on Tuesday.

"We remain in close consultation with the Iraqi government when it comes to U.S. force presence in Iraq, in particular the safety and security of those forces," Nguyen said. "No timelines have been set in regards to U.S. force levels."

Nguyen said that as part of the Higher Military Commission (HMC), US and Iraqi officials are engaged in discussions on the future of the US-led coalition against the Islamic State terror group (ISIS, banned in Russia) in the Middle Eastern country.

"The HMC is a factors-based review that will inform the leadership of both countries and provide recommendations based upon the following factors: the threat from ISIS, operational and environmental requirements, and capability levels of the Iraqi Security Forces," he explained.

In January, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said that Washington and Baghdad would begin working group meetings related to the future of the US military presence in the country.

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The Department of Defense however said that launching the commission did not mean the start of negotiations between the two countries about the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.

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UPDATE - Mideast Unrest Could Lead to Rebirth of Arab Spring 'on Steroids' - Ex-IMF Official

(Updates with comments from analysts in paras 11-16, background in para 17)

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The unrest in the Middle East stemming from the Gaza conflict could ignite another Arab Spring "on steroids" if the crisis continues for a long period of time, Hossein Askari, former IMF Executive Board member and special adviser to the Saudi Arabian finance minister, told Sputnik.

The so-called Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests and uprisings that began in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid and spread across much of the Arab world, toppling leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

"I think you could see the rebirth of the Arab Spring on steroids," Askari said about the potential long-term impacts of continued violence in the region. "Arab governments cannot continue to ignore the plight of Palestinians. They will have to take a firm stand against the United States and cut off all ties to Israel."

Since the start of Israel's war in Gaza in early October, US and coalition forces in the Middle East have come under more than 200 attacks, mostly in Iraq and Syria, by groups that belong to the so-called Axis of Resistance. The United States and its partners have participated in airstrikes against targets in Iraq, Syria and against Houthi forces in Yemen, which have been attacking Israel-connected commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea.

Askari said he believes the Middle East is on a path to further instability largely because of the problems brought about by the leaders of Israel and the United States.

"These leaders are more motivated by their own political predicament than what is moral or what is best for their countries. Then, as long as conditions keep on deteriorating, Arab leaders are in danger of being toppled if they don't enter the arena of war and support the Palestinians," Askari said.

The United States may eventually be forced to remove its troops from Iraq and scale down its operations in Bahrain and Qatar, where it maintains military bases, Askari added.

The US and Iraqi governments are currently in the middle of talks about the future presence of US troops in the country. Recently, Baghdad strongly protested after the US military conducted strikes in the country in response to an attack that killed three US service members in Jordan.

"The face of the Middle East will change dramatically," Askari said.

Askari believes a Palestinian state could be established within the next five years.

Former Iranian Ambassador to Germany Seyed Hossein Mousavian told Sputnik he also predicts more instability in the Middle East until the end of the war in Gaza.

"There will be more escalation as long as Israeli massacres, crimes and genocide continue against Palestinians," Mousavian said. "The key to contain more regional conflict is an immediate permanent ceasefire in Gaza and establishing an independent Palestinian state.

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More US military strikes means more escalation of regional conflict."

Former Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy recently told Sputnik that what is needed is comprehensive diplomacy that deals with core issues in the Middle East, but US policies in this respect are highly questionable.

"The United States in particular has a singular role to play because of its geopolitical influence," Fahmy said. "It also bears a unique responsibility as the main supplier of weapons to Israel, in fact the whole region, which is in stark contradiction to its responsibility as a permanent member of the UNSC which is supposed to ensure global peace and security."

Laura Blumenfeld, former senior policy adviser on the State Department's Israeli-Palestinian Negotiating Team, told Sputnik that Russian President Vladimir Putin could play a significant role mediating peace in the Middle East through his influence with Iran.

"He [Putin] has leverage with Iran to persuade Hamas leadership to release the hostages, and then evacuate from Gaza, as PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] fighters did from Lebanon. Israel would pull back," Blumenfeld said.

Biden administration officials have been engaged in diplomatic efforts with Arab partners about the need to contain the violence in the region and to determine the best way forward for Palestinians after Israel meets its military objectives in Gaza. US officials have repeatedly said the United States does not support a ceasefire in the conflict at present.

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Blinken Says Spoke With Paul Whelan, Efforts to Return Convicted Spy Continue

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday that he recently spoke with former US Marine Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16-year sentence in Russia for espionage.

"Yesterday, as it happens, I spoke on the phone with Paul Whelan. Our intensive efforts to bring Paul home continue every single day," Blinken said during remarks at an event on hostage-taking as an international security threat.

In December, the United States proposed a deal to Russia to secure the release of Whelan, as well as Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, who is also charged with espionage. However, Russia rejected the proposal, according to the US State Department.

Russian President Vladimir Putin also said in December that the Kremlin hopes to reach a mutually acceptable prisoner exchange deal with the US that would include both Whelan and Gershkovich.

Putin said in an interview with Tucker Carlson earlier this month that Russian and US services continue to discuss the terms of Gershkovich's release, adding that he believes the US and Russia can reach an agreement.

