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Most Luminous Object in the Known Universe Eats a Sun's Worth of Material Every Day

The black hole powering the most luminous object observed in the solar system is eating roughly the equivalent of the Sun every day through the gas and cosmic dust it sucks up.
Quasar J0529-4351 has been visible in sky surveys since 1980 but was only identified as the most luminous object in the universe last year and its ravenous appetite was just described in a study published on Monday. So bright was the object that it was previously misidentified as a foreground star.
Quasars are the extremely bright center of a galaxy and are powered by supermassive black holes. The newly identified quasar comes from just 1.5 billion years after the Big Bang.
"It is a surprise that it has remained unknown until today, when we already know about a million less impressive quasars. It has literally been staring us in the face until now," Christopher Onken of the Australian National University (ANU) and one of the study's authors said.
Around a million quasars have been cataloged already.
The newly discovered quasar is also the known universe's fastest-growing black hole, a fact that is not surprising because luminosity and consumption go hand in hand when it comes to quasars. The researchers said it also has the largest accretion disk in the known universe, which is the field of debris being sucked into the black hole.
It is, however, not the largest black hole in the known universe. That distinction belongs to TON 618, estimated to be large enough to fit 66 billion stars the size of our Sun inside of it. By contrast, the J0529-4351 quasar is estimated to be 17-19 billion times the mass of our Sun, still very large but not quite as large as the TON 618. While J0529-4351 is growing in size faster than TON 618, its rate of roughly 370 solar masses a year means it will be a virtual eternity before it catches TON 618 at its current rate of growth.
Scientists still aren't sure how the supermassive black holes that fuel quasars are formed. black holes are formed when a star collapses on itself. It can then grow by sucking in other celestial objects, including black holes, but that method of growth does not seem effective enough to create celestial objects the size of supermassive black holes.
The researchers hope that studying an extreme quasar like this one will help them understand more about how supermassive black holes and galaxies are formed. They also believe that there are likely more extreme quasars out there, waiting to be discovered.
"Personally, I simply like the chase. For a few minutes a day, I get to feel like a child again, playing treasure hunt, and now I bring everything to the table that I have learned since," lead study author Christian Wolf, also from the ANU said.
The study was published in Nature Astronomy.

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Chinese Foreign Ministry: NATO 'Should Stop Its Tricks' In Regards to Navalny

On Friday, Russian Alexey Navalny died while serving a 19-year sentence in a Russian prison for fraud and extremism. He reportedly lost consciousness after feeling unwell following a walk. The cause of his death is still being investigated.

NATO countries should stop their "tricks" of "interfering in other countries' internal affairs' Mao Ning, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said on Monday when asked about NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's criticism of China's response to the Alexey Navalny's death.

"NATO should stop its tricks of hyping up tensions and interfering in other countries' internal affairs to expand its sphere of influence and stop smearing China and stoking antagonism and confrontation," Mao asserted, adding "NATO should earnestly take concrete action for the peace and stability in Europe."

Previously, China called the death "Russia's internal affair" and offered no comment.

"First and foremost, different from NATO, China never interferes in other countries' internal affairs," the spokeswoman added, reiterating China's position favoring peace talks in Ukraine.

In contrast, NATO leaders immediately blamed Russian President Vladimir Putin, before any investigation had been taken.

"If confirmed [Navalny's death], would be a further sign of Putin's brutality. Whatever story they tell, let us be clear: Russia is responsible," US Vice President Kamala Harris said on Friday.

In response, the Russian Foreign Ministry said that NATO jumping to conclusions was itself suspicious.

"The immediate reaction of NATO leaders to Navalny's death in the form of direct accusations against Russia is self-exposing. There is no forensic examination yet, but the West's already made conclusions," spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, adding that "carbon-copy accusations" that came within minutes after Navalny's death show that they must have been "prepared in advance."

Last year, China released a 12-point document titled "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis" which included the end of hostilities and the resumption of peace talks.

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Israel Sets Deadline on Rafah Invasion as US Drafts Ceasefire Resolution in Major Reversal

More than 29,000 Palestinians have been killed and another 69,000 have been injured in Israeli attacks since the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel that killed more than 1,100 Israelis.

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Israeli Knesset member Benny Gantz, who is also a member of Israel's war cabinet, said over the weekend that the invasion of Rafah will begin on March 10, the Muslim holy day that marks the start of Ramadan, if the Israeli hostages held by Hamas are not released.

"The world must know — and Hamas leaders must know — that if by Ramadan the hostages are not home, then the fighting will continue, including in Rafah," Gantz said at the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations over the weekend.

Meanwhile, Al-Jazeera reported that it has seen a US draft of a UN Security Council resolution that for the first time calls for a ceasefire. It also calls for the land invasion of Rafah to be paused "under the current circumstances."

Previously, the US has resisted calls for a ceasefire, using its permanent member status on the UN Security Council to veto two resolutions that called for a ceasefire. However, Washington has taken a stronger tone with Israel lately and previously called for Israel to provide a "credible" plan to reduce civilian casualties before it continues its ground offensive in Rafah.

More than 1.4 million of the 2.3 million Palestinians living in Gaza have sheltered in the southern city of Rafah after being told to move there by Israeli forces when it invaded Northern Gaza and then moved south. It also sits on the border with Egypt and has been the only port where aid has gone through with any consistency.

Last week, the UN's emergency relief coordinator, Martin Griffiths, said in a statement that an invasion of Rafah "could lead to a slaughter in Gaza," adding that it "could also leave an already fragile humanitarian operation at death's door."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has promised a plan for a civilian evacuation of Rafah. However, speaking at the same conference as Gantz, Netanyahu argued the operation is necessary for Israel to complete its goal of eliminating Hamas.

"Once you destroy the battalions, there is no organized command and control structure," he said. "You're left with individual terrorists, which we mop up with ground action."

Algeria, which is currently the only Arab member of the UN Security Council, put forward a draft resolution calling for a ceasefire more than two weeks ago. US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield signaled that the US planned to veto it, claiming that it would interfere with "sensitive negotiations" to secure the release of hostages.

The US, Qatar, Egypt and Israel have held negotiations on a potential truce centered on the release of Israeli hostages and Palestinians held in Israeli jails.

The resolution does not call for a permanent ceasefire nor does it require that it begin immediately according to reports, which may make the resolution too weak for other members of the Security Council to accept. It nevertheless represents a massive change for the administration of US President Joe Biden, which has been Israel's staunchest supporter.

Over the weekend it was reported that Washington plans to send tens of millions of dollars worth of weapons to Israel. According to that report, the Biden administration's internal assessment of the weapons transfer dismissed the potential for human rights violations. "Israel takes effective action to prevent gross violations of human rights and to hold security forces responsible that violate those rights," the assessment reads.

It is not known when or if the US resolution will be brought to a vote.

Israeli war cabinet and Knesset member Benny Gantz seemingly set Ramadan as the deadline for Israel's invasion of the southern Gazan city of Rafah.

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"The world must know — and Hamas leaders must know — that if by Ramadan the hostages are not home, then the fighting will continue, including in Rafah," Gantz said at the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations over the weekend. Ramadan begins on March 10.

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On Monday, Al-Jazeera reported that it viewed a draft UN Security Resolution by the United States that, for the first time, called for a ceasefire and the pause of the Rafah invasion.

More than 1.4 million of the 2.3 million Palestinians living in Gaza have sheltered in the southern city of Rafah.

The resolution does not call for an immediate ceasefire, so it may not be accepted by other Security Council members. The US has already vetoed ceasefire resolutions twice. It is expected to veto a third resolution put forth by Algeria soon.

It is not known when or if the US resolution will be brought to a vote.

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NATO countries should stop interfering in the internal affairs of other countries and "stop its tricks," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said on Monday when asked about NATO leaders' criticisms of China's response to Alexey Navalny's death.

On Friday, the Chinese government called Navalny's death an internal Russian affair, which prompted criticism from NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. Asked about that on Monday, Mao responded that "First and foremost, different from NATO, China never interferes in other countries' internal affairs," while adding that China favors peace talks in Ukraine.

"NATO should stop its tricks of hyping up tensions and interfering in other countries' internal affairs to expand its sphere of influence and stop smearing China and stoking antagonism and confrontation," Mao asserted, adding "NATO should earnestly take concrete action for the peace and stability in Europe."

Last year, China released a 12-point document titled "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis" which included the end of hostilities and the resumption of peace talks.

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US 'Grooming Asia for War' With Military Exercises

The United States is grooming Asia for a war with China, peace activist and political analyst KJ Noh told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Tuesday.

While discussing reports that the US will have nearly half of its aircraft carriers deployed in the Pacific, Noh noted that it is the largest gathering of US naval forces in the Pacific since World War Two. "Remember, it's not just five aircraft carriers. It's at least five to ten attack submarines, plus 30 service combatants, including Aegis destroyers and three to 500 planes, [including] F-18s and F-35s. So it's an extraordinary projection of firepower, and it has a very, threatening message," he summarized.

"This also serves to normalize aggressive shows of force. It's like grooming Asia for war and, of course, there's the ratchet effect from that normalization … It just signals that the escalation is coming."

Co-host Garland Nixon supposed that the move may have been made to assuage concerns from neocons that the US is focusing on Ukraine at the expense of China, a motivation that Noh agreed was "possible."

But Noh noted that there are different groups of neocons in the US government, some that "are ready to cut their losses [in Ukraine] and pivot to war with China," and another group, including recently appointed Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, who is "very happy to have an ambidextrous war or just focus on China."

