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US Conducts Attacks Against Houthi UAVs. Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – US forces conducted strikes against seven drones and two mobile anti-ship cruise missiles launched by Yemen's Houthis in the Red Sea over the last 24 hours, US Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a statement on Friday.

"On Feb. 22, at approximately 5 p.m. (Sanaa time), US Central Command (CENTCOM) forces conducted self-defense strikes against four Iranian-backed Houthi unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) and two mobile anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM) that were prepared to launch from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen towards the Red Sea,' CENTCOM said in a statement.

Separately on Friday, February 23, the US military shot down three Houthi one-way attack UAVs near several commercial ships operating in the Red Sea, CENTCOM said.

"There was no damage to any ships," the statement said.

CENTCOM took the actions because it determined that there was "an imminent threat" to merchant vessels and to the US Navy ships in the region, it added.

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US Senator Calls to 'Break Google Up' Ahead of 2024 Presidential Election

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Senator JD Vance said on Friday that the government should break up tech company Google ahead of the 2024 presidential election, due to concerns about its informational biases.

"Long overdue, but it's time to break Google up. This matters far more than any other election integrity issue," Vance said in a statement to social media platform X.

Google maintains a "monopolistic" control of information in the United States as an "explicitly progressive" tech company, Vance said.

Millions of undecided US voters will turn to Google to ask questions and receive results biased towards Democrats, Vance said. Google's informational control is a threat to democracy, Vance said.

On Thursday, Google suspended the ability of its Gemini artificial intelligence (AI) model to generate images of people, after the AI produced historically inaccurate depictions, such as black vikings and Asian renditions of Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin.

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US Targets Network of Russian Businessman Komarov in New Sanctions Package - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is targeting a network of entities linked to Russian businessman Andrey Ilyich Komarov as part of its new sanctions package to mark the two-year anniversary of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the US State Department said on Friday.

"Ministry of Trade and Industry officials within the Government of the Russian Federation have planned to use Andrey Komarov as a front man to acquire companies for Rostec. Komarov is being designated… for operating or having operated in the construction sector of the Russian Federation economy," the State Department said in a statement on the sanctions package.

The US is sanctioning two of Komarov's businesses, limited liability companies September and Oktyabr, the statement said.

The US is also sanctioning a "wide range" of other entities purportedly tied to Komarov's corporate network, the statement said. The sanctions target entities in the manufacturing, financial services, accounting, mining and consulting sectors of the Russian economy, according to the statement.

The sanctions are part of a broader package of anti-Russia sanctions imposed to mark the two-years anniversary of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, as well as the death of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny, whose death US officials have pinned on the Kremlin.

Western countries have no information about the circumstances of Navalny's death, Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev said in response to the accusations.

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Canada Imposes Russia-Related Sanctions on 10 Individuals, 153 Entities - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – Canada on Friday announced a new batch of Russia-related sanctions targeting 10 individuals and 153 entities.

"The Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced that Canada is imposing additional sanctions on 10 individuals and 153 entities under the Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations," Global Affairs Canada said in a separate statement.

Among those sanctioned, Russian President Vladimir Putin's aide Igor Levitin, as well as businessmen Sergei and Nikolai Sarkisov.

The sanctions also target Russian Helicopter Systems, defense corporation Almaz-Antey, Ilyushin Aviation Complex, Reshetnev Information Satellite Systems, Voentorg and Voentorg-Retail. The list also includes insurance firms RESO-Garantia and AlfaStrakhovanie.

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US DPRK Envoy Meets With Chinese Counterpart to Discuss Peace, Stability - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Senior Official for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) Jung Pak met with Chinese Special Representative on Korean Peninsula Affairs Liu Xiamoing to discuss the need for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, the US State Department said on Friday.

"The two sides discussed the need to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and the importance of returning to dialogue and diplomacy," the State Department said in a statement.

Pak discussed with Liu the DPRK's "destabilizing and escalatory" behavior, as well as its deepening military cooperation with Russia, the statement said.

Pak stressed the need for all UN member states to comply with obligations to implement sanctions on the DPRK, the statement said.

Pak and Liu's meeting follows a meeting between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference earlier this month, the statement said. Blinken and Yi affirmed the importance of maintaining communications on DPRK-related issues at all levels of government, the statement said.

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US Imposes New Sanctions on Rosatom Subsidiaries, Targets Arctic Development - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US has designated Rosatom subsidiaries involved in Arctic development and Russia's nuclear sector as part of a package of sanctions against hundreds of people and entities, the State Department said in a statement on Friday.

"This is the sixth Russia sanctions action that includes designations of State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom (Rosatom) subsidiaries. These targets include Rosatom entities 7 supporting Russia's development of the Arctic region, future business development, and an enterprise of Russia's nuclear weapons complex," the statement said.

The targets include Joint Stock Company Rusatom Arctic, Innovation Hub Limited Liability Company (Innohub), and Federal State Unitary Enterprise Alexandrov Research Institute of Technology, all subsidiaries of Rosatom involved in Arctic development, business acceleration and nuclear technology.

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Biden's Reliance on Notecards Raises Concerns Among Democrat Donors – Reports

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WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden's reliance on notecards he uses for answers during closed-doors campaign events has caused growing concerns among his donors, Axios reported on Friday, citing sources familiar with the matter.

Some donors are wondering if Biden, age 81, will be able to withstand the tough conditions of the presidential campaign, according to the report.

Donors are also worried that Biden will face difficulties if he engages in direct debates with his rival, Donald Trump, who is four years younger, the report said.

However, Biden's advisers insisted that he only uses notecards for very detailed and technical questions. They also said that he frequently does spontaneous Q&A sessions, according to the report.