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Talks on Russian Assets Linked to Failure to Explain US Taxpayer Money for Ukraine - Envoy

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The discussions in the United States about confiscating Russian frozen assets have intensified because of the government's failure to explain why US taxpayer money should be sent to Ukraine instead of solving the problems at home, Russian Ambassador in Washington Anatoly Antonov said on Tuesday.

"Faced with difficulties in explaining to ordinary citizens why taxpayers' money should go to finance the Kiev regime instead of solving internal problems, Washington has intensified discussions about the seizure of our blocked assets," Antonov said.

The ambassador emphasized that regardless of what pseudo-legal justification the United States tries to provide for attempting to steal Russian assets, the real legal force of such steps will be insignificant.

"Outright robbery a priori cannot be approved by the international community," Antonov said. "Questioning the guarantees of the inviolability of sovereign assets means planting a bomb under the Western financial and economic model."

Antonov also said that there is an obvious need in the United States for voices of reason.

"The politicized and clearly biased judgments of local Russophobes no longer suit anyone," he said. "Voters need realistic assessments of what is happening in the world and, in particular, in our country. Hence, by the way, there is the genuine interest in the recent interview of the Russian President of Russia to Tucker Carlson."

Financial institutions in the United States and Europe froze about $300 billion worth of Russian assets at the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

In January, the US Senate advanced legislation that would authorize the seizure of frozen Russian state funds, following a similar measure earlier in the House of Representatives. The Biden administration has backed the bill.

Canada already has such a law in the works and the European Council on Monday decided that the profits from frozen Russian assets will be stored for future use in the interests of Ukraine.

Earlier on Tuesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia would legally persecute everyone who is involved in the decision to illegally use profits from the country’s frozen assets.

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No Timing on US House Vote for Senate Foreign Aid Bill, May Be Split Into Pieces - Sources

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - There is no timeline set on when the Republican-majority House of Representatives may hold a vote on the Senate's foreign aid bill, but it 's possible it could be divided for separate votes to make passage easier, congressional sources told Sputnik on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, the Senate passed the $95 billion foreign aid bill that includes $60 billion for

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Ukraine aid, $14 billion for Israel, among other funding for US national security priorities, but excludes border policy reforms.

"There are rumors that the [House] Speaker may break the Senate bill up into separate pieces as there may be more support if he does it that way...or he may do nothing," the source said. "Not clear at this point but there would be tremendous opposition to a Ukraine funding bill."

The source explained that there is growing Republican opposition to providing more funding to Ukraine but strong Republican support to continue assisting Israel. The "neocons and warmongers" in the congressional Republican Party will be applying significant pressure on House Speaker Mike Johnson to do something, the source added.

Another congressional source said there is no timing for when a vote could take place on the foreign aid bill, but Democrats will continue to push for passage of the legislation.

Late Monday, Johnson issued a statement expressing opposition to the Senate's foreign aid bill, adding that the House will have to continue to work "its own will on these matters" since the bill fails to address the United States' most pressing issue: border security. Johnson has suggested the Senate consider border security legislation that has already cleared the House.

Last week, Senate Republicans blocked a $118 billion national security supplemental package that includes $60 billion for Ukraine, $14 billion for Israel and border policy reforms. Republicans claim the reforms in the bill would not do enough to deter illegal immigration on the US southern border.

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Trudeau Condemns Alleged Antisemitism Displays at Toronto's Mount Sinai Jewish Hospital

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Tuesday condemned alleged displays of antisemitism during demonstrations at Toronto's Jewish-operated Mount Sinai Hospital.

On Monday night, pro-Palestine protesters demonstrated before the Mount Sinai Hospital and several individuals climbed the entrance facade where they placed a Palestinian flag. Toronto-based Jewish organization Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center characterized the events as "reprehensible" and "shameful," especially given that the hospital was established in 1920 by Jews against the backdrop of antisemitism.

"The demonstration at Mount Sinai Hospital yesterday was reprehensible. Hospitals are places for treatment and care, not protests and intimidation," Trudeau said via the social media platform X. "I strongly condemn this display of antisemitism. In Toronto and across Canada, we stand with Jewish communities against this hate."

On October 7, 2023, the Hamas movement launched an attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip. Some 1,100 Israelis - military and civilians - were killed in the attack and some 240 others were abducted. Israel launched massive retaliatory strikes and imposed a complete blockade of Gaza. Israel then initiated a ground invasion of the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas and rescuing the hostages. Some 29,000 Palestinians have been killed and some 70,000 others injured in Israel's attacks, according to the local authorities.

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

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US Envoy to NATO Says Trump's Remarks Endanger US, Allied Troops

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said on Tuesday that former President Donald Trump's remarks about the alliance are irresponsible and pose risks to US and allied soldiers.

"Encouraging the Kremlin to attack any NATO Ally or Alliance territory really puts our soldiers, US soldiers, and our Allies' soldiers in greater danger. Doing so, making those types of statements is dangerous and, frankly, irresponsible," Smith said during a press briefing.

She stressed that all these alliances are "America's strength."

"They are not a charity project. They serve US interests directly, and they serve the interests of our allies directly," Smith added.