The neocons "know their time is running out on Taiwan, their advantages are ticking down and so I think they want to pivot rapidly," Noh argued. "China is a war that both parties can get behind as opposed to Ukraine, which they consider to be a tough slog because so many Republicans are opposed [to it]."

Asked by Co-host Wilmer Leon about a growing generational divide on foreign aid both among the public and in Congress, Noh attributed it to a technological gap. "Younger people are more likely to see social media, TikToks, [so] they're probably getting a better sense that there is a real genocide [in Gaza] and that there are real losses happening in Ukraine. So they're not buying it."

That distrust also stems from economic factors that affect the young. "The younger generations see that there is no hope under neoliberal capitalism, that they have been thoroughly and totally messed with as far as the system is concerned. So they're not behind it. They're certainly not behind sending thousands or tens of thousands of their hard-earned money personally to a war that makes absolutely no sense," Noh argued, adding that it is only "the ruling imperial elite and the aged … that [are] really still entranced by this madness."

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How Avdeyevka Was Liberated and What Comes Next

Late last week, Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu announced that Avdeyevka had been liberated by Russian forces, who captured the small city that had served as the stronghold for the Armed Forces of Ukraine for over ten years.

The operation had been months in the making, progressing gradually before quickly accelerating as Ukrainian defenses crumbled in the South and North. This collapse led to the encirclement of the remaining Ukrainian forces stuck in the middle.

"It was monthslong, but then when [the Ukrainians] broke, it broke [with a] kind of real quickness at the end," Mark Sleboda, a foreign relations and security expert told Sputnik's Fault Lines on Tuesday.

"It was a rout," Sleboda emphasized. "The order to retreat was only given two days after the Kiev regime troops en masse were abandoning their positions."

Sleboda explained that there were five major reasons why Ukraine lost what has been described by some military experts as "the most heavily fortified location on Earth."

Sleboda noted that this was the first operation in Ukraine where Russian soldiers actually outnumbered the enemy. "It wasn't [the standard military rule of thumb for an offensive] six to one advantage in this conflict, but there definitely was a somewhat larger number of Russians," he said, noting that the Russians were also of better quality. "There's a lot of Kiev regime forces that were thrown in, especially at the end as attempted reinforcements that were territorial defense had been mobilized, forcibly conscripted just two weeks ago."

The second reason, according to Sleboda was the "extreme shell hunger" that Ukraine has faced and continues to face. "This is an attrition war fought to a very large extent with artillery," he explained.

Sleboda said that there was also a lack of communication between Ukrainian commanders and the front line, possibly brought on by unconfirmed reports that Russian electronic warfare efforts cut Ukrainian soldiers off from Starlink services, which Ukraine uses to communicate over large distances. Sleboda called the reports "very credible" and that it resulted in "a lot of troops in the city [having] no idea what was going on at the end."

The fourth and fifth factors contributing to Avdeyevka's liberation are interconnected, Sleboda said. They include Kiev's lack of air defenses and Russia's heavy use of guided FAB long-range bombs.

"In just the last few days, [Russia] dropped more than 300 [FABs] on Avdeyevka, I cannot imagine the delivery of that kind of munitions in that small of a space."

Those factors combined "shattered the morale" of Ukrainian troops, Sleboda said, noting that Kiev only gave the order to retreat "to save face" after troops were already abandoning their position.

Sleboda said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky "was extremely angry" that Avdeyevka collapsed while he was at the Munich Security Conference. "He was extremely embarrassed," Sleboda claimed, saying that Zelensky wanted to hold the city at least until the conference ended, if not the Russian Presidential elections next month.

Asked what's coming next, Sleboda noted that Russia does not like to advertise its war plans. "The Kiev regime does trailers and all of this fanfare and announces everything months in advance, and the glories sound the horns and whatever, right before their defeat. But Russia

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keeps everything absolutely operationally silent and the [Russian] Ministry of Defense never even mentioned the name Avdeyevka until they had liberated the city."

Still, Sleboda predicts that Russian forces will soon move past Avdeyevka and capture the villages behind it, presumably referring to Orlovka, Severnoye, Tonenkoye and Stepovoye but possibly as far as the Karlovka Reservoir, the first significant natural barrier Ukraine could use for defense. "[Ukraine] did not build fortifications past Avdeyevka. In that direction there's no clear fortified line for the Kiev regime forces to retreat to," he added, specifically saying that Novomikhailovka to the south of Avdeyevka should fall soon, noting that Russian soldiers are already in the eastern and southern parts of the town.

Sleboda mentioned Ugledar as a possible goal, which he said the Russians could try to cut the supply lines to the "very tough, fortified position" that the Ukrainians have built there.

"So this is going to lead to, at least locally, a cascading collapse over the next two months," Sleboda predicted. He also speculated that Russia may work to erase the meager gains Ukraine made last year during its failed counteroffensive on other front lines, specifically pointing to Rabotino as a focus in the Zaporozhye direction where he said a "big force" has gathered. "That force could push as far as Orekhov, from which the [Ukrainian counteroffensive] was staged and maybe even Zaporozhye City," which is about 35 miles from Rabotino and 25 miles from the current frontline in Kamenskoye.

Ivanovskoye and Chasov Yar, just outside of Artemovsk (fka Bakhmut) are also in danger of falling, Sleboda said. Operations in Ivanovskoye have been a focus in recent months, according to most military mappers, with Russian forces making gains in the town's North and West.

Ultimately, Sleboda predicts that nothing will save Ukraine from eventual capitulation, even if its Western benefactors eventually provide their long-promised aid. "The US lacks the military-industrial capacity [to keep up with Russian production] and throwing a few tens of billions more dollars at the problem is not going to solve it in three to five years," Sleboda explained. Instead, the bill being debated in the US Congress, which includes roughly $60 billion in aid for Ukraine, would only enable the Zelensky regime "To seize more people, more resources, more press gangs… abducting [people] off the streets, because no one is volunteering… [Ukraine's recruits are] all unwilling civilians at this point."

The United States is grooming Asia for a war with China, peace activist and political analyst KJ Noh told Radio Sputnik Tuesday.

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Discussing reports that the US will have nearly half of its aircraft carriers deployed in the Pacific, Noh noted that it is the largest gathering of US naval forces in the Pacific since World War Two. "Remember, it's not just five aircraft carriers. It's at least five to ten attack submarines, plus 30 service combatants, including Aegis destroyers and three to 500 planes, [including] F-18s and F-35s. So it's an extraordinary projection of firepower, and it has a very, threatening message," he summarized.

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"This also serves to normalize aggressive shows of force. It's like grooming Asia for war and, of course, there's the ratchet effect from that normalization … It just signals that the escalation is coming."

The neocons "know their time is running out on Taiwan, their advantages are ticking down and so I think they want to pivot rapidly," Noh argued. "China is a war that both parties can get behind as opposed to Ukraine, which they consider to be a tough slog because so many Republicans are opposed [to it]."

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Manpower shortages, shell shortages, communication breakdowns, a lack of air defense on the Ukrainian side and Russia's heavy use of long-range FAB guided bombs were the critical factors that led to Avdeyevka advance, Mark Sleboda, a security and foreign policy analyst told Sputnik's Fault Lines on Tuesday.

"It was monthslong, but then when [the Ukrainians] broke, it broke [with a] kind of real quickness at the end," Sleboda explained.

The quick collapse of the city angered Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who hoped the city would hold at least until the end of the Munich Security Conference, if not the Russian presidential elections. "He was extremely embarrassed," Sleboda explained.

After Avdeyevka, Sleboda said that it is difficult to know where Russia plans to go next, noting that they could continue to move forward because Ukraine didn't build fortifications behind the city, but that Russia has gathered forces on multiple fronts and is active in Rabotino and outside of Artemovsk as well.

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US Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence to Step Down – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – US Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security Ronald Moultrie will step down from his position at the end of the month, according to a release.

"Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security Ronald S. Moultrie will step down from his position at the end of February," US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said in a release on Wednesday.

Austin praised Moultrie as a "trusted counselor" with a "far-sighted approach to complex intelligence issues."

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Moultrie began his role in June 2021, serving as Austin's principal advisor on intelligence, counterintelligence, and security matters. He previously held senior leadership positions in the Pentagon and had retired in 2015 as the National Security Agency's director of operations.

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US Approves $1.2 Billion in Student Debt Relief - White House

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The White House announced on Wednesday that it had approved canceling $1.2 billion in student debt for nearly 153,000 borrowers, according to a release.

"Today, President Biden announced the approval of $1.2 billion in student debt cancellation for almost 153,000 borrowers currently enrolled in the Saving on a Valuable Education (SAVE) repayment plan," the release stated.

This brings the amount of student debt relief approved by the Biden administration to nearly $138 billion for almost 3.9 million borrowers.

The latest borrowers receiving relief will be the first benefit from a SAVE plan policy that provides debt forgiveness to borrowers who have been in repayment for at least 10 years and took out $12,000 or less in student loans. For every additional $1,000 a borrower initially borrowed, they will receive relief after an additional year of payments.

The implementation of this provision of SAVE was pushed forward from July.

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US to Invest $20bln in US Port Infrastructure Over Next Five Years - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will invest more than $20 billion into US port infrastructure over the next five years, US Deputy National Security Adviser for Cyber and Emerging Technologies, Anne Neuberger, told reporters.

"The administration is also excited to announce that we will invest over $20 billion into US port infrastructure over the next five years for the President's investing in America agenda," Neuberger said.

According to Neuberger, the new investment is part of the Biden administration's initiative to strengthen the cybersecurity of US ports and to fortify US supply chains.

The United States wants to ensure that all the investment in port infrastructure goes towards buying trusted cranes and to bringing back manufacturing to the United States given how important cranes are to port operations, Neuberger added.