In many cases, Bided uses notecards because his detail-oriented staff want to ensure that he gives comprehensive answers and that his fundraisers are successful, the report added.

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US Targets 26 Entities, Individuals in 11 States For Russia Sanction Evasion - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The United States designated 26 entities and individuals in 11 countries, including China, Serbia, the United Arab Emirates and Liechtenstein for their alleged efforts to evade US sanctions on Russia, the US Department of the Treasury said in a press releases on Friday.

"In all, OFAC [Office of Foreign Assets Control] today targeted 26 third-country entities and individuals in 11 countries, including the People's Republic of China, Serbia, the United Arab Emirates, and Liechtenstein," the statement said.

Russia-based PJSC Transcontainer and Liechtenstein-based precious metals investment firm Rheingold Edelmetall AG were among the targets, along with Russia-based Limited Liability Company Pumori Northwest, Russia-based Aktsionernoe Obshchestvo Avia Fed Service and UAE-based Linker FZE.

Six entities in China were also designated: Jiangxi Liansheng Technology Co., Ltd; Guangzhou Ausay Technology Co., Limited; Guangzhou Hesen Import and Export Co., Ltd; Yilufa Electronics Limited; Shenzhen Biguang Trading Co., Ltd and New Idea Guangzhou Technology Co., Ltd

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US Sanctions Russia's Natural Gas Producer Novatek, Transportation Company TransContainer

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The United States targets Russia's natural gas producer and exporter Novatek Murmansk and container transportation company

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TransContainer as part of the largest sanctions package to date in response to the death of Alexei Navalny and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the US Department of the Treasury said on Friday.

The sanctions also target the Russian state exploration company Rosgeologia, the department said in a press release.

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US Sanctions Mechel, Central Scientific Research Automobile, Automotive Engines Institute

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The United States has imposed sanctions on Russia's mining company Mechel, Central Scientific Research Automobile and Automotive Engines Institute as part of a new package targeting hundreds of people and entities, the US Department of the Treasury said in a press release on Friday.

"Mechel is Russia's top producer of specialty steels and manufactures rolled products from various types of steels. A Mechel subsidiary has provided steel that is used in Russia's KA-52 attack helicopter," the release said.

The US also sanctioned the Central Scientific Research Automobile and Automotive Engines Institute, the Treasury said.

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US Sanctions Russia-Belarus Union State Secretary Mezentsev, Chechen Minister Dudaev

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The United States imposed sanctions on State Secretary of the Russia-Belarus Union State Dmitry Mezentsev and Minister for National Policy of the Chechen Republic Akhmed Dudaev, the US Department of the Treasury said on Friday.

The sanctions also target Russian Ambassador to Belarus Boris Gryzlov.

The sanctions are part of the largest designations package to date on more than 500 companies and persons in Russia and other countries in response to the death of Alexei Navalny and the conflict in Ukraine.

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Elon Musk Says Gmail Alternative Called XMail 'Coming'

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk revealed on his social media platform X that he will soon launch a new product called "XMail" as an alternative

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to the widely used Gmail service.
"It's coming," Musk said late Thursday when asked whether he planned to launch an XMail service.
Musk did not reveal any details about when the service might be launched.
His comments came in response to a post from a senior member of X's Security Engineering program, Nate McGrady, who had asked, "When we making Xmail?"
Musk took over X, formerly known as Twitter, in 2022 and has introduced a wide array of changes to the social media platform.
Gmail currently has more than 1.8 billion active users worldwide, accounting for about 30% of the global market share for email clients, according to Forbes.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Russia's Car Manufacturer Aurus, Homebuilder PIK – Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The United States imposed sanctions on Russia's luxury car manufacturer Aurus and the homebuilding and construction giant company PIK as part of a package targeting hundreds of people and entities, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Friday.
The sanctions are part of the largest designations package to date on more than 500 companies and persons in Russia and other countries in response to the death of Alexei Navalny and the conflict in Ukraine.

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US Treasury Dept Unveils New Russia Sanctions Targeting Hundreds of People, Businesses

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing sanctions on over 500 targets in Russia and other countries in response to Alexei Navalny's death and the Ukraine crisis, marking the largest batch of designations since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the Treasury Department said in a press release on Friday.
"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control is sanctioning almost 300 individuals and entities. Together with actions from the US Department of State, this is the largest number of sanctions imposed since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. State is designating three Government of Russia officials in connection with Navalny's death; together, Treasury and State are sanctioning over 500 targets," the release said.
The Commerce Department earlier on Friday imposed export restrictions on 93 entities in Russia, China, India, Kyrgyzstan, South Korea, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates as part of the sanctions package against Russia.

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Canada Pledges $91.4Mln to Improve Haiti's Security, Rule of Law - Foreign Ministry

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Canada will provide C$123 million ($91.4 million) in assistance to improve Haiti's security and rule of law, the foreign ministry said.

The announcement was made on Thursday by Foreign Minister Melanie Joly at the G20 foreign ministers meeting in Rio de Janeiro.

"At the event, Minister Joly announced that Canada will allocate $123 million in funding to support Haiti, including $80.5 million to support the deployment of the Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission that is being led by Kenya, which aims to support the efforts of the Haitian National Police (HNP) to improve security conditions in Haiti for the civilian population," Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said in a statement.

Among the recipients of the funds are UN Office for Project Support (UNOPS), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The funds will be used to procure personal protective equipment, vehicles, as well as logistics and communications equipment for the Haitian National Police; address gang-related sexual and gender-based violence; support fight against corruption and impunity; and strengthen Haiti's border management capacities.