Last week, Trump said during a rally in South Carolina that a leader of a NATO member state asked him whether the United States would protect that or other countries in the event of a possible attack by Russia if they do not meet their defense spending obligations. Trump said he would not protect NATO countries if they lag on their defense spending. The former US president warned he would then encourage Russia "to do whatever the hell they want," stressing that NATO member states "got to pay."

In an interview with Tucker Carlson last week, President Vladimir Putin said that NATO countries are trying to intimidate their own populations with an imaginary Russian threat.

Russia has no interest in waging a war against NATO, Putin said.

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Mideast Unrest Could Lead to Rebirth of Arab Spring 'on Steroids' - Ex-IMF Official

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The unrest in the Middle East stemming from the Gaza conflict could ignite another Arab Spring "on steroids" if the crisis continues for a long period of time, Hossein Askari, former IMF Executive Board member and special adviser to the Saudi Arabian finance minister, told Sputnik.

The so-called Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests and uprisings that began in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid and spread across much of the Arab world, toppling leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

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"I think you could see the rebirth of the Arab Spring on steroids," Askari said about the potential long-term impacts of continued violence in the region. "Arab governments cannot continue to ignore the plight of Palestinians. They will have to take a firm stand against the United States and cut off all ties to Israel."

Since the start of Israel's war in Gaza in early October, US and coalition forces in the Middle East have come under more than 200 attacks, mostly in Iraq and Syria, by groups that belong to the so-called Axis of Resistance. The United States and its partners have participated in airstrikes against targets in Iraq, Syria and against Houthi forces in Yemen, which have been attacking Israel-connected commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea.

Askari said he believes the Middle East is on a path to further instability, largely because of the problems brought about by the leaders of Israel and the United States.

"These leaders are more motivated by their own political predicament than what is moral or what is best for their countries. Then, as long as conditions keep on deteriorating, Arab leaders are in danger of being toppled if they don't enter the arena of war and support the Palestinians," Askari said.

The United States may eventually be forced to remove its troops from Iraq and scale down its operations in Bahrain and Qatar, where it maintains military bases, Askari added.

The US and Iraqi governments are currently in the middle of talks about the future presence of US troops in the country. Recently, Baghdad strongly protested after the US military conducted strikes in the country in response to an attack that killed three US service members in Jordan.

"The face of the Middle East will change dramatically," Askari said.

Askari believes a Palestinian state could be established within the next five years.

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Canadian Law Enforcement Charges Two Men for Allegedly Helping Smuggle People Into US

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) said on Tuesday that it charged two individuals for allegedly being involved in the smuggling of people from Canada to the United States.

The two men were arrested in early August 2023 in Quebec's East Pinnacle as they transported eleven individuals to an unguarded location of the US-Canada border.

"An RCMP investigation has led to charges being laid against two individuals who allegedly helped to smuggle people from Canada to the United States. Marcos Chagolla Rojas, 39, of Montréal, and Lino Guerrero Martinez, 29, of Montréal, are charged with conspiracy to commit an offense in the United States, under section 465(3) of the Criminal Code," the RCMP said in a statement.

The RCMP said that it continues to work with Canadian and US law enforcement agencies to ensure the protection of the common border, further noting that its Integrated Border Enforcement Teams investigates illegal cross-border activities, which includes monitoring human smuggling and contraband trafficking.

The men are scheduled to appear before a Granby courthouse on February 19.

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UN Chief Says ICJ Ruling Must Be Respected Amid Israel Plans to Attack Rafah - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres cannot judge the International Court of Justice (ICJ) rulings on Israel's earlier military actions in Gaza with respect to that country's stated goal to attack Rafah but he believes the rulings should be respected, United Nations spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"The Secretary-General cannot comment on that [whether the Israeli military operation starting in Rafah would be against its ruling]," Dujarric said. "I would just reiterate what he's said previously, in this court case and others, that the rulings of the International Court of Justice need to be respected."

Earlier on Tuesday, South Africa made an urgent request to the ICJ asking whether Israeli offensive ground operations in Rafah would violate the Genocide Convention and the court's order issued on January 26.

The ICJ has not issued a definitive ruling in the case presented by South Africa as to whether Israel's actions in Gaza constitute genocide, but has said that Israel's actions may do so and it is open to examine the evidence.

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Trump to Attend NY Hearing, Skip Georgia Hearing on Thursday - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Former president Donald Trump will miss the Georgia hearing scheduled for this Thursday in Fulton County but will be attending court in New York on the same day, the Washington Post reported on Tuesday, citing Trump's attorneys.

"President Trump will be attending court in New York on Thursday," Trump attorney Steve Sadow is quoted as saying in the report.

The news represents a shift from Monday, when the former president was expected to forgo the largely procedural New York appearance in favor of the Georgia hearing, said the report.

In Georgia on Thursday, a hearing on the allegations about an improper relationship between District Attorney Fani Willis and Special Prosecutor Nathan Wade is expected to take place. The outcome of the hearing could see Willis disqualified from the case.

According to the report, the Georgia hearing will revolve around Willis and Wade's relationship and the question of whether Willis financially benefited from hiring Nathan Wade.

A Fulton County grand jury indicted Trump on 13 felony counts related to his alleged attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

Trump has pleaded not guilty to charges lodged by Willis in Georgia over the 2020 presidential election.