US officials during the call highlighted that more than 200 Chinese-manufactured cranes are operating across the United States, of which nearly half have been probed by US Coast Guard cyber protection teams for any potential malicious cyber activity.

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Biden to Sign Executive Order Addressing Maritime Cyber Threats – Neuberger

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden will sign an executive order addressing maritime threats that will give the Coast Guard and the Department of Homeland Security the authority to effectively respond to malicious cyber activities from abroad, US Deputy National Security Advisor for Cyber and Emerging Technology Anne Neuberger said during a press briefing.

"President Biden will sign an executive order that will bolster the Department of Homeland Security's authority to address maritime cyber threats," Neuberger said on Tuesday.

The new executive order will also give the US Coast Guard the authority to require maritime transportation vessels and facilities to shore up their cybersecurity and institute mandatory reporting of cyber incidents, Neuberger added.

The Deputy National Security Advisor underscored that the order will increase the protection of United States infrastructure objects, including more than 200 port cranes, against "Chinese threats" since the country is the main supplier of cranes in the United States that can be controlled and programmed remotely.

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US Still at Risk of Recession Amid Shaky Economic Conditions - Ex-Texas Oil Regulator

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is still at risk of a recession amid high interest rates and consumer debt, former Texas energy regulator Ryan Sitton told Sputnik.

"I still believe recession is out there," Sitton said. "Consumer debt is at an all time high ... consumers are spending money they don't have, interest rates are absolutely through the roof, and people are complaining about housing affordability."

Sitton believes that these issues related to inflation and recessionary fears will play into the US election.

Public spending is among the major talking points in the presidential election due in November, with polls suggesting that voters increasingly believed higher federal spending was directly contributing to inflation.

Significant federal relief spending and loose monetary policy put in place after the pandemic led to the current runaway rate of inflation. In response, the Fed hiked interest rates 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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Biden Decision to Pause Approval of New LNG Exports Not Logical - Ex-Texas Oil Regulator

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's decision to temporarily pause new liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports projects makes no logical sense, former Texas energy regulator Ryan Sitton told Sputnik.

Last month, Biden paused the approval of new LNG exports in the United States, citing a need to better assess climate, health and economic considerations of pending licenses.

"US opening up these LNG export facilities is only going to put more natural gas in the world, which is going to lower the impact on coal-fired power facilities, so there's just no logic to this," Sitton said.

Sitton expects the temporary suspension on LNG projects will have a short-term impact on natural gas prices.

Sitton also added that it "makes no sense" the United States would not seek to expand its market in Europe and Asia as an alternative to Russian gas.

The White House said that the United States will remain a reliable supplier of LNG to Europe despite the Biden administration's decision to pause new LNG exports.

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Trump Says Concerned Wave of Chinese Migrants Illegally Entering US May Be Building Army

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump, during a Fox News town hall event in South Carolina, said he is concerned about a recent spike in Chinese migrants illegally entering the United States because it could be possible that they're establishing an army inside the country.

"It's China and maybe, what are they building? An army?," Trump said on Tuesday.

On Monday, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) said that over the last three days, 452 Chinese nationals were apprehended by Border Patrol agents on the US southern border.

Since October, some 20,000 Chinese nationals have entered the United States illegally, according to CBP.

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Trump During Town Hall Says Would Call on European Partners to 'Do More to Help Ukraine'

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump, when asked whether he supports sending $60 billion to Ukraine, said that he would first call on European partners to do more to help Ukraine.

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"What I would do is first thing I get on the phone is with the European nations...they've got to start paying up," Trump said during a Fox News town hall on Tuesday evening. "[It] affects them much more than it affects us."

In addition, Trump emphasized that the conflict in Ukraine could have been prevented if he were US president.

Last week, the Senate passed a $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.

However, it's unclear whether the House of Representatives will take up the bill any time soon after House Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters he is focused on other priorities involving the US federal spending budget as a short-term spending bill nears a deadline in March.

The Biden administration is very concerned that without more US aid to Ukraine, Russia will make substantial gains in its special military operation, especially following the fall of Avdiivka.

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US Training 12 Ukrainian pilots on F-16s in 2024, Will Graduate This Summer - Air Force

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is slated to train 12 Ukrainian pilots to fly F-16 fighter jets this year and they are all expected to graduate between May and August, a US Air Force spokesperson told Sputnik.

"The Air Force is slotted to train 12 UKR[ainian] pilots in FY [fiscal year] [20]24. They will all graduate between May and August," the spokesperson said on Tuesday.

Last month, the US Air National Guard started to train a small group of Ukrainian pilots on F-16 fighter jets.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the delivery of F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine would lead to a further escalation in the conflict because the aircraft has a modification that makes them nuclear-capable and represents a direct threat to Russia.

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Ex-Texas Oil Regulator Says Russian Price Cap Has Not Had Much Effect

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The West's price cap on Russian oil has not had much effect, former Texas energy regulator Ryan Sitton told Sputnik.

"I don't think it has done a lot, though. I think it had a short-term impact," Sitton said when asked whether the price cap on Russian oil has had a substantial impact.

Earlier this month, International Monetary Fund (IMF) First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath said Russia has been able to export large quantities of oil despite the price cap, maintaining substantial export earnings.

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In December 2022, the G7 countries, Australia, and the EU imposed a price cap of $60 per barrel on Russian crude oil transported by sea, blocking the transport of oil bought at higher prices.

In response, Russia prohibited selling its oil to countries supporting the price cap mechanism.

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Falcon 9 Completes 300th Successful Launch, Puts Indonesia Comsat into Orbit - SpaceX

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - A Falcon 9 booster carried out the private sector booster's 300th successful mission by carrying an Indonesian Telkom communications satellite into orbit, SpaceX announced.

"Falcon 9 completes its 300th successful mission," the private sector rocket company founded and owned by Elon Musk said on Tuesday.

The satellite was launched from Space Launch Complex 40 (SLC-40) at Cape Canaveral Space Force Base in Florida and it was the 17th launch of the reusable first-stage Falcon9 booster, SpaceX said.

The Merah Putih-2 was the fourth Indonesian communications satellite launched by SpaceX and is operated by Bandung-based Telkom Indonesia, AmericaSpace.com reported. It was the sixth Falcon 9 launch this month, the report said.

Over the past decade, starting in December 2013, Falcon 9 boosters have launched 52 major communications satellites into geo-stationary orbits 22,000 miles above the Earth for 20 different countries, the report said.

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Missouri to Deploy National Guard, Highway Patrol in Border Operation - Parson

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - Governor of Missouri Mike Parson announced the implementation of Executive Order 24-03, activating around 200 National Guard members and up to 22 Highway Patrol troopers.

"We will activate approximately 200 Missouri National Guard members and up to 22 Missouri Highway Patrol troopers," Parson said during a press briefing on Tuesday.

Parson said that starting March 1st, the Missouri Highway Patrol would begin its deployment with 11 officers, and the National Guard members are expected to be active on the ground by March 10th.

"In the coming days and weeks, we will work with legislators to approve $2.3 million to support this operation," Parson said.

Parson added that the operation plan under Executive Order 24-03 is set to activate the mission for 90 days.

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US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) documented more than 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded. The Biden administration has also experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal crossings at the southern border.

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Biden Tells Campaign Staff to Ramp Up Attacks on Trump's Statements - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden instructed the staff of his 2024 reelection campaign to ramp up attacks on former US President Donald Trump's public statements, CNN reported, citing two sources familiar with the directive.

Biden told senior campaign staff to bring more attention to what Trump says, the report said on Tuesday.

One senior campaign adviser reportedly said that Biden's team has been surprised by how many voters view Trump's presidency through "rose-colored glasses" and are trying to remind the public of the former officeholder's more contentious moments.

"Donald Trump is the polar opposite of everything President Biden stands for and has accomplished since he took office, and the campaign's top priority over the next nine months will be laying out that stark choice for voters," Biden campaign rapid response director Ammar Moussa reportedly said in a statement.

Last week, the Biden campaign launched a new advertisement attacking Trump for his stances on NATO, which include encouraging other countries to pay more into the alliance. The advertisement criticized Trump's position as dangerous and un-American and highlighted Biden's commitment to NATO.

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UPDATE-State Dept. Denies US Involved in Downing of Russian Il-76 Plane With Ukrainian POWs

(updates para1-4)

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – The US was not involved in the downing of the Russian cargo plane Il-76 with dozens of Ukrainian prisoners of war on board, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik in a statement.

In addition, the spokesperson called all statements to the contrary nothing more than "Russian propaganda", despite the Russian Investigative Committee conducting an investigation and providing evidence that a missile of the Patriot system was used to shoot down the plane.

The spokesperson reiterated that the United States does not enable or encourage attacks inside the territory of Russia.

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"We have been focused on providing Ukraine with the equipment and training it needs to retake its own sovereign territory, and that's exactly what we've done," the spokesperson added.

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

Russian President Vladimir Putin said following the incident that Ukrainian intelligence knew that there were Ukrainian prisoners of war on board the Il-76 military transport plane, but struck it anyway. The Russian Investigative Committee said that the Ukrainian armed forces used the MIM-104A guided missile of the Patriot system to shoot down the plane.

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American Red Cross Urges Aid for Civilians Impacted by Israel-Hamas Conflict - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The American Red Cross said in a statement that all capable entities should work to deliver immediate humanitarian relief to civilians impacted by the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

“We implore all organizations and combatants with the capacity, the influence, and the remit to please do whatever possible to deliver immediate relief for the innocent civilians, aid workers and emergency responders suffering from this devastation, particularly our Movement partners in the region,” the statement said on Tuesday.