Haiti has long been mired in a socio-economic and political crisis that escalated after the assassination of then-President Jovenel Moise on July 7, 2021. The country has faced an unprecedented increase in the activities of criminal groups, with the humanitarian situation further deteriorating due to natural disasters, such as severe floods, torrential rains and earthquakes.

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US Imposes Export Restrictions on 93 Entities as Part of Russia Sanctions Package - Notice

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States on Friday imposed export restrictions on 93 entities in Russia, China, India, Kyrgyzstan, South Korea, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates as part of a sanctions package against Russia, the Commerce Department announced in a notice in the Federal Register.

The targeted entities include 63 businesses in Russia, eight in China and 16 in Turkey, the notice said.

"These entities have been determined by the US Government to be acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States," the notice said.

President Joe Biden earlier on Friday said the US would impose export restrictions on about

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100 entities and impose about 500 sanctions on Russia.

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US Senate Majority Leader Arrives in Ukraine in Push for Johnson to Advance Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer arrived in Ukraine on Friday, becoming the highest-ranking congressional leader to visit the country since then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi's trip in the first months of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Schumer is leading a Congressional delegation that also includes senators Jack Reed, Michael Bennet, Richard Blumenthal and Maggie Hassan. The lawmakers are set to meet with Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The visit coincides with the two-year anniversary of Russia's special military operation.

"We are here to show the Ukrainian people that America stands with them and will continue fighting to get the funding they so desperately need and deserve. We will not stop fighting until we gain the aid," Schumer said in a statement.

The visit comes after the US Senate passed a $95 billion supplemental funding bill with $60 billion in additional Ukraine aid and $14.1 billion in security assistance for Israel, but no border security measures. House Speaker Mike Johnson said that the lower chamber has no plans to consider the current legislation after Senate failed to propose "adequate" border security provisions.

"When we return from Ukraine: We will make clear to Speaker Johnson — and others in Congress who are obstructing military & economic support — exactly what is at stake here in Ukraine, for the rest of Europe, for the free world[.] Congress must pass the Senate's national security bill," Schumer wrote on X.

Schumer also said in the statement that during the visit the delegation will "learn in granular detail about the armaments Ukraine so vitally needs and the consequences of the failure to deliver them — the specific advantages Russia would gain if the arms are not delivered, and the advantages Ukraine would gain if the arms were delivered."

Russia has consistently warned against the continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict. Moscow also sees the Ukraine conflict as a hybrid war led by the United States.

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Biden Urges to Pass Bipartisan National Security Supplemental Bill 'Before It Is Too Late'

MOSCOW, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden urges the House of Representatives to pass the bipartisan national security supplemental bill "before it is too late," the White House said on Friday.

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"Two years into this war, the people of Ukraine continue to fight with tremendous courage. But they are running out of ammunition. Ukraine needs more supplies from the United States to hold the line against Russia's relentless attacks ... That's why the House of Representatives must pass the bipartisan national security supplemental bill, before it's too late," the statement said.
The bill will provide financial assistance to Ukraine, as well as strengthen the defense base of the United States, Biden said.
"This bill provides urgent funding for Ukraine. It also invests in America's own defense industrial base. It passed overwhelmingly in the Senate, and there is no question that, if the Speaker called a vote, it would pass quickly in the House," the statement read.

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Biden Announces Over 500 Sanctions Against Russia, Export Restrictions for 100 Entities

MOSCOW, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has announced the introduction of over 500 new sanctions against Russia, as well as export restrictions on about 100 legal entities, the White House said on Friday.
"Today, I am announcing more than 500 new sanctions against Russia for its ongoing war of conquest on Ukraine and for the death of Aleksey Navalny [late Russian opposition figure] ... These sanctions will target individuals connected to Navalny's imprisonment as well as Russia's financial sector, defense industrial base, procurement networks and sanctions evaders across multiple continents," the statement said.
The United States will also target Russia's energy revenues, the statement said.
"We are also imposing new export restrictions on nearly 100 entities for providing backdoor support for Russia's war machine. We are taking action to further reduce Russia's energy revenue," the document read.

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Zelenskyy Says He Has Enough Support to Win Presidential Election If Vote Held Now

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said that he has enough support to be reelected as president if a vote was held now.
"Currently, I do have the largest support in this society, so if we'll have this election right now, then people will elect me, so it's not that I'm trying to stay in power because I will win the elections if the elections would be held now," Zelenskyy told Fox News.
Zelenskyy added that he did not cancel the presidential elections this spring but instead that it was required by Ukrainian law to delay them because the country is currently in conflict with Russia. The only way to hold elections now is to change the law, he added. The Ukrainian leader also said it is "nonsense" that he is avoiding peace negotiations as a means to hold on to

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power in the country.
A presidential election was supposed to take place in Ukraine in the spring of 2024 in accordance with the country's legislation. However, the Ukrainian constitution prohibits holding elections under martial law, which has been in effect in the country since the beginning of Russia's military operation. In February, the Ukrainian parliament approved the extension of martial law in the country for another 90 days.