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Musk Says Cognitive Test Necessary for US President Who Controls Country's Nuclear Arsenal

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Tuesday that a cognitive test should not be an option for a US president, who is tasked with controlling the United States' nuclear arsenal.

"Passing a basic cognitive test should not be optional for someone who controls the nuclear football," Musk said via the social media platform X, referring to a briefcase used by the US president to remotely coordinate a nuclear attack.

Musk's statement comes amid increased concerns about US President Joe Biden's cognitive competency. Biden, 81, is the oldest president in the country's history.

A recent special counsel report detailed several instances of Biden forgetting about key dates in his life and career. Biden also mistook the president of Egypt for the president of Mexico during a press conference, where he also attempted to defend his memory.

On Monday, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said that Biden's physician will not conduct a cognitive test as part of regular medical examinations for the president, in contrast to former President Donald Trump.

The vast majority of Americans, 86%, said they believe Biden is too old to serve a second term, according to an ABC News/Ipsos poll released on Monday. A majority of respondents, 59%, said they believe that both Biden and Trump are too old to run the country again.

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Biden Family Received Millions From China, Ukraine - Hunter Biden's Ex-Business Associate

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Former Hunter Biden business associate Anthony Bobulinski said in a congressional testimony on Tuesday that the Biden family received tens of millions of dollars from foreign actors, including in China and Ukraine, in order for them to get access to the Obama-Biden White House.

"Joe Biden's immediate family members were enriched to the tune of tens of millions of dollars from some of our most dangerous adversaries, including the Chinese Communist Party and players from Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Kazakhstan, and other foreign nations and entities," Bobulinski said in a written testimony for the House Oversight Committee published by Fox News.

The Biden family business was Joe Biden himself and "the brand" created around him to lucratively sell it to foreign nationals seeking access to the Obama administration, Bobulisnki said.

Moreover, Bobulinski said Joe Biden was not just a participant in his family's business but also an enabler of murky dealings with various foreign actors.

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"The only reason any of these international business transactions took place - with tens of millions of dollars flowing directly to the Biden family - was because Joe Biden was in high office," Bobulinski said.

As an example of the Biden family's corruption, Bobulinski pointed out the case of China Energy Company Limited (CEFC), a company allegedly linked to the Communist Party (CCP), that was able to gain access to the Obama White House in 2015 through Biden's mediation.

Joe Biden was aware that CEFC was identified by the US authorities as being affiliated with the CCP, but did not take any steps to prevent it from infiltrating the White House, Bobulinski added.

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Tenth of Agricultural Area May Be Unusable by 2050 Due to High Emissions - UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, February 13 (Sputnik) - Estimated 10% of the currently agriculturally utilized area could no longer be suitable for use by 2050 if high emission scenarios materialize, UN Food and Agriculture Organization Deputy Director General Beth Bechdol said on Tuesday.

"It is projected that 10% of the currently suitable area for major crops and livestock could be climatically unsuitable by mid-century under high emission scenarios," Bechdol said during a meeting of the UN Security Council on climate and security.

Such a development would further reduce the already small area used for crops and livestock, Bechdol added.

Earlier in the meeting, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that "empty bellies fuel unrest."

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Kirby Says Unaware if Biden Intends to Make Personal Appeal to House Speaker About Ukraine

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Tuesday that he is unaware of whether President Biden intends to make a personal appeal to the House Speaker regarding Ukraine.

"I'm not aware of any personal appeal," Kirby said during a press briefing when asked about Ukraine, and clarified whether President Biden plans to make a personal appeal to the House speaker in a phone call or invite him to the White House.

In addition, Kirby said that Speaker of the House Mike Johnson was at the White House and heard directly from Biden about the importance of the supplemental funding for Ukraine.

"The speaker was here at the White House and had the chance to hear directly from not only President Biden, but his national security team about the importance of supporting Ukraine and Israel going forward and how important that supplemental funding was. So the speaker certainly

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has heard directly from the President," Kirby said.

Earlier on Tuesday, most Democratic senators along with 22 Republicans voted in favor of the $95.3 billion emergency aid bill, which would provide $60.1 billion in aid to Ukraine, $14.1 in aid to Israel, and $9.2 billion in humanitarian aid for civilians in war zones, among other provisions.

However, it is unclear whether the bill, which does not include provisions for US border security, will pass the Republican-dominated House of Representatives. Johnson already indicated on Monday that he would not support it.

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White House's Kirby Demurs on Whether Israel Heeding Rafah Warning

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – The White House said Tuesday that it did not know whether Israel was heeding its warning and holding off on its Rafah offensive.

"I don't know that we have any indication of their timing one way or the other … but as you heard the president say we don't believe that it's advisable to move forward with a major operation in Rafah unless or until there has been proper accounting for all the civilians that are there," White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said at a press briefing.

Israel has been pounding Rafah with airstrikes for several days in preparation for a ground offensive that aims to root out Hamas. The city is the last refuge for more than a million Palestinians who were told to relocate south during the past four months of the Israeli military operation in the enclave.