The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is dire, due to water, food, fuel and medical supply shortages, the statement said. Red Cross and Red Crescent teams from around the world are addressing the crisis and providing aid to people in need, the statement said.

The American Red Cross has pledged $10 million to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to help remove any financial obstacles impacting the ability to provide humanitarian relief in the area, the statement said.

On October 7, Hamas launched a large-scale attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip, killing 1,200 people and capturing approximately 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. At least 29,000 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, according to local authorities.

The taking of hostages as part of the conflict is unacceptable and their release must remain a priority, the American Red Cross’ statement said.

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Oil Down Almost 3% on Week, Nearly Erasing Prior Week's Gain, on Demand Worries

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NEW YORK, February 21 (Sputnik) - The near two-month old rally in oil has hit a snag again, with crude prices nearly erasing by Tuesday's close a chunk of what they gained the prior week, amid nagging worries about demand.

West Texas Intermediate, the benchmark for US crude, settled down 1.3% at $78.18 a barrel, after falling by a similar percentage in Monday's electronic session as US markets were shut for the President's Day holiday. The combined drop of 2.6% was just short of the 3% gain for all of last week for the so-called WTI benchmark.

WTI aside, London-traded Brent, the global benchmark for crude, settled at $82.34 per barrel, down 1.5% on the day and 1.2% on the week, after last week's 1.6% gain.

Month-to-date, WTI remained up 1.8%, after January's rise of almost 6%. Brent meanwhile retained a 2.4% gain so far into February, after last month's advance of almost 5%.

"Demand worries are once again holding back this year's rally in oil," said John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital. "But concerns over the Israeli-Hamas war and the impact they could have on oil shipments continue to prevent the market's bleeding."

Demand worries for oil, led by softer economic growth in China, remained at the forefront of Tuesday's trading, as the People's Bank of China unexpectedly cut its key five-year loan prime rate despite holding the key one-year medium-term lending rate steady at 2.5%.

China aside, other global economies are also showing signs of struggle as the UK and Japan slipped into recession in the fourth quarter of last year, data showed.

Balancing that were supply disruption fears — including the possibility of rocket misfirings from the Israel-Hamas war at crude vessels plying the Red Sea. But while crude prices have been higher since the start of 2024, they remain well below the highs of 2022. Concerns over slowing demand led to a 10% price slide through 2023.

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Flight From San Francisco to Boston Rerouted to Denver for Wing Repair - Spokesperson

SAN FRANCISCO, February 21 (Sputnik) - United Airlines Flight 354 from San Francisco to Boston was redirected to Denver due to a wing slat issue, United Airlines Spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik.

"United flight 354 diverted to Denver yesterday afternoon to address an issue with the slat on the wing of the aircraft," the statement said on Tuesday.

The statement added that the flight had landed safely and that United Airlines had arranged for an alternative aircraft to transport passengers to their destination.

According to reports, no injuries were reported following the incident.

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State Dept. Denies US Involved in Downing of Russian Il-76 Plane With Ukrainian POWs

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – The United States was not involved in the downing of the Russian cargo plane Il-76 with dozens of Ukrainian prisoners of war on board and all statements to the contrary are nothing more than Russian propaganda, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik in a statement.

"The assertion that U.S. forces are involved in the conflict is consistent with Kremlin propaganda narratives, not reality," the spokesperson said on Tuesday when asked to comment on Russia's claims that US military were involved in the downing of the plane using US-made Patriot system.

The spokesperson reiterated that the United States does not enable or encourage attacks inside the territory of Russia.

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

Russian President Vladimir Putin said following the incident that Ukrainian intelligence knew that there were Ukrainian prisoners of war on board the Il-76 military transport plane, but struck it anyway. The Russian Investigative Committee said that the Ukrainian armed forces used the MIM-104A guided missile of the Patriot system to shoot down the plane.

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US Extends License Allowing Limited Transactions Related to Russian Seafood - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department has extended a license allowing limited financial transactions related to Russian fish and seafood through May 31, provided that those products were loaded onto a vessel before February 20 under deals concluded in December, according to a notice on its Office of Assets Control (OFAC) website.

The transactions must also involve contracts that were agreed before the US announced expanded sanctions on Russian seafood on December 22, 2023, the notice said on Tuesday.

With some key exceptions, all transactions "that are ordinarily incident and necessary to the importation into the United States of seafood derivative products that were loaded onto a vessel at the port of loading prior to 12:01 a.m. eastern standard time on February 20, 2024, pursuant to written contracts or written agreements entered into prior to December 22, 2023, are authorized through 12:01 a.m. eastern daylight time, May 31, 2024," the notice said.

The license does not apply to any transactions with individuals who are designated by the Treasury Department.

The new license replaces a previous one that had authorized similar transactions through February 21, 2024.

The Biden administration expanded its ban on US imports of Russian seafood in December to close a loophole that allowed US imports of Russian seafood processed in a third-party country.

However, several leaders in the US seafood industry have opposed the expansion of the ban,

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saying it raises prices for US consumers and will contribute to a loss of US jobs in the industry.

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Russia Calls to End Blocking of Land Delivery to City of Goma in DRC - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 21 (Sputnik) - Russia calls for land delivery in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to be unblocked, the Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Anna Evstigneeva said on Tuesday.

"We call for the land delivery for the city of Goma [city in DRC] to be unblocked," Evstigneeva told the UN Security Council members during a briefing on the DRC.

This has led to a great humanitarian crisis and even a high displacement of IDPs [internally displaced persons], she added.

The ongoing political instability has also dried up food production. According to the World Food Programme data, about 6.3 million people are internally displaced in the DRC, of whom nearly 6 million are within the three eastern provinces, with about 4.4 million people affected by malnutrition.

The DRC has long been facing attacks against civilians by different rebel and militant groups operating in the eastern part of the country. The attacks result in regular loss of life, mass displacements, and increased instability.

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Critical Staff Returns to UN DRC Mission Office After Security Incidents- Official

UNITED NATIONS, February 21 (Sputnik) - Critical staff of the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo have returned to the office after security incidents against UN staff, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General in the Democratic Republic of the Congo Bintou Keita said on Tuesday.

“In the course of one day and in Kinshasa alone, UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes and MONUSCO were targeted in 11 incidents, affecting a total 32 UN Staff Members who had to either be extracted or rescued by Quick Response Teams, as well as 2 UN vehicles burnt and 8 severely damaged by stoning. Following these incidents, I decided to restrict the movement of staff and called for remote working arrangements. With the

actions taken by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, these measures were gradually relaxed as of last Saturday, with critical staff returning to the office, as of yesterday,” Keita told the UN Security Council members during a briefing on the DRC.

MONUSCO is also being targeted by a wave of mis- and dis-information due to its part in the ongoing clashes, he added.

The ongoing political instability in the DRC has also dried up food production. According to the

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Austin, Umerov Discuss Ukraine Battlefield Developments After Avdiivka Loss - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin held a call with Ukrainian counterpart Rustem Umerov to discuss battlefield developments in Ukraine, Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said in a statement.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with Ukrainian Minister of Defence Rustem Umerov today to discuss the developments from the battlefield," the statement said on Tuesday.

The conversation comes following Ukraine's withdrawal from the city of Avdiivka, which the US State Department called a notable gain for Russia.

Austin and Umerov reviewed outcomes of the February 13 Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting, the statement said. Austin also reiterated the commitment of dozens of countries to supporting Ukraine, the statement said.

The two defense chiefs agreed to remain in close contact, the statement added.

Ukraine will be forced to make decisions about what areas are viable to hold if the US Congress does not soon provide further security assistance to Kiev, Singh said earlier on Tuesday in a press briefing.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu also said on Tuesday the Ukrainian armed forces lost some 2,400 soldiers over the last two days of the fight for Avdiivka.

Russian officials are also investigating preliminary information about secret prisons and burial sites left behind in Avdiivka by Ukrainian forces, Russian Foreign Ministry special envoy Rodion Miroshnik told Sputnik on Tuesday.

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Sullivan on Trump's Idea to Loan Ukraine $60Bln – 'Not Best Way Forward'

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters that former President Donald Trump's proposition to loan Ukraine $60 billion instead of just sending it for free is "not the best way forward" given the current amount of Ukraine's national debt.

"With respect to a loan to Ukraine, what we have requested and what the Senate passed on an

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overwhelmingly bipartisan basis last week is both military assistance and economic assistance. That economic assistance is in the form of grants, because asking Ukraine to take on and shoulder a substantial amount of debt right now, as it's fighting for its life, we don't regard that as the best way forward," Sullivan said on Tuesday.

Sullivan urged US lawmakers to move forward and pass the supplemental package and not "negotiate against" the interests of the United States.

Earlier this month, former US President Donald Trump suggested that Washington put $60 billion in foreign aid for Ukraine in the form of a loan but not "just hand it over" after the US Senate passed a $95 billion supplemental funding bill with Ukraine and Israel aid, but no border security measures. US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that the lower chamber of the US Congress has no plans to consider the legislation.

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UPDATE-US Sanctions on Russia to Target Defense Industry, Sources of Economic Revenue - Sullivan

(Changes attribution, lede, adds quote, modifies para 3)

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) – The new sanctions package against Russia that is expected to be unveiled later this week will target the country's defense industrial base and sources of revenue, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said during a press briefing.

"It will be a substantial package covering a range of different elements of the Russian defense industrial base and sources of revenue for the Russian economy that power Russia's war machine, that power Russia's aggression, and that power Russia's repression. So, we believe it will have an impact," Sullivan said on Tuesday.

National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said earlier on Tuesday that the United States is set to release a new sanctions package against Russia on Friday in response to the death of Alexei Navalny.