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Zelenskyy Says He Has Enough Support to Win Presidential Election If Vote Held Now

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in a Fox News interview on Thursday that he has enough support to be reelected as president if a vote was held now.
"Currently, I do have the largest support in this society, so if we'll have this election right now, then people will elect me, so it's not that I'm trying to stay in power because I will win the elections if the elections would be held now," Zelenskyy said during the interview.
Zelenskyy added that he did not cancel the presidential elections this spring but instead that it was required by Ukrainian law to delay them because the country is currently in conflict with Russia. The only way to hold elections now is to change the law, he added. The Ukrainian leader also said it is "nonsense" that he is avoiding peace negotiations as a means to hold on to power in the country.
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Zelenskyy Says Does Not Want to Repeat Minsk Agreements, Admits Russia Has Air Superiority

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in a Fox News interview on Thursday that he does not want a repeat of the Minsk agreements.
"It's not only about territories, it's about our security. My signal is … don't want to repeat Minsk agreement," he said. "No new frozen conflicts, we don't believe in it."
In addition, Zelenskyy admitted that Russia has air superiority.
"It's not a stalemate. Indeed, it's very complicated in the east, there is a lack of certain weapons, they [Russia] do have air superiority, superiority in terms of manpower. This is the

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fact," Zelenskyy said in the interview.

The south of Ukraine will be very important to defend, Zelenskyy said, adding that they will have some "surprises" for Russia in the Black Sea without getting into details.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said earlier this month that the United States must stop supplying weapons to Ukraine if it wishes to resolve the conflict.

US Congress is in a gridlock on approving new funding for Ukraine as it gets tangled up with efforts to address the US southern border crisis and efforts to provide a full government spending budget before short-term spending legislation expires in early March.

The Minsk Agreements were a complex series of measures negotiated by Russia, France, Germany and Ukraine — a quartet known as Normandy format — in 2014-2015 in a bid to put an end to the armed conflict between the Kiev authorities and the breakaway eastern region of Donbas. Moscow repeatedly said that Kiev was not fulfilling the deal, including by not granting autonomy to the predominantly Russian-speaking Donbas.

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Trump Asking Supporters For Help in Selecting His Next Vice President - Correspondent

CHARLESTON, February 23 (Sputnik)- Former President Donald Trump has been sending his supporters questionnaires asking them whom they would like to see as his next Vice President.

Trump's fundraising committee titled "Make America Great Again" has been sending website links to polls via messages. Once you get to the website, it urges online visitors to advise Trump in selecting his deputy - not only to give an exact name but also to describe some characteristics.

The questionnaire asks about top issues people are concerned about - be it securing the border, eliminating the deep state, defending gun rights, or defeating communism. Other questions look at whether the candidate should be a person of faith or whether it should be a military veteran.

On Tuesday, Trump mentioned South Carolina Senator Tim Scott, entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis as well as former Hawaii Representative Tulsi Gabbard as potential candidates to be on his vice presidential shortlist.

Trump is the likely victor in South Carolina's primaries of February 24. According to one of the polls, led by Suffolk University released on Tuesday, found out that 63% will probably vote for Trump, while only 35% will vote for his main republican opponent, Nikki Haley.

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Nikki Haley Says White House 'Needs Accountant' Amid National Debt Concerns

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WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley during a rally said that the White House requires the expertise of an accountant to address the nation's $34 trillion national debt.

"We need an accountant in the White House," Haley said on Thursday.

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

Last month, US Secretary of Treasury Janet Yellen said that the $34 trillion US national debt is a "scary number" but manageable because the United States has a "huge" economy.

International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva recently said the United States can show more discipline concerning public spending as the strength of the US dollar and post-pandemic excesses in government expenditures are feeding into global inflation.

US public spending as of the third quarter of 2023 stood at $10 trillion, or 36% of gross domestic product, according to the US government's Bureau of Economic Analysis.

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Bukele Says Hidden US Government Funding Mechanism 'Bubble' Set to Burst

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States' hidden government funding mechanism is a financial bubble on track to burst, Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele said during remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference.

"The real problem is not the high taxes themselves, but the fact that they are not even really funding the government," Bukele said on Thursday. "Basically, you finance the government by printing money out of thin air… A bubble that will inevitably burst."

The US finances the government through treasury bonds, which are purchased by the Federal Reserve through printing currency, Bukele said. The Federal Reserve in turn backs the printed currency with the treasury bonds themselves, Bukele said.

US citizens pay taxes to uphold the illusion of funding the government through taxpayers, Bukele said.

If most people in the US and the rest of the world became aware of the "farce," confidence in the US dollar would plummet and Western civilization with it, Bukele said.

There is still time for the next US president to make policy and structural changes to prevent the economic bubble from bursting, Bukele said.

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IMF Reaches Staff Level Agreement With Ukraine on Disbursement of About $880 Mln-Statement

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WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Ukrainian authorities have reached a staff-level agreement on a disbursement of about 880 million dollars, the IMF said in a statement.

"The International Monetary Fund (IMF) staff and the Ukrainian authorities have reached staff-level agreement (SLA) on an updated set of economic and financial policies for the third review of the 4-year Extended Fund Facility (EFF) Arrangement. . . This would pave the way for Executive Board consideration, which would enable disbursement of about US$880 million," the IMF said on Thursday.

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US Odysseus Mission Lands on Moon But Signal Weak, Status Uncertain- Intuitive Machines

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Intuitive Machines Odysseus lander touched down on the Moon and sent back a weak signal to Earth after some minutes of initial uncertainty, NASA officials said.

"For the first time in more than half a century the United States has returned to the Moon," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said.

"Odysseus has found its new home, " mission director Tim Crane said.

The signal from the Odysseus lander was lost for about seven minutes after touchdown and although the signal was then reacquired, it remained very weak, Intuitive Machines flight controllers said.

In addition, the status of the spacecraft and the robotic missions it carried might not be confirmed for many hours.

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Ex-FBI Informant Smirnov Arrested Against Despite Release Order in Biden Case - Filing

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Former FBI informant Alexander Smirnov, who has been charged with providing investigators false information about the Biden family, has been arrested despite a judge's release order, court documents revealed.