The United States does not assess that Israel's recent airstrikes in Rafah represent the launch of a full scale offensive there, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

The US and other countries have warned that an operation in Rafah would pose grave risks to the mass of civilians seeking refuge there.

Jordan's King Abdullah during a visit to the White House on Monday warned that an Israeli attack on Rafah would create another humanitarian catastrophe in the region while the situation is already "unbearable."

On October 7, Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip, while its fighters breached the border, opening fire on the military and civilians. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted.

Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. More than 28,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of Israeli strikes, according to local authorities.

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Cardiac Alliance Says Lviv May Gain Premier Pediatric Heart Program in Ukraine in 2024

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The pediatric cardiologists from the US-based Cardiac Alliance hope that the hospital in the city of Lviv will have a premier children's heart surgery program in Ukraine by the end of this year, Cardiac Alliance team leader Bill Novick told Sputnik.

"My suspicion is that by the end of 2024, we will have established the Lviv program as a premier pediatric cardiac surgical program in Ukraine. It will be one the best in Ukraine," Novick said.

The Cardiac Alliance specialists still need to educate their Ukrainian colleagues in Lviv on certain types of expertise, including surgery, anesthesia and intensive care units (ICU), Novick said.

The team leader explained that a special ICU education team will accompany them during their upcoming trip to Lviv in April that will focus on ICU issues.

"Depending upon the outcome and the overall feeling by everybody involved in this, we may repeat this again in the summer trip," Novick said.

Novick expressed the hope when the Lviv program reached self-sufficiency, the Cardiac Alliance specialists would decrease the frequency of visits the following year.

"We would like to build up the program to the point where they are happy with their level, and then, when they are, we can move on and concentrate on another program," he said.

The Cardiac Alliance has already received a proposal to start a new program in the city of Odessa, and a cardiac surgeon from the local children's hospital will visit Lviv in April for initial consultations, Novick said.

The Cardiac Alliance is currently looking for funding for this potential project, Novick said.

"There is a possibility that we would might be able to get on a trip in the fourth quarter of this year to Odessa. But that is a guess right now. When money becomes available, we will absolutely schedule a trip," Novick added.

The Cardiac Alliance is comprised of medical specialists from different countries who usually work in different states, including in so-called "hot spots" around the world. The group has great experience working in former Soviet republics, including in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

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US Envoy Says Does Not Expect NATO to Invite Ukraine to Join Alliance at July Summit

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-9)

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The United States does not expect Ukraine to receive an invitation to join NATO during the alliance's upcoming summit in July, US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said on Tuesday.

"As for the summit this summer, I do not expect the alliance to issue an invitation at this juncture," Smith said during a press briefing.

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Smith expressed hope that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will take part in the summit and hear the NATO member states' unwavering support for his government.

"I do anticipate that allies will be able to signal that the alliance continues to move closer to Ukraine and that we are taking concrete steps to serve as a bridge between where we are now and that full-pledge membership," Smith said.

The US ambassador emphasized that NATO considers Ukraine a future member and had reaffirmed this position last year.

"We have worked very hard since the Vilnius summit last year to move out on a number of steps to continue to help our friends in Ukraine with the necessary reforms inside their own country to move closer to Euro-Atlantic integration, both integration with the European Union and with the NATO alliance," Smith said.

NATO continues to focus on supporting Ukraine in the current fight to ensure that it can be successful on the battlefield, Smith added.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said in an interview with China Central Television that Ukraine's non-aligned status is extremely important for Russia.

NATO's expansion by potentially including Ukraine in the alliance creates security threats for Russia and Moscow asks that "this be heard," Putin added.

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White House Will Not Discuss Plan B if Speaker Rejects National Security Bill - Kirby

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The White House said on Tuesday that it would not discuss a hypothetical situation regarding what it would do if US House Speaker Mike Johnson refuses to take the Senate-approved foreign bill to the House floor.

"I won't get into hypotheticals. I think the president was very clear in his statement it's really important that the House now take this up and get it to his desk," National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Tuesday, most Democratic senators along with 22 Republicans voted in favor of the $95.3 billion emergency aid bill, which would provide $60.1 billion in aid to Ukraine, $14.1 in aid to Israel and $9.2 billion in humanitarian aid for civilians in war zones, among other provisions.

However, it is unclear whether the bill, which does not include provisions for US border security, will pass the Republican-dominated House of Representatives. Johnson already indicated on Monday that he would not support it.

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EU Legislation on Russian Assets 'Important Measure,' Canada Seeks Doing More - Freeland

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WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The European Union (EU) legislation on frozen Russian assets' windfall profits is an "important measure, but Canada seeks to go even further, Canadian Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland said on Tuesday.

The European Council on Monday decided that the profits from frozen Russian assets will be stored for future use in the interests of Ukraine.

"We work very closely with our partners in the United States, in the European Union," Freeland said. "This is an important measure that the European Union has taken. Canada thinks that we need to go further and we're going to keep working with our partners on it," Freeland said.

Canada believes in the principle that an aggressor has to pay for reparations and Russia continues to inflict "tremendous damage" in Ukraine amid its ongoing special military operation, Freeland added.

Earlier on Tuesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia would legally persecute everyone who is involved in the decision to illegally use profits from the country's frozen assets.