On Friday, the Russian prison service said that Navalny died while incarcerated, adding that an investigation into the cause of death is underway.

President Joe Biden said on the same day that the United States is unaware of how exactly Navalny died but he nevertheless blamed Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin has called such statements by Western politicians outrageous and unacceptable.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said that US officials should "show restraint" and wait for the results of the medical examination before commenting on Navalny's death.

The Foreign Ministry said it is interesting that the US government considers Navalny's death more important than the death of journalist Gonzalo Lira, a US citizen who was imprisoned and tortured in Ukraine for criticizing Volodymyr Zelenskyy's regime and subsequently died in a Ukrainian prison.

Several other foreign leaders and media have prepared "carbon-copy" accusations in advance of Navalny's death, the Russian Foreign Ministry said, characterizing their actions as moral opportunism.

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Tucker Carlson Says US Government Leaked Putin Interview News to New York Times

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - US journalist Tucker Carlson said that the US government leaked information about his interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin to reporters with The New York Times (NYT)

"I got a call from a NYT reporter, and then a friend of mine got a call from another NYT reporter, asking when I was interviewing Putin. There's no way they could have known that. I didn't tell anybody," Carlson said on Tuesday in an interview with TheBlaze. "They [the US government] clearly did it again. They leaked it to the NYT in an effort to scuttle the interview."

Carlson said that the US government should not be allowed to use "creepy spy agencies" to surveil him, noting that he is a US citizen who has not committed a crime.

The interview with Putin was motivated by a desire to know what is happening in Russia, amid heightened tensions between Washington and Moscow, Carlson said.

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San Francisco Official Proposes Library Program to Fight Opioid Crisis

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - Member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors Matt Dorsey proposed legislation to combat the opioid crisis by launching a program to distribute free recovery literature to those facing substance and alcohol use disorders.

"The program created by the proposed legislation will offer free-to-keep recovery literature and basic texts, in all available languages, from the myriad mutual-help program traditions for individuals seeking recovery from substance use disorders, alcohol use disorders, non-substance-related addictive disorders, and their related co-dependencies," Dorsey said in a statement on Tuesday.

According to the statement, the "Read to Recovery" program, which softly launched in April 2023 in three San Francisco libraries, has already distributed over 2,600 books to aid San Franciscans on their recovery journeys.

"If adopted, the groundbreaking program would make San Francisco the first major city in the US to launch such an initiative, which will fully fund universal access to free-to-keep literature and basic texts from all recovery traditions in all available languages," the statement said.

The statement added that the legislation would expand the program to include all 27 public branch libraries across the city within its first year.

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Biden to Participate In Call With G7 Leaders, Zelenskyy to Discuss Ukraine

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik)- US President Joe Biden will participate on February 24 in a conference call with G7 leaders and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to discuss Ukraine, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said.

"This Saturday, the President will participate in a conference call with other G7 leaders and Ukrainian Zelenskyy to discuss our continued support [for Ukraine]," Jean-Pierre told reporters on Tuesday.

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Tucker Carlson Says Boris Johnson Wants $1Mln to Discuss Ukraine Conflict

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - US journalist Tucker Carlson said on Tuesday that former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson wants $1 million from him to talk about the Ukraine conflict in the wake of Carlson's recent interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"It gets out that we're doing it [interviewing Putin], and I'm immediately denounced by this guy called Boris Johnson … So I put in a request for an interview with Boris Johnson," Carlson said in an interview with TheBlaze. "Finally, one of his advisers gets back to me and says, 'He will talk to you, but it's going to cost you a million dollars.' He wants a million dollars."

Johnson's adviser said the former prime minister would be willing to explain his position on Ukraine for the six-figure fee, Carlson said.

In November 2023, Ukraine's former chief negotiator with Russia, David Arakhamia, said Johnson talked Kiev out of signing an agreement with Moscow to end the conflict in spring 2022. Johnson has previously denied the accusations.

Johnson could not have traveled to Ukraine without consulting the United States, Putin said earlier this month.

Putin did not request $1 million to participate in an interview, Carlson noted, adding that Johnson is "a lot sleazier" than Putin.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik)-

ISRAELI INVASION IN GAZA

* Israel is fully determined to reach all its military goals in the Gaza Strip, including a complete victory over Hamas, and no amount of pressure is able to affect this determination, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Tuesday.

* The United States on Tuesday vetoed an Algeria-drafted UN Security Council resolution that

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was calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, a Sputnik correspondent reported.
* Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov held a phone conversation with the leadership of Fatah and Hamas to discuss the inter-Palestinian meeting planned to take place in Moscow, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
* The United States remains eager to work with members of the UN Security Council to pass its own draft resolution on Gaza, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said after vetoing an Algerian-drafted measure that called for an immediate ceasefire in the enclave.
WESTERN MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE
* Western sponsors of Ukraine link continuing delivering extended-range combat missiles to Kiev with effectiveness of their use, an informed source told Sputnik on Tuesday.
* Ukraine's counteroffensive last year was planned abroad, mainly in the Baltic states, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.
* At least 260 NATO satellites are working to support the Ukrainian troops on the battlefield, including 67 specialized ones, Shoigu said.
CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* Ukraine lost nearly 166,000 soldiers, 800 tanks, including more than half of Leopard tanks supplied to them, 123 aircraft and 2,400 pieces of military equipment during its counteroffensive last year, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said on Tuesday.
* Russia has successfully cleared the territory of Krynky in the Kherson Region, where Ukraine has previously deployed four marine corps brigades with a goal to reach Crimea's western coast, Shoigu said.
* Ukraine has suffered 2,400 military casualties in a fight for Avdiivka on February 17-18, Shoigu said.
* The Ukrainian armed forces flee Avdiivka, leaving many wounded soldiers, weapons and mined areas behind, Shoigu said.
NAVALNY DEATH
* The United States will unveil a major sanctions package against Russia on Friday in response to the death of Alexei Navalny, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Tuesday.
* The calls of EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell for an "independent international investigation" into the death of Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny are not acceptable for Moscow, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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Lack of US Funding Will Force Ukraine to Make Choices on What Cities to Hold - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) – If the US Congress fails to approve new funding for Ukraine, Kiev would have to make choices on what cities or towns it can continue holding amid its ongoing conflict with Russia, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Tuesday.
"If we don't get more, if we don't get the supplemental … we will not be able to provide these

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critical PDA (Presidential Drawdown Authority) packages, and Ukraine will have to make choices and decisions on what cities, what towns they can hold with what they have, and what partners can continue to supply them," Singh said during a press briefing, when asked what Ukrainian cities are next at risk of falling after Russia took control of Avdiivka.

The Pentagon will continue to urge Congress to pass the supplemental funding as soon as possible so that Ukraine can continue ensuring its defense, Singh said.

On Saturday, Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrskyi announced the decision to withdraw troops from Avdiivka. Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that the decision to pull out the troops had been made to "save people's lives." On the same day, the Russian Defense Ministry said that the Russian military had taken full control of the city of Avdiivka.

On Tuesday, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said the Ukrainian armed forces lost some 2,400 soldiers over the last two days of the fight for Avdiivka. Ukrainian forces also left many wounded soldiers, weapons, and mined areas when leaving Avdiivka, Shoigu said.

Western countries have been providing military and financial aid to Kiev since the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it will lead to further escalation of the conflict.

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Pentagon Says Potential Upcoming Government Shutdown Risks Disrupting Military Operations

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - A potential federal government shutdown in March risks disrupting US defense programs and operations, Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Tuesday.

"When the House returns from recess on February 28, there will be only three legislative days until certain federal agencies run out of funding," Singh said. "On March 1, funding for the department's military construction activities will expire, and on March 8, funding for the rest of the department will expire. This brinkmanship creates uncertainty, increased costs and delays missions and most importantly, it's a distraction for the force."

Singh urged the US Congress to pass appropriations bills into law as soon as possible in order to provide predictable, adequate, sustained and timely funding.

Singh further said the US Defense Department would continue to defend the nation and conduct ongoing US military operations, but the impact of a government shutdown would be widespread and devastating to US service members, their families and Defense Department civilians.

Short-term spending bills limit the Defense Department's ability to implement a fully resourced US national defense strategy, according to Singh.

No amount of money can buy back the time the Defense Department loses when it is forced to operate under short-term spending bills, Singh added.

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US State Department Declines to Comment on Assange Extradition Hearing in UK

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller on Tuesday declined to comment about an extradition hearing in the United Kingdom for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, which began Tuesday.

"I'm not going to comment on an ongoing extradition matter," Miller said during a press briefing, when asked about the two-day hearing in London.

Assange founded WikiLeaks in 2006 and came to prominence in 2010, after the site began publishing leaked classified information, including from the US government. The US seeks to prosecute Assange under the Espionage Act for obtaining and disclosing sensitive materials, for which he could face 175 years in prison.

The UK court will determine whether Assange will have further chances to fight extradition to the United States. The hearing sparked a rally in support of Assange outside the courthouse in London.

Assange lost a previous appeal to the UK High Court last June. Assange may appeal his case to the European Court of Human Rights as a last-ditch effort to prevent his transfer to the US.

It is inappropriate for a US government official to speak at length about a matter under indictment, Miller said.

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State Dept. Says US Aware of Dual Citizen Detention in Russia, Seeks Consular Access

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) – The US is aware that a dual US-Russian citizen was detained in Russia over the weekend and is seeking consular access, State Department spokesperson Mathew Miller said on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) said that it had detained a woman with Russian and US citizenship from Los Angeles for treason in Yekaterinburg, adding that she has been collecting money for the needs of the Ukrainian army since 2022.