Smirnov allegedly lied to investigators about Burisma lobbying Hunter Biden to have his father, who was then serving as vice president, protect the company from problems in exchange for millions of dollars.

"Despite Judge Albregts's prior ruling, denial of the stay request, and Mr. Smirnov's prior release from custody, on the morning of February 22, 2024, Mr. Smirnov was arrested for a second time - on the same charges and based on the same indictment set forth," Smirnov's lawyers stated in court documents.

Smirnov's lawyers said he was arrested while at their offices for a legal consultation.

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The defense team argues that authorities violated Smirnov's constitutional rights.
The situation comes amid an impeachment inquiry by House lawmakers into alleged criminal activity by the Biden family, including foreign influence peddling and bribery.

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Gmail Says 'Here to Stay' After Viral, Fake Message Claiming End of Email Service

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Google's email platform Gmail said that it will continue operations, after a fake message about the end of the service went viral.
"Gmail is here to stay," the service said on Thursday in a statement to social media platform X.
Earlier, a fake email appearing to originate from Gmail claimed that the platform was reaching the end of its service in August 2024.
In September, Google said that Gmail will no longer allow users to display the platform in Basic HTML view starting in January 2024.
The fake image emerged after Google's generative artificial intelligence (AI) model Gemini received criticism for producing historically inaccurate depictions of people. On Thursday, Google suspended Gemini's ability to generate images of people until they release an improved version of the AI model.

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Marine Hydraulics Wins $91Mln Deal to Upgrade Navy Amphibious Landing Dock - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Marine Hydraulics International has received a more than $91 million US Navy contract to modernize the USS Mesa Verde amphibious transport ship, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.
"Marine Hydraulics International [of] Norfolk, Virginia is awarded a ...$91,632,639 ...contract action for the repair, maintenance, and modernization included in USS Mesa Verde (LPD 19) Chief of Naval Operations fiscal 2024 Selected Restricted Availability," the release stated on Thursday.
The contract will cover all labor, supervision, facilities, equipment, production, testing, and quality assurance necessary to upgrade the ship, the Defense Department noted.
Work on the ship will be carried out over the next year and a half in Norfolk, Virginia and is expected to be completed by August 2025, the release said.

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Boeing Wins $405Mln Contract Boost to Keep Upgrading Minuteman III ICBMs - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Boeing has received a more than $405 million contract extension from the US Air Force to continue operating, maintaining and modernizing the now 60-year-old Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) weapons system, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"The Boeing Company [of] Layton Utah has been awarded a $405,366,978 ...modification ...contract for operations, maintenance, and testing in support of the Minuteman III weapons system," the release stated on Thursday.

The modification brings the total cumulative face value of the contract to $559,366,978, the defense Department acknowledged.

Work on the program will be performed at the Little Mountain Test Facility at Ogden in the US state of Utah over the next five years and is expected to be completed by Feb. 28, 2029, the Defense Department said.

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US to Digitalize Ukrainian State Archives for $645k to Preserve Its History – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The United States will spend $645,000 to digitalize the Ukrainian state archives to preserve the country's history and culture for future generations, the US State Department said in a press release.

"[T]he U.S. Department of State announced today a project to protect and digitize collections of the State Archival Services of Ukraine (SAS), thereby ensuring that Ukrainian history, through its archives, will be safeguarded for generations to come," the release said on Thursday. "[T]he $645,000 project is the latest activity supported by ECA [The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs]'s Ukraine Cultural Heritage Response Initiative."

The project will focus on preserving archival records in the Ukrainian language that is central to its national identity and history, according to the release.

The Ukraine Cultural Heritage Response Initiative commands total funding of $10.5 million to support Kiev's programs in the preservation of cultural heritage.

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US Charges Four Foreign Nationals for Allegedly Smuggling Iranian Weapons - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US federal prosecutors charged four foreign nationals in US court for allegedly smuggling Iranian-made weapons in the Arabian Sea that are similar to those used by Houthi rebels in Yemen, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"A criminal complaint was unsealed today charging four foreign nationals after US naval forces

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interdicted a vessel in the Arabian Sea that was transporting suspected Iranian-made advanced conventional weaponry," the release said on Thursday.

The four foreign nationals were apprehended on January 11 after US forces raided a small vessel in the Arabian Sea off the coast of Somalia, the release said, adding that this is the operation where two US Navy SEALs lost their lives after falling into the sea.

The US boarding team allegedly seized what is believed to be "Iranian-made advanced conventional weaponry," such as parts for medium range ballistic missiles and anti-ship cruise missiles, including a warhead and propulsion and guidance components, the release said.

The Justice Department claims that this weaponry is allegedly "consistent" with the weapons used by the Houthi rebel forces in recent attacks on merchant ships and US military ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

The US Navy apprehended fourteen mariners it captured during the raid and brought them aboard a US Navy warship, and on February 11, the United States obtained arrest warrants for four of the 14 mariners, the release said.

The US court indicted Muhammad Pahlawan, Mohammad Mazhar, Ghufran Ullah, and Izhar Muhammad, of whom all had Pakistani identification cards, the release noted. The United States also obtained ten material witness warrants for the other individuals captured.

The defendants and material witnesses were transferred from the US Navy warship to the Eastern District of Virginia, where the four defendants and eight of the ten material witnesses made their initial appearances before a US federal judge in Richmond earlier on Thursday, the release said.

According to the release, Pahlawan faces two charges that include intentionally and unlawfully transporting on board the vessel a warhead, knowing the warhead would be used by the Houthi rebel forces against commercial and naval vessels in the Red Sea and surrounding waters; and providing materially false information to US Coast Guard officers during the boarding of the vessel regarding its crew and cargo. The other three co-defendants were also charged with providing materially false information to US Coast Guard officers, the release added.