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NASA, SpaceX Target Feb. 28 for Crew-8 Launch to International Space Station - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - NASA and SpaceX are targeting February 28 as the earliest launch time for the forthcoming SpaceX Crew-8 mission to the International Space Station, the space agency said in a blog post on Tuesday.

"NASA and SpaceX are targeting no earlier than 12:49 a.m. EST Wednesday, February 28, for the launch of the agency's SpaceX Crew-8 mission to the International Space Station," NASA said.

The launch date for Crew-8 was changed from February 22 in order to avoid operational conflicts with Intuitive Machines' lunar lander mission, scheduled for February 14, NASA said.

NASA and SpaceX will evaluate Crew-8 readiness and may make further adjustments to the schedule if needed after the IM-1 launch, it added.

The Crew-8 team includes NASA astronauts Matthew Dominick, Michael Barratt and Jeanette Epps, and Roscosmos cosmonaut Alexander Grebenkin.

Crew-8 will mark the eighth crew rotation mission with SpaceX to the ISS as part of NASA's Commercial Crew Program.

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Biden Urges US House to Move With Urgency on Ukraine, Israel Aid Bill - White House

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has called on the US House of Representatives to proceed with urgency on the Ukraine and Israel aid bill after the Senate passed the measure.

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"I applaud the bipartisan coalition of Senators who came together to advance this agreement and I urge the House to move on this with urgency. We cannot afford to wait any longer," Biden said on Tuesday.

Earlier on Tuesday, most Democratic senators along with 22 Republicans voted in favor of the $95.3 billion aid bill, which would provide $60.1 billion in aid to Ukraine, $14.1 billion in aid to Israel as well as $9.2 billion in humanitarian aid for civilians in war zones, among other provisions.

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Iran Pulled Senior Military Commanders Out of Syria Five Days Before US Strikes – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – Iran withdrew its senior military commanders from Syria five days before the US strikes against militant groups in the country so they would not perish in the attack, The Financial Times report on Tuesday, citing an Iranian official and people in the know.

The Iranian leadership decided to recall its Revolutionary Guard commanders out of Syria in the aftermath of the January 28 attack on a US base in Jordan which killed three American soldiers and which US President Joe Biden blamed on Tehran-backed militant groups, the report said.

At the time of the start of the American attacks on Syria five days later, Iranian military commanders had already been withdrawn from the country in a sign that Tehran was not interested in getting drawn into a direct conflict with the United States and seeks to avoid possible escalation with Washington, according to the report.

The decision to withdraw the commanders was a “change in tactics” on Tehran’s part following the death of nine guard officers in Israeli strikes since October, the Iranian official said.

On February 3, the United States launched airstrikes against 85 targets allegedly belonging to Iran's Revolutionary Guard and affiliated militias in Iraq and Syria, the Defense Department said. Following the US strikes, Russia requested an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council to be held on February 5 to discuss the events.

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IMF Launches Ukraine Capacity Development Fund to Support Economic Reform Agenda

(Adds details paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday it has launched the Ukraine Capacity Development Fund to support the country’s economic reforms.

"The Ukraine Capacity Development Fund (UCDF), a trust fund managed and administered by the IMF, has been formally launched today at an inaugural Steering Committee meeting held in Kyiv," the press release said. "The UCDF will provide substantial resources for the scaling up of

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technical assistance and training in support of the Ukrainian government's ambitious economic reform agenda."

The UCDF's workplan focuses on main areas of Ukraine's economic and financial reform agenda, including fiscal reforms, monetary policy, financial sector policies, as well as strengthening financial integrity and tackling corruption.

"This initial workplan amounts to US$27.5 million, with expectations that the target of US$65 million will be reached," the release said.

Current resources in the amount of $16.5 million are being provided by the Netherlands, Slovakia, Latvia, Japan, and Lithuania.

These resources will help cover IMF capacity development operations for 2024-2028, the release said.

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US Proposes New Rule to Combat Money Laundering, Financing Terrorism – Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration proposes a new rule to combat money laundering and financing terrorism, the Department of the Treasury said on Tuesday.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) to keep criminals and foreign adversaries from exploiting the U.S. financial system and assets through investment advisers," the Treasury said in a notice.

The proposed rule would require certain investment advisers to apply Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) requirements, including implementing risk-based AML/CFT programs, reporting suspicious activity to FinCEN, and fulfilling recordkeeping requirements, it added.

The US also published its risk assessment that identifies illicit finance threats and vulnerabilities in the sector, according to the notice.

"The proposed rule would also apply information-sharing provisions between and among FinCEN, law enforcement government agencies, and certain financial institutions, along with special measures that have been applied under Section 311 of the USA PATRIOT Act," the notice said.

FinCEN Director Andrea Gacki said that the new rule would level the regulatory playing field, protect US economic and national security, and safeguard American businesses.

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Canada's Justice Dept Says Cannot Comment on Russia's Extradition Request for Nazi Veteran

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Canada's Department of Justice cannot comment on extradition requests unless they are made public by the court, a spokesperson told Sputnik after Ottawa rejected Russia's extradition request for Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka.