"With respect to this most recent detention, we are aware of the case. We are seeking consular assistance that has not yet been granted," Miller said during a press briefing.

According to the FSB, the woman has been "proactively collecting funds which were subsequently used to purchase tactical medical items, equipment, means of destruction and ammunition for the Ukrainian armed forces."

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US Urges Israel to Probe Alleged Violations Against Palestinian Women, Girls - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - The United States urges Israel to investigate UN Human Right Council expert claims of human rights abuses against women in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"We strongly urge Israel to thoroughly and transparently investigate credible allegations," Miller said during a press briefing, when asked about the UN report.

On Monday, a group of experts appointed by the UN Human Rights Council said that Palestinian women and girls have been arbitrarily executed, subjected to degrading treatment in detention and sexually assaulted by Israeli army forces in the wake of Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel.

The US cannot independently confirm the reports, Miller said.

The UN experts called for an independent and prompt investigation into the claims and urged Israel to cooperate with any such probe.

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UN Says Will Continue to Call for Gaza Ceasefire After US Veto of Algeria Resolution

UNITED NATIONS, February 20 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is determined to continue calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday, after the United States vetoed a draft UN Security Council resolution.

"It is not the first time we've seen a veto in the Security Council. I think our message and the Secretary's message has been to repeatedly call for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza," Dujarric told a briefing following a UN Security Council meeting on Palestine.

The secretary-general continues to hope the council will unite and speak with one voice, he added.

Earlier in the day, the United States vetoed an Algeria-proposed draft resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza.

Supporting Algeria's call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza could have risked sensitive hostage negotiations between Hamas and Israel, US National Security Communications adviser John Kirby said.

The United States vetoing another ceasefire resolution has demonstrated that it does not want peace in the Middle East and is only demanding at any cost that their closest Middle East ally be shielded, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said.

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Pentagon Confirms Houthis Shot Down US MQ-9 Reaper Drone Near Yemen on Monday

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh confirmed on Tuesday that Houthi rebels recently shot down a US MQ-9 Reaper drone near the coast of Yemen in the Red Sea.

"I can confirm that on February 19 the US MQ-9 was downed or went down off the coast of Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen in the Red Sea," Singh said during a press briefing. "Initial indications are that it was shot down by a Houthi surface-to-air missile."

The US military has not recovered the downed drone, Singh added.

On Monday, a Houthi spokesman said Houthi air defense forces shot down a US MQ-9 Reaper drone.

Media footage has also circulated online of the Houthi missile striking down the US military drone.

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State Dept. After Liberation of Avdiivka Says Russia Made First Notable Gains in Months

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) – US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller admitted on Tuesday that the liberation of Avdiivka became the first notable gain in months amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

“Unfortunately, Russia made its first notable gains and months. It is now more clear than ever what the stakes are in Ukraine. Without more support from Congress, Ukraine will not be able to replenish its air defenses and ammunition supplies to help protect itself from Russia's aggression,” Miller said during a press briefing.

On Saturday, Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrskyi announced the decision to withdraw troops from Avdiivka. Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that the decision to pull out the troops had been made to "save people's lives." Later, the Russian Defense Ministry said that the Russian military had taken full control of Avdiivka.

For the last nine years, Avdiivka has been one of the most fortified outposts of the Ukrainian army in Donbas. The settlement was used by Ukraine for sometimes daily artillery shelling of residential areas of Donetsk, killing hundreds of civilians.

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Biden Administration Distributing $5.8Bln for Clean Water Projects - Vice President

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WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has authorized the distribution of $5.8 billion to ensure clean, safe water for all Americans including the removal of all remaining lead water pipes across the United States, Vice President Kamala Harris announced in a speech in Pittsburgh on Tuesday.

"President Biden and I are dedicating $5.8 billion in federal dollars to help remove lead pipes and to fund clean water projects across our country," Harris said.

The disbursement will come from the $1 trillion Bipartisan Infrastructure Law that Biden signed into force during his year in office. It brings the total amount of funds allocated for clean water projects by the Environmental Protect Agency under the law to $22 billion.

"Over two million people in America live without running water, tens of millions more lack access to safe and reliable drinking water and sanitation, and over nine million homes, daycares, and businesses receive their water through a toxic lead pipe. Due to decades of inequitable infrastructure development and underinvestment, lack of access to clean water disproportionately affects low-income and underserved communities," the White House said in a press release.

As part of the initiative, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is announcing over $3.2 billion through the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund to expand access to clean drinking water across the United States, bringing the total amount of funding announced under this category to $8.9 billion, the White House said.

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US Sanctions on Russia to Target Defense Industry, Sources of Economic Revenue - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan has said that the upcoming US sanctions against Russia will target the country's defense and industrial base and sources of economic revenue, Reuters reported on Tuesday.

The US is set to release a new sanctions package against Russia on Friday in response to the death of Alexei Navalny, National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said earlier in the day.

On Friday, the Russian prison service said that Navalny died while incarcerated, adding that an investigation into the cause of death is underway.

President Joe Biden said on the same day that the United States is unaware of how exactly Navalny died but he nevertheless blamed Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin has called such statements by Western politicians outrageous and unacceptable.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said that US officials should "show restraint" and wait for the results of the medical examination before commenting on Navalny’s death.

The Foreign Ministry said it is interesting that the US government considers Navalny’s death more important than the death of journalist Gonzalo Lira, a US citizen who was imprisoned and tortured in Ukraine for criticizing Volodymyr Zelenskyy's regime and subsequently died in a Ukrainian prison.

Several other foreign leaders and media have prepared "carbon-copy" accusations in advance

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of Navalny's death, the Russian Foreign Ministry said, characterizing their actions as moral opportunism.

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US Wants Humanitarian Pause Deal Between Israel, Hamas Before Ramadan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - The United States wants Israel and Hamas to reach an agreement on a humanitarian pause before the Islamic holy month of Ramadan begins, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"We would like to get that humanitarian pause before Ramadan begins," Miller said during a press briefing. "We would like to get it before the end of the week … we'd like to get it as soon as possible."

The Biden administration has made clear to Israel that it should not launch a military campaign in Rafah until it has a credible, realistic humanitarian plan prepared, Miller said. The US has not yet received such a plan, Miller added.

Ramadan begins on March 10. Observance of Ramadan through acts such as fasting and prayer is considered a fundamental practice of Islam.

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Two US-Owned Vessels Suffer 'Minor Damage' in Houthi Attacks in Red Sea - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - Two US-owned vessels sustained minor damage during separate Houthi attacks in the Red Sea earlier this week, US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Tuesday.

"On February 19, between 12:30 [p.m.] and 1:50 p.m., two anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM) were launched from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen toward M/V Sea Champion, a Greek-flagged, US-owned grain carrier in the Gulf of Aden. Minor damage and no injuries were reported. The ship continued toward its scheduled destination to deliver grain to Aden, Yemen," CENTCOM said in a statement.

Later on Monday, a Houthi attack drone struck the Navis Fortuna, a Marshall Islands-flagged and US-owned bulk carrier, causing minor damage but no injuries, CENTCOM added.

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US Vetoes Algeria's UNSC Resolution Demanding Immediate Gaza Ceasefire - Correspondent

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UNITED NATIONS, February 20 (Sputnik) - The United States on Tuesday vetoed an Algeria-drafted UN Security Council resolution that was calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

Thirteen members of the UN Security Council voted in favor, with the United Kingdom abstaining.

The draft resolution demanded "an immediate humanitarian ceasefire that must be respected by all parties."

The document also urged that "all parties to the conflict comply with their obligations under international law," in particular toward all civilians and hostages. It also demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

In addition, it reiterated the call for "the full, rapid, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access into and throughout the entire Gaza Strip."

The US mission to the UN said on Monday it did not think the draft resolution was "an effective mechanism."

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First Deputy IMF Chief To Travel to Argentina for Talks on Economy - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik)- First Deputy Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Gita Gopinath will travel to Argentina this week to discuss the economic challenges the country is facing, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Tuesday.

“First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath will travel to Argentina this week,” Kozack said.

She stressed that Gopinath will meet with local government officials to hear about Argentina’s difficult economic and social challenges as well as its vast potential.

The IMF said in early February that it had completed the seventh review of the extended arrangement under the Extended Funds Facility that will allow for a disbursement of $4.7 billion to Argentina.

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US Eager to Work With All UNSC Members to Pass Its Own Resolution on Gaza - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 20 (Sputnik) - The United States remains eager to work with members of the UN Security Council to pass its own draft resolution on Gaza, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Tuesday after vetoing an Algerian-drafted measure that called for an immediate ceasefire in the enclave.

“We're eager to continue working with the council on this proposal, one that would see a temporary ceasefire as soon as practicable based on the formula of all hostages being released,” Thomas-Greenfield said in the UN Security Council Chamber after a meeting on

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Palestine.

In addition to calling for a "temporary" ceasefire and the release of hostages, the US draft warns against an Israel ground operation in Gaza.

The document also calls on “parties to refrain from depriving the civilian population in the Gaza Strip of basic services and humanitarian assistance indispensable to their survival.”

Earlier on Friday, the United States vetoed an Algeria-proposed draft resolution that called for "an immediate humanitarian ceasefire that must be respected by all parties."

The document also urged "all parties to the conflict comply with their obligations under international law," in particular toward all civilians and hostages. It also demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has called on the parties to stop hostilities. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the settlement of the Middle East crisis is possible only on the basis of the “two-state” formula approved by the UN Security Council, which provides for the creation of an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with its capital in East Jerusalem.