The Justice Department said Pahlawan faces a maximum penalty of 25 years in prison for both of his charges, and the other three individuals face up to five years in prison.

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UPDATE - US Stocks Hit Record Highs on AI-Mania, Economic Strength

(adds paragraphs 3-10)

NEW YORK, February 23 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street finished in the positive for a second day in a row on Wednesday, hitting record highs amid buying induced by the hype over artificial intelligence and overall confidence in the US economy.

The S&P 500, an index which tracks the top 500 US companies, closed up 2.2% after Wednesday's 0.1% gain, finishing at 5,089 points. Earlier in the day, it hit an all-time high of 5,095.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which serves as Wall Street's broadest equities indicator by

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following stocks of 30 large US corporations, settled up 1.2% at 39,069 points. The Dow hit a record high of 39,149 during the session.

Analysts said technology stocks were the catalyst to the rally in the S&P and the Dow, amid the chip demand forecast from the boom in AI.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee tech names such as Google, Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Netflix, crossed 16,000 points for the first time. The index closed the day up almost 3% at 16,042, after an all-time peak at 16.062.

The darling of stock bulls, particularly, was Nvidia, a chip-maker that beat Wall Street's targets for its fiscal fourth quarter. The stock added $277 billion in value on Wednesday, in what analysts described as the greatest single-day gain in market history.

Thursday's rally was also inspired by optimism over US economic growth. Federal Reserve Vice Chair Philip Jefferson said earlier in the day that socially motivated consumption — an act described as “keeping up with the Joneses” — is likely to make Americans spend more than forecast by the Fed, despite biting inflation.

"If the economy evolves broadly as expected, it will likely be appropriate to begin dialing back our policy restraint later this year," Jefferson added, referring to planned interest rate cuts by the central bank.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, grew 3.1% in the year to January. The Fed’s long-term target is to bring CPI growth to 2% or lower per annum.

Before the 2020 coronavirus outbreak, CPI rarely crossed 2% a year. In June 2022, the reading, however, hit a four-decade high of more than 9% per annum.

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US Stocks Hit Record Highs on AI-Mania, Economic Strength

NEW YORK, February 23 (Sputnik) - Wall Street finished in the positive for a second day in a row on Wednesday, with stocks hitting record highs amid buying in technology stocks induced by the hype over artificial-intelligence and overall confidence in the US economy.

The S&P 500, an index which tracks the top 500 US companies, closed up 2.2% after Wednesday’s 0.1% gain, finishing at 5,089 points. Earlier in the day, it hit an all-time high of 5,095.

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US Observes Significant Increase in Houthi Attacks on Ships in Past 48-72hrs – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The United States have observed an increase in the number of attacks conducted by Yemen’s Houthis in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden over the last three days, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

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Singh made the remarks when asked about the number of US commercial and military vessels damaged or rendered inoperable by Houthi attacks, and whether the Yemeni movement had ramped up its attacks.

"Yes, we've certainly seen in the past 48-72 hours an increase in attacks from the Houthis, more consistency," Singh said during a press briefing, while declining to give an exact number of the affected US ships.

Singh pointed out that although the Houthis have carried successful attacks on ships navigating through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, they have also affected their own coasts and population.

By sinking the MV Rubymar, which was carrying about 22 metric tons of fertilizer, off the coast of Yemen, the Houthis have created an "environmental hazard" in their own backyard as the ship's oil leaks into the sea, Singh said.

Moreover, a US-owned grain carrier which was recently damaged in the Gulf of Aden was carrying grain for the people of Yemen, Singh said.

"They [Houthis] are saying that they're conducting these attacks against ships that are connected to Israel. These are ships that are literally bringing goods, services, aid to their own people," Singh said.

The Houthi movement, which controls large parts of northern and western Yemen, vowed in November 2023 to attack any ships associated with Israel until it halts military actions in the Gaza Strip. This led US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to announce the creation of a multinational operation to secure navigation in the Red Sea. US and UK forces later launched major strikes against Houthi positions in a bid to degrade the rebels' ability to target commercial vessels.

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Future PDA Package to Address Ukraine Top Priorities in Artillery, Air Defense – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The US intends to address Ukraine's air-defense and artillery ammunition necessities in the next Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA) once Congress approves the $95 billion supplemental funding bill, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

Last week, the US Senate passed a $95 billion supplemental funding bill with Ukraine and Israel aid, but no border security measures. It came after House Republicans rejected border provisions that a bipartisan Senate group had proposed as inadequate. House Speaker Mike Johnson said that the lower chamber has no plans to consider the current legislation.

A bipartisan group of US House lawmakers has since unveiled a $66.32 billion spending bill with aid for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan, as well as border security measures to address the migrant influx.

"In terms of weapons that we're considering sending, we know that Ukraine's top priorities are still air defense, artillery ammunition, so whatever package comes together, whatever the next PDA, you're going to see something that looks like what meets their priorities and that's

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something that was discussed at the UDCG [Ukraine Defense Contact Group]," Singh said during a press briefing.

The US will make sure that the Ukrainian military gets everything it urgently requires on the battlefield, Singh said. Nothing has been taken off the table, she added when questioned about the possibility of supplying Ukraine with ATACMS.

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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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) –

WESTERN SANCTIONS ON RUSSIA

* The US Justice Department charged Russia's VTB Bank CEO Andrey Kostin and two US-based associates with violations of US sanctions, Reuters reported on Thursday citing Justice Department officials.