"Extradition requests are considered confidential state-to-state communications, so we cannot comment on the existence of an extradition request unless made public by the courts," the spokesperson said in a statement. "Extradition in Canada is conducted in conformity with the Extradition Act, international treaties and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It is worth noting that Canada and Russia do not share an extradition treaty."

Canada has rejected Russia's request to extradite the Nazi veteran who received a standing ovation in the Canadian parliament in September, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov confirmed to Sputnik on Tuesday.

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US Senate Majority Leader Says Foreign Aid Bill Could Pass House Vote

(Adds details in paras 3-4)

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said Tuesday that he believed that the foreign aid bill just approved by the Senate would also be passed by the House if brought to the floor by Speaker Mike Johnson.

"With the strong bipartisan vote in the Senate, it's clear that if Speaker Johnson brings this bill to the House floor, it will pass with that same bipartisan support," Schumer said at a press briefing.

Most Democratic senators, along with 22 Republicans, voted Tuesday in favor of the $95.3 billion emergency aid bill, which would provide $60.1 billion in aid to Ukraine, $14.1 billion in aid to Israel, and $9.2 billion in humanitarian aid for civilians in war zones, among other provisions.

However, it is unclear whether the bill, which does not include provisions for US border security,

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will pass the Republican-dominated House. Speaker Mike Johnson already indicated on Monday that he would not support it.

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"With the strong bipartisan vote in the Senate, it's clear that if Speaker Johnson brings this bill to the House floor, it will pass with that same bipartisan support," Schumer said at a press briefing.

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UPDATE - US Consumer Prices Up 3.1% in Year to Jan, Staying Above 3% Level Sought by Fed

(Adds comment, details and context in paragraphs 3-11)

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices grew 3.1% in the year to January, above the 3% annual rate that would have facilitated a Federal Reserve rate cut, Labor Department data showed on Tuesday.

The so-called Consumer Price Index, or CPI, has stubbornly remained above 3% in the aftermath of the inflation triggered by the trillions of dollars of pandemic relief spending in the United States. The Fed is counting on annual inflation to go below its long-held target of 2% in order to roll back nearly two years of rate hikes forced by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Wall Street economists polled by US media had expected January CPI to expand by 2.9% annually, versus the 3.4% growth logged during the year to December.

A survey of money market traders after the data showed the Fed unlikely to consider a rate cut before July, as the central bank awaits kinder inflation data.

“Rate-cut pricing for [the] year-end [is] down to 92 bps [basis points] from 111 bps,” economist Adam Button said in a commentary on the ForexLive forum.

At its last policy meeting on January 31, the Fed said it will “carefully assess incoming data, the evolving outlook, and the balance of risks” in considering any adjustments to rates, which it left unchanged for a fourth month in a row at between 5.25% and 5.5%.

Prior to that, the central bank had anticipated rate cuts to begin in March.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell also said at his January 31 news conference that any pivot on rates would have to come from benign inflation data.

Prior to the 2020 coronavirus outbreak, CPI rarely crossed 2% a year.

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Epic federal spending and loose monetary policy put in place after the pandemic ended that, with annual CPI hitting a four-decade high of above 9% by June 2022.

The Fed, in response, hiked rates by 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023, adding 5.25 percentage points to a prior base rate of just 0.25%.

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Russia Vows to Continue to Pursue Justice in Hunka Case After Canada Rejects Extradition

(Adds details in paras 4-7; background in paras 2, 8-10)

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Moscow will continue to pursue justice in the case of Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka after Canada refused to extradite him, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

Canada has rejected Russia's request to extradite the Ukrainian Nazi veteran who received a standing ovation in the Canadian parliament in September, Stepanov confirmed to Sputnik earlier in the day.

"In any case, this story with Nazi Hunka is far from over. We - Russia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Embassy - will continue to seek justice," Stepanov said.

The incident with Hunka also prompts questions about whether he had declared his SS background when receiving Canadian citizenship, the ambassador said.

"If not, this is the ground for depriving citizenship in accordance with Canadian law," Stepanov stressed.

If yes, the Canadian authorities should provide explanations to the Canadian people, the ambassador said.

"Let me remind you that the SS was recognized as a criminal organization by the Nuremberg Tribunal," he said. "It is an integral part of the modern system of international law."

In September, Hunka was invited to attend Zelenskyy's address at the parliament of Canada. Hunka was introduced as a hero who fought against the Russians during World War II and received two standing ovations from the entire Canadian legislature.

In October, Hunka was charged in absentia with genocide of civilians during World War II by the Russian Investigative Committee. He is accused of participating in large-scale executions of at least 500 civilians in the Lviv region of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic from 1943-1944.

In December, the Russian Prosecutor General's Office told Sputnik that it had requested that Hunka be extradited to Russia to face criminal charges of genocide against Soviet citizens.

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US House Panel Releases Former Hunter Biden Business Associate’s Interview on China Deal

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WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – The US House Oversight Committee released a transcript on Tuesday of a closed-door interview it held with a former Hunter Biden business associate regarding a deal with Chinese energy firm CEFC.

The transcript of Rob Walker's interview was released without commentary. It is unclear what specific claims of wrongdoing the committee may allege.