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White House Says Warned of Ukraine Losses Unless Congress Takes Action, 'Here You Go'

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - Ukraine's loss of Avdiivka was the result of Congress' failure to approve more funding for Kiev, something that the White House had warned lawmakers of, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"And we've been warning Congress that if they didn't act, Ukraine would suffer losses on the battlefield, and here you go. That's what happened this weekend," Kirby said during a press briefing.

The well-being of Ukraine is at risk if supplemental funding is not secured promptly to arm Ukrainian soldiers with the necessary weapons and ammunition, he added.

On Saturday, Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrskyi announced the decision to withdraw troops from Avdiivka. Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that the decision to pull out the troops had been made to "save people's lives." On the same day, the Russian Defense Ministry said that the Russian military had taken full control of the city of Avdiivka.

On Tuesday, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said the Ukrainian armed forces lost some 2,400 soldiers over the last two days of the fight for Avdiivka. Ukrainian forces also left many wounded soldiers, weapons, and mined areas when leaving Avdiivka, Shoigu said.

Western countries have been providing military and financial aid to Kiev since the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it will lead to further escalation of the conflict.

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Haley Says NATO Allies Must Pay More, But US Cannot Abandon Alliance

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - Former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley said on Tuesday that NATO allies should pay more into the alliance, but that the United States cannot abandon NATO allies altogether.

"Of course we should ask [NATO allies] to pay more. We should demand it. But abandoning them will only bring more war," Haley said during remarks in South Carolina.

Earlier this month, Trump said a leader of an unspecified NATO member state asked him whether the US would protect NATO allies from a Russian attack if they do not meet their defense spending obligations.

Trump responded that the US would not defend delinquent allies and would encourage Russia to "do whatever the hell they want," adding that NATO members have to pay more into the alliance.

Trump is inviting Russia to attack NATO countries, Haley said. Trump has "all but said" that he will abandon Ukraine as well, Haley added.

Putin is now eyeing operations against Baltic countries, Haley said. China, Iran and North Korea also "smell blood in the water," Haley said.

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Haley Says Not Dropping Out of 2024 US Presidential Race Despite Trump's Lead

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - Former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley said on Tuesday that she is not yet dropping out of the 2024 US presidential race, despite former US President Donald Trump's victory in every nominating contest so far.

"South Carolina will vote on Saturday, but on Sunday, I'll still be running for president. I'm not going anywhere," Haley said during remarks in South Carolina.

The Republican Party will hold its primary election in South Carolina — Haley's home state — on February 24. Trump holds a 23-point lead over Haley in South Carolina ahead of the primary, according to an Emerson College/The Hill poll released Tuesday.

Trump already won the Iowa caucus, the New Hampshire primary and the Nevada caucus. Haley participated in the Nevada primary instead of the caucus, which she lost to the "none of these candidates" option.

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US Veto Sends Wrong Message, Makes Situation in Gaza More Dangerous - China's UN Envoy

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UNITED NATIONS, February 20 (Sputnik) - China's Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun on Tuesday criticized the United States for the use of its veto power on an Algeria-drafted UN Security Council resolution, arguing it undermines consensus and worsens the situation in Gaza.

Earlier in the day, the US vetoed a resolution that called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. Thirteen council members voted in favor, while the UK abstained.

"It is not that the Security Council does not have an overwhelming consensus, but rather it is the exercise of the veto by the United States that has stifled the council consensus. The US veto sends a wrong message, pushing the situation in Gaza into a more dangerous one," Zhang said during a UN Security Council meeting.

China expresses its strong disappointment and dissatisfaction with the vote's outcome, he added.

Supporting Algeria's proposed UNSC resolution for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza could have risked sensitive hostage negotiations between Hamas and Israel, US National Security Communications adviser John Kirby said.

The United States vetoing another resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza has demonstrated that it does not want peace in the Middle East and is only demanding at any cost that their closest Middle East ally be shielded, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said.

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US 'Not Aware' if Israel Completed Civilian Evacuation Plan in Rafah – White House

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) – White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said Tuesday that he was not aware if Israel had completed a plan for safely evacuating the more than one million Palestinian civilians in Rafah in advance of its ground invasion of the southernmost city of Gaza.

"I'm certainly am not aware that any plan has been completed and or presented to Prime Minister Netanyahu," Kirby said at a press briefing.

He reiterated that the US does "not support operations in Rafah under the current circumstances without a credible plan to deal with the safety and security of the people there."

Kirby added that White House Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk would be visiting Israel on Friday to work on hostage negotiations and would likely discuss Israel's plans for Rafah too.

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US Says Supporting UN Gaza Ceasefire Resolution Could Risk Hostage Negotiations – NSC

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WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) – US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said Tuesday that supporting Algeria's proposed UNSC resolution for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza could have risked sensitive hostage negotiations.

"To vote for this resolution today could very well put those negotiations at risk," Kirby said at a press briefing.

He reiterated US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield's statement that voting to support the resolution would be "wishful and irresponsible."

The US vetoed a ceasefire resolution for the third time on Tuesday. Thirteen of the fifteen UNSC council members voted in favor of Algeria's draft, while the UK abstained.

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US Says Zelensky Made 'Wise Decision' to Withdraw Troops From Avdiivka – NSC

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) – US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said Tuesday that Ukrainian President Zelenskyy made a "wise decision" to withdraw his troops from the town of Avdiivka, which was fully captured by Russia over the weekend.

"It was a wise decision by President Zelensky to withdraw so his troops didn't get encircled, so that he could preserve them and the precious resources that they have," Kirby said at a press briefing.

He reiterated that passing the supplemental funding bill was essential for the US to support Ukraine, blaming the Avdiivka withdrawal on "congressional action."

Kirby warned that if Ukraine did not receive more ammunition, it could have a "larger effect" on fighting in the east and the amount of territory Russia would control.

Earlier on Tuesday, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said that the losses of the Ukrainian Armed Forces near Avdiivka over the past two days amounted to 2,400 soldiers. The Armed Forces of Ukraine also left many wounded soldiers, weapons, and mined areas when leaving Avdiivka, Shoigu added.

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Russian Citizen Pleads Guilty to Selling Stolen Login Info Online - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - A 27-year-old Russian national pleaded guilty in a US court to selling stolen financial information and login credentials through an online marketplace, the US Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"Georgy Kavzharadze, 27, pleaded guilty today to being a prolific vendor of stolen financial information, login credentials, and other personally identifying information (PII) on a criminal internet marketplace called Slilpp," the Justice Department said in a statement.

Kavzharadze pleaded guilty to charges including conspiracy to commit bank fraud and wire

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fraud, the statement said. Kavzharadze is scheduled for sentencing on July 19, the statement added.

Kavzharadze, who used the moniker “TeRorPP” online, listed more than 626,100 login credentials on Slilpp and sold more than 297,300 of them, the statement said. The credentials were connected to $1.2 million in fraudulent transactions and attempted transactions, the statement said.

The FBI coordinated with international law enforcement partners to seize Slilpp’s infrastructure and domain names in June 2021. Slilpp’s database included information for accounts used to buy and sell login credentials through the platform, the statement said.

The United States charged Kavzharadze in August 2021, following which point he was extradited to the US, the statement said.

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US Veto of UN Resolution on Gaza Shows It Does Not Want Peace in Middle East - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, February 20 (Sputnik) - The United States by vetoing another resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza has demonstrated that it does not want peace in the Middle East and is only pursuing its own geopolitical interests, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday.

“The real goal of Washington is not to achieve peace in the Middle East, not to protect civilians, but rather to advance their geopolitical agenda, demanding at any cost that their closest Middle East ally to be shielded,” Nebenzia told the Security Council ahead of a vote on the resolution.

The United States on Friday used its veto power for the third time since October 7 to block a ceasefire resolution on the Israel-Hamas conflict. The resolution, proposed by Algeria, called for "an immediate humanitarian ceasefire that must be respected by all parties."

Nebenzia called the Algerian-drafted resolution "robust" and "balanced."

The draft also urged all parties to the conflict to "comply with their obligations under international law," in particular toward all civilians and hostages. It also demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has called on the parties to stop hostilities. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the settlement of the Middle East crisis is possible only on the basis of the “two-state” formula approved by the UN Security Council, which provides for the creation of an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with its capital in East Jerusalem.

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State Dept. Says 'No Comment' on Reports About New Version of ATACMS Missiles for Ukraine

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WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) – US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasian Affairs Yuri Kim on Tuesday said she had “no comment” to media reports that the Biden administration is mulling supplying Ukraine with a new version of the ATACMS long-range missile.

“No comment,” Kim said during a press briefing when asked to comment on media reports.

On Monday, NBC News reported that the Biden administration is working to provide Kiev with a new version of the ATACMS ballistic missile with an even longer range than before.

The White House started supplying Ukraine with ATACMS missiles with a range of up to 165 kilometers (102 miles) in mid-October. Russian President Vladimir Putin called the US's decision "another mistake." In early December, The Washington Post reported that neither ATACMS nor cluster munitions supplied alongside had a significant impact on the Ukraine conflict.

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US to Continue Sanctioning Belarus for Supporting Russia in Ukraine Conflict– Official

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) – The United States will continue imposing sanctions on Belarus for supporting Russia in the ongoing conflict with Ukraine, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Eastern Europe and Policy and Regional Affairs Christopher W. Smith said on Tuesday.

“The United States has already imposed sanctions against the [Belarusian President Alexander] Lukashenko regime, not only for its attacks on democracy and human rights at home but also for its support for Russia's war on Ukraine. We will continue to do so in a measure and measures that are commensurate and appropriate, and we will continue to do so with our allies and partners including the European Union,” Smith said during a press briefing.