* Russia will respond to new sanctions of the United Kingdom with actions aimed at developing its own economy, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

* The International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned that Western plans to confiscate frozen Russian assets could threaten the international monetary system and carry other unanticipated risks.

* The Latvian parliament decided to ban import of agriculture products from Russia and Belarus, its press office said.

* The UK government announced on Thursday that it had added six members of the Novatek board of directors to the updated list of sanctions against Russia.

* The United States is set to announce new sanctions against Russia that will be "crushing" and will include hundreds of targets, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said

HOUTHIS ATTACKS

* The US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Thursday that a US aircraft and a coalition warship shot down six UAVs launched by the Houthis in the Red Sea after the drones were identified as an imminent threat to the coalition forces.

* The Houthis of Yemen have conducted three military operations against foreign vessels and Israel, the movement's military spokesman Yahya Saree said.

SITUATION IN GAZA

* The decision by some countries to halt financial assistance to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is "donor blackmail" and should be reconsidered, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

* The mandate of Israeli negotiations on a hostage deal with Hamas will be expanded in

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parallel with continuation of hostilities in the Gaza Strip, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said.

BIDEN'S REMARKS ON PUTIN

* Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday described US President Joe Biden's statement addressed to him as "rude."

* Biden's insulting remarks about President Vladimir Putin were just a "plain" and "direct" way of speaking about current threats allegedly posed by Russia, US National Security Communications adviser John Kirby said.

* The Russian Embassy in the United States sent a note of protest to the Department of State on Thursday morning over US President Joe Biden's outrageous remarks about President Vladimir Putin, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The United Kingdom will provide Ukraine with a new military aid package, Defense Secretary Grant Shapps said on Thursday during an address in the House of Commons.

* The German parliament, Bundestag, voted in favor of a draft resolution submitted by factions of the ruling coalition on the supply of long-range weapons systems to Ukraine to destroy strategic targets in Russia's rear.

* Ukraine has lost up to 410 soldiers in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Russia's conditions for possible negotiations with Ukraine are clear, this is the recognition of the results of the special operation, Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev said in an interview with Russian media, including Sputnik.

* Ukraine and the United States do not seek a broader war with Russia in Europe, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said.

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Blinken Says Algeria's UN Resolution on Gaza Wouldn't Result in Ceasefire

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday said that Algeria's draft resolution in the UN Security Council calling for a ceasefire in Gaza would not have actually resulted in a ceasefire.

On Tuesday, the United States vetoed an Algerian resolution that called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. Thirteen council members voted in favor, while the UK abstained.

"With regard to the UN Security Council Resolution ... That resolution would not have in and of itself resulted in a ceasefire," Blinken said during a press conference in Rio de Janeiro.

Blinken was in Brazil to attend a G20 foreign ministers meeting, which covered issues related to Ukraine, Gaza, climate, among other priorities.

Blinken further said that he and other senior US officials continue to engage in diplomatic efforts to secure a hostage deal that could eventually lead to a broader ceasefire.

US National Security Communications adviser John Kirby said earlier this week that supporting Algeria's proposed resolution could have risked sensitive hostage negotiations between Hamas

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and Israel.

Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia noted that by vetoing another resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, the United States 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.

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Blinken Says Consensus at G20 Meeting Was Desire for Prompt End of Ukraine Conflict

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that there was a general consensus at the G20 foreign ministers meeting in Brazil this week about the need for an immediate end to the conflict in Ukraine.

"I think if you were in that room, as Foreign Minister Lavrov was, you heard a very strong chorus coming from not just the G7 countries within the G20, but for many others as well, about the imperative of ending the Russian aggression, restoring peace, making sure that Ukrainians are the ones who decide their own future," Blinken said during a press conference in Rio de Janeiro.

Blinken was in Brazil to attend a G20 foreign ministers meeting, which covered issues related to Ukraine, Gaza and climate, among other priorities.

Blinken noted that he did not have any direct conversations with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said earlier this month that the US must stop supplying weapons to Ukraine if it wishes to resolve the conflict.

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US Offers $1Mln Reward for Info on Russian-Swiss National Vladislav Osipov - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The US is offering a $1 million reward for information leading to the arrest of dual Russian-Swiss national Vladislav Osipov over his alleged involvement in transnational organized crime, the State Department said on Thursday.

"The Department of State is announcing a reward offer under the Transnational Organized Crime Rewards Program (TOCRP) of up to $1 million for dual Russian-Swiss national Vladislav Osipov for information leading to his arrest and/or conviction for participating in, conspiring to participate in, or attempting to participate in transnational organized crime," the State Department said in a statement.

Osipov is accused of holding high-level positions in several firms owned or managed by Russian businessman Viktor Vekselberg, being knowledgeable about Vekselberg's ownership of the luxury yacht Tango, and conspiring since 2018 to operate the vessel in violation of US laws,

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the statement said.

Vekselberg was sanctioned by the United States in April 2018 under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, a US federal law requiring sanctions on Iran, North Korea and Russia.

The US sanctioned the Russian businessman again in March 2022 and blocked his access to his yacht and private airplane over what the Treasury said was his support for Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

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Nuland Says US, Ukraine Don't Want Wider European War With Russia

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Ukraine and the United States do not seek a broader war with Russia in Europe, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

"It is important that we not trip this into a larger European war. Ukraine doesn't want that. We don't want that," Nuland said during an interview at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The US has attempted to calibrate the delivery of military aid to Ukraine based on their battlefield needs and what is available, Nuland said.

The US and its allies have been providing military aid to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022. The aid evolved from providing artillery munitions and training in 2022 to battle tanks, advanced air-defense systems, cluster munitions and long-range missiles.