According to Walker, he, James Gilliar, and Hunter Biden began pursuing a joint venture deal with Chines energy firm CEFC in February 2016. Joe Biden, then vice president, stopped by one meeting with CEFC officials at the Four Seasons hotel in Washington for about 10 minutes to exchange pleasantries. Walker maintained that Joe Biden was not involved in any of his son's business ventures.

On March 1, 2017, Walker received a $3 million transfer from the CEFC-linked State Energy HK. He sent $1,065,000 to Gilliar's company and the same amount but in small increments to Hunter Biden and other members of the Biden family, including his uncle James and sister-in-law Hallie.

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Lack of Extradition Treaty No Justification for Canada Refusing to Extradite Hunka - Envoy

(Adds details in paras 4-8; background in paras 8-12)

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The absence of an extradition treaty between Canada and Russia is an untenable excuse for refusing to extradite Ukrainian Nazi veteran Yaroslav Hunka, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

"The absence of an extradition treaty can hardly serve as a reason for refusal. This is an an obvious politically motivated excuse," Stepanov said.

Canada has rejected Russia's request to extradite the Ukrainian Nazi veteran who received a standing ovation in the Canadian parliament in September, Stepanov confirmed to Sputnik earlier in the day

"This Canadian citizen publicly admitted that he voluntarily joined the ranks of the SS Galicia division," Stepanov said. "His participation in mass crimes and extermination of the civilian population - Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Jews - was documented. And the Canadian authorities received these documents from us."

Canada's decision to refuse the extradition raises a number of questions, the ambassador pointed out.

"Let's say you don't want to extradite the SS man to Russia. But at home, here in Canada, is Ottawa going to initiate a case against Hunka for crimes that have no statute of limitations? We haven't heard anything about this from the Trudeau cabinet," he said.

The ambassador recalled that the prime minister apologized on behalf of the parliament only for inviting a Nazi to join the event with Volodymyr Zelenskyy, pretending that that the issue was closed question.

"Here is a litmus test for Canada covering up Nazism. Will the criminal be punished or will he continue to live out his comfortable retirement years in a country that is so proud of its legal

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standards?" Stepanov wondered.

In September Hunka, a 98-year-old Ukrainian Canadian, was invited to attend Zelenskyy's address at the parliament of Canada. Hunka was introduced as a hero who fought against the Russians during World War II and received two standing ovations from the entire Canadian legislature.

The honoring of a Nazi veteran prompted outcries from Russia, Poland and other countries, with senior Russian and Polish officials suggesting that Hunka should be extradited to face justice in a court of law. The House of Commons of Canada adopted a motion to condemn Nazism and withdraw its recognition of Hunka.

In October, Hunka was charged in absentia with genocide of civilians during World War II by the Russian Investigative Committee. He is accused of participating in large-scale executions of at least 500 civilians in the Lviv region of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic from 1943-1944.

In December, the Russian Prosecutor General's Office told Sputnik that it had requested that Hunka be extradited to Russia to face criminal charges of genocide against Soviet citizens.

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US Envoy Says Does Not Expect NATO to Invite Ukraine to Join Alliance at July Summit

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - The United States does not expect Ukraine to receive an invitation to join NATO during an upcoming summit in July, US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said on Tuesday.

"As for the summit this summer, I do not expect the alliance to issue an invitation at this juncture," Smith told reporters, as quoted by Reuters.

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Wall Street economists polled by US media had expected the annual CPI rate for January at 2.9%, versus the 3.4% seen year-on-year in December. A survey of money market traders after the release of the data showed the Fed unlikely to consider a rate cut before July, as the central bank awaits kinder inflation data.

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Canada has rejected Russia's request to extradite the Ukrainian Nazi veteran who received a standing ovation in the Canadian parliament in September, Stepanov confirmed to Sputnik earlier in the day.

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Russia Receives Note From Canada on Refusal to Extradite Nazi Veteran - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - Canada has refused to extradite Yaroslav Hunka, the Ukrainian Nazi veteran who received a standing ovation in the Canadian parliament in September, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov confirmed to Sputnik.

"A note has been received from the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the matter," Stepanov said.

In December, the Russian Prosecutor General's Office told Sputnik that it had requested that Hunka be extradited to Russia to face criminal charges of genocide against Soviet citizens.

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US Senate Majority, Minority Leaders Praise Senate Passage of Foreign Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) – The US Senate majority and minority leaders both praised the upper chamber's passage of the foreign aid package for Ukraine, Israel and the Indo-Pacific on Tuesday.

"With this national security bill: The Senate declares that American leadership will not waver, not falter, not fail," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer posted on social media.

In a statement, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said: "The Senate understands the responsibilities of America's national security and will not neglect them … And today, on the value of American leadership and strength, history will record that the Senate did not blink."

Most Democratic senators, along with 22 Republicans, voted in favor of the $95.3 billion emergency aid bill, which would provide $60.1 billion in aid to Ukraine, $14.1 in aid to Israel, and $9.2 billion in humanitarian aid for civilians in war zones, among other provisions.

However, it is unclear whether the bill will pass the Republican-dominated House. Speaker Mike Johnson already indicated on Monday that he would not support it. He stated that any national security supplemental legislation should secure America's own border before sending additional foreign aid around the world.

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