In December, the United States imposed sanctions on 11 entities and eight people in Belarus believed to be linked with Lukashenko and their alleged suppression of Belarusian democratic civil society and support for Russia.

Western countries have stepped up their military and financial assistance to Ukraine and rolled out several sanctions packages against Russia and Belarus after Moscow launched its military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. Moscow has condemned foreign military supplies to Kiev.

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US to Announce Sanctions Against Russia in Response to Navalny Death - Kirby

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - The United States will unveil a major sanctions package against Russia on Friday in response to the death of Alexei Navalny, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"We will be announcing a major sanctions package on Friday of this week to hold Russia

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accountable for what happened to Navalny," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Navalny died last Friday at an Arctic prison colony where he was serving a 19-year-term on fraud and extremism charges. He felt unwell after a walk and almost immediately lost consciousness, the prison authorities said. All necessary resuscitation measures were carried out, but to no avail, with medics pronouncing him dead, the authorities said. The causes of the death are being established.

The immediate reaction of Western leaders to Navalny's death is "self-exposing," as they have made their conclusions before a forensic examination is completed, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

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'Gaps Remain' in Hostage Deal Between Israel, Hamas; Key Elements Are 'On The Table'-Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 20 (Sputnik) - The hostage deal between Israel and Hamas has some elements missing but the main points are included and would help bring sustainable peace, American Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Tuesday.

"…though gaps remain, the key elements are on the table so that if an arrangement [deal on hostage between Israel and Hamas] is reached, it would help create the conditions for sustainable cessation of hostilities which I know all of us would like to see," Thomas-Greenfield said in the UN Security Council Chamber during a meeting on Palestine.

It would help to create a sustainable cessation of hostilities and we want it to have it as soon as possible, she added.

"I understand the desire of the Council to act urgently," she followed. "…But it cannot come at the expense of undermining the only, and let me repeat, the only path available toward a longer durable peace."

Earlier today, the United States vetoed an Algeria-proposed draft resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza.

The draft resolution demanded "an immediate humanitarian ceasefire that must be respected by all parties."

The document also urged that "all parties to the conflict comply with their obligations under international law," in particular toward all civilians and hostages. It also demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

The Russian Foreign Ministry called on the parties to stop hostilities. According to the position of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the settlement of the Middle East crisis is possible only on the basis of the "two-state" formula approved by the UN Security Council, which provides for the creation of an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with its capital in East Jerusalem.

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US Hopes Turkey Continues to Coordinate With NATO Allies on Ukraine Conflict - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will continue to coordinate with other NATO allies on matters related to the conflict in Ukraine, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasian Affairs Yuri Kim said on Tuesday.

"We hope that [Erdogan] will continue to coordinate closely with us, as NATO allies address this historic threat to all allies," Kim said.

The US welcomes Erdogan's efforts to address problems arising from the conflict, as well as the conflict itself, Kim said. Erdogan has a "special place in his heart" from the Crimean Tatar community, Kim added.

The US appreciates Erdogan's personal involvement in starting the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which is now "defunct," Kim said.

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UPDATE- Justice Dept. Unseals Indictment Against Russian Nationals for Lockbit Ransomware Attacks

(Update: adds para 6 to mention sanctions)

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) – The US Justice Department unsealed an indictment on Tuesday that charged two Russian nationals with attacking numerous individuals and businesses in the US with Lockbit ransomware, according to a release.

"The Justice Department also unsealed an indictment obtained in the District of New Jersey charging Russian nationals Artur Sungatov and Ivan Kondratyev, also known as Bassterlord, with deploying LockBit against numerous victims throughout the United States, including businesses nationwide in the manufacturing and other industries, as well as victims around the world in the semiconductor and other industries," the release stated.

It added that three additional criminal counts against Kondratyev were unsealed in the Northern District of California related to his Sodinokibi/Revil ransomware attack on a corporation located in California in 2020.

According to the New Jersey indictment, from at least as early as January 2021, Sungatov allegedly deployed LockBit ransomware against corporations and funded additional LockBit attacks against other victims. He allegedly deployed LockBit ransomware against manufacturing, logistics, insurance, and other companies in Minnesota, Indiana, Puerto Rico, Wisconsin, Florida, and New Mexico.

As early as August 2021, Kondratyev similarly began to allegedly deploy LockBit against multiple victims. Operating under the online alias "Bassterlord," he allegedly deployed LockBit

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against municipal and private targets in Oregon, Puerto Rico, and New York and targets in Singapore, Taiwan, and Lebanon.

The US Treasury also announced Tuesday that it is sanctioning both men.

LockBit is one of the most active ransomware groups in the world. It has targeted over 2,000 victims, received more than $120 million in ransom payments, and made ransom demands totaling hundreds of millions of dollars.

The Justice Department also announced that in cooperation with the FBI, the UK's National Crime Agency's cyber division, and other international law enforcement agencies, it had disrupted Lockbit's operations by seizing numerous public websites that connect to the organization's infrastructure and control of servers used by LockBit administrators. The agencies have also developed decryption capabilities that may enable victims to restore systems encrypted by the LockBit ransomware.

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Brazil Ex-Ambassador to US Warns of Chinese Influence Amid US Vacuum

WASHINGTON, February 20 – Former Brazilian Ambassador to the US Rubens Barbosa said on Tuesday that China will increase its presence in Brazil if the US and Brazil do not develop common interests.

"In the political-economic dialogue that exists between Brazil and the United States, they should identify all areas of common interest but this has not been done. And I don't think it's being done now. In the future, if this is not done, I am afraid that China will increase its presence here in the region," Barbosa said at a Wilson Center event.

He said that US interest in Brazil had declined in the last 20 years, and Brazil was not a priority for the US government or companies. This in turn had opened up space for China to expand its influence in the region.

He said that the US and Brazil struggled to find common points of interest, and although they wanted to export to each other, they functioned unilaterally.

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Ukrainian Reconstruction Efforts Will Cost Hundreds of Billions of Dollars -US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) - It will cost hundreds of billions of dollars to rebuild Ukraine after the conclusion of its conflict with Russia, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasian Affairs Yuri Kim said on Tuesday.

"It's going to take billions [of dollars]. Do I have a more specific number for you than that? It's hard to say at this moment. We do know it will go into the hundreds of billions," Kim said during a press conference.

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The United States is attempting to support Ukraine's security situation, develop attractive investment conditions and prepare reconstruction efforts, Kim said.

The Ukrainian economy shows signs of resilience, Kim said. Ukrainian grain and commodity exports are approaching pre-war levels, Kim said.

The US is also exploring ways to ensure Russia is not able to "conduct business as usual," such as through imposing sanctions and continuing to freeze Russian assets, Kim said.

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Brazil Ex-Ambassador to US Says Blinken's Visit Will Underscore Limited Interest

WASHINGTON, February 20 – Former Brazilian Ambassador to the US Rubens Barbosa lamented on Tuesday that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's upcoming visit to the Brazil for the G20 foreign ministers' summit will underscore America's limited interests in the country.

"I think that we have many things to discuss in our relationship, but I think that at the moment, as Secretary of State Blinken's visit to Brazil will show, the interests are very limited," Barbosa said at a Wilson Center event.

He said that the US priorities did not include Brazil or broader Latin America and the US was only concerned about a few issues in the region: immigration, drugs, violence and democracy.

Barbosa argued that the Brazil was a "Western country" and the US should exploit its untapped economic potential and encourage US trade and investment.

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US Vetoes Algeria's UNSC Resolution Demanding Immediate Gaza Ceasefire - Correspondent

UNITED NATIONS, February 20 (Sputnik) - The United States on Tuesday vetoed an Algeria-drafted UN Security Council resolution that was calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

Thirteen members of the UN Security Council voted in favor, with the United Kingdom abstaining.

The draft resolution demanded "an immediate humanitarian ceasefire that must be respected by all parties."

The document also urged that "all parties to the conflict comply with their obligations under international law," in particular toward all civilians and hostages. It also demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

In addition, it reiterated the call for "the full, rapid, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access into and throughout the entire Gaza Strip."

The US mission to the UN said on Monday it did not think the draft resolution was "an effective

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mechanism."

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UPDATE - Canada Sanctions Four Guatemalans for 'Undermining Democracy' - Ministry

(Adds details in para 4)
WASHINGTON, February 20 (Sputnik) – Canada has sanctioned four Guatemalan individuals for alleged corruption and obstructing democracy, the Canadian foreign ministry said on Tuesday.
"The sanctioned individuals have worked relentlessly to undermine democracy and prevent a peaceful transition of power. These sanctions will serve to deter obstructionist actions by corrupt public officials and to support the democratically elected Arévalo government," Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said in a statement.
GAC also accused the designated individuals of corruption and "gross" human rights violations.
The sanctions target Attorney General and head of the Public Ministry Maria Consuelo Porras Argueta, Prosecutor Cinthia Edelmira Monterroso, Special Prosecutor Against Impunity at the Public Ministry Jose Rafael Curruchiche Cucul, and Judge Jimi Rodolfo Bremer Ramirez.
In August, Guatemala's Supreme Electoral Tribunal declared Bernardo Arevalo the winner of the presidential election with 60% of the vote. However, some lawmakers and officials refused to accept the results of the election. An investigation was subsequently opened into alleged irregularities in the first round of voting.
In December, the Guatemalan Prosecutor's Office announced that the election results were invalid due to alleged administrative violations by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal. Arevalo said he considered the move an attempted coup.
Arevalo finally took the oath of office in mid-January in a ceremony marred by hours of procedural delays as the outgoing Congress dragged its feet on the qualification commission's work instead of holding a plenary session and swearing in the newly elected lawmakers, who in turn were to swear in the president.

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