Russia has repeatedly warned against the continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said earlier this month that the US must stop supplying weapons to Ukraine if it wishes to resolve the conflict.

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Kirby on Biden's SOB Diss: President Speaks Plainly About 'Threats' Posed by Russia

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's insulting remarks about President Vladimir Putin were just a "plain" and "direct" way of speaking about current threats allegedly posed by Russia, US National Security Communications adviser John Kirby said on Thursday.

During a campaign event on Wednesday, Biden called Putin "a crazy S.O.B."

"We have serious national security concerns, particularly when it comes to Russia on a range of issues, from what they're doing in Ukraine, to, of course, this potential development of

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anti-satellite capability to this burgeoning relationship with Iran," Kirby said during a press briefing. "[Biden] speaks about them [concerns] plainly and directly because that is exactly how we need to look at the threat posed by Russia - plainly, directly, transparently - and that's what he is doing."

Kirby added that Biden's description of US national security concerns stems mainly from his years-long involvement in foreign policy and knowledge of the subject.

The Russian Embassy in the United States sent a note of protest to the Department of State on Thursday morning over Biden's outrageous remarks about President Putin.

Putin called Biden's remarks about him "rude," but said that he considers them an "adequate reaction" to his previous comment that Russia prefers Biden over former President Donald Trump as the next US leader.

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Blinken Says Had No Direct Talks With Lavrov at G20 Meeting, But Heard His Remarks

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday said he had no direct conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the G20 foreign ministers meeting in Brazil this week, but the two heard each other's remarks.

"I didn't have any direct conversations with Foreign Minister Lavrov, but we certainly, well, I heard him speak in the meetings and I imagine he heard me speak," Blinken said during a press conference in Rio de Janeiro.

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UPDATE - US Crude Stockpiles Rise 4th Week In Row, Tempering Oil Rally

(Changes headline, updates paragraphs 7 and 9)

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US crude stockpiles rose for a fourth week in a row, growing by a total of more than 22 million barrels, according to data on Thursday from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) that analysts said could help keep this year's oil rally in check.

Crude balances rose by 3.514 million barrels during the week to February 16, after expanding by almost 19 million in three prior weeks, the EIA, which serves as the data wing of the Energy Department, said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report.

But fuel inventories fell sharply too last week, suggesting oil prices may ultimately creep higher, analysts said.

Gasoline balances slid a third week in a row, showing a deficit of 0.3 million after prior declines of 3.658 million and 3.146 million. Gasoline is the primary motor fuel in the United States and accounts for the largest component in the country's energy mix.

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Distillate inventories dropped for a fifth week in a row, with the latest slide of 4 million barrels adding to the prior loss of around 9 million. Distillates are primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses, and ships, and also go into making airline fuel.

In Thursday's New York trading, the West Texas Intermediate benchmark for US crude settled up 0.9% at $78.61 per barrel.

Since the year began, the so-called WTI benchmark has risen almost 10% on fears that the raging Israel-Hamas war could disrupt crude shipments from oil-rich countries around the conflict zone.

But this year's gain in oil prices could have been a lot more if not for nagging worries about the sliding demand for energy, reinforced by the build in US crude supplies, analysts said. For example, they point to the highs of nearly two years, when WTI peaked at $130.50 in March 2022, shortly after the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

"When you zoom out, US [crude] inventories are on track to end winter below last year's levels but a few more weeks [of builds] like this would change that", Button, the economist, said in a recent posting on the ForexLive forum.

The last time US crude inventories saw builds like this was over a six-week period in October-November 2023 when stockpiles rose by almost 30 million barrels. Prices for the WTI fell 17% in that period.

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New US Sanctions on Russia Will Be 'Crushing,' Will Include Hundreds of Targets - Nuland

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is set to announce new sanctions against Russia that will be "crushing" and will include hundreds of targets, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

"We will have a crushing new package of sanctions, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them in the next couple of days," Nuland said on Thursday during a Center for Strategic and International Studies event.

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Biden Promises 'Major' Russia Sanctions in Meeting With Navalnaya - White House

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden met with Alexei Navalny's widow in San Francisco on Thursday and reaffirmed that the United States will unveil new Russia sanctions tomorrow, the White House said.

"President Biden met with Yulia and Dasha Navalnaya today in San Francisco to express his heartfelt condolences for their terrible loss following the death of Aleksey Navalny in a Russian prison," the White House said in a statement.

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He said that the US will announce "major new sanctions" against Russia "in response to Aleksey's death" and the Ukraine conflict, according to the statement.

The West has no right to intervene in Russia's internal affairs, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday when commenting on the West's reaction to Navalny's death. He also pointed to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's plight and journalist Gonzalo Lira's death as a "beam in the West's own eye."

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New Sanctions on Russia Focused on Evasion, Banks Supporting It – Nuland

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – A new package of US Treasury Department designations targeting Russia will be focused on company networks and banks in a range of countries that help Moscow evade sanctions, US Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

"When you see this package that we're going to launch in a couple of days, it is very heavily focused on evasion, on nodes and networks and countries that help evade willingly or otherwise, and on the banks that support and allow that kind of evasion and some of the inputs for the weapons," Nuland said during a discussion hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

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UPDATE - US Charges Head of Russia's VTB Bank Andrey Kostin for Sanctions Violations

(Updates throughout with details from Justice Department press release)

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department charged Russia's VTB Bank CEO Andrey Kostin and two US-based associates with violations of US sanctions, the Justice Department said in a statement on Thursday.

"Today, the United States unsealed an indictment charging Andrey Kostin, a sanctioned Russian oligarch and the President and Chairman of a Russian state-owned bank with participating in two schemes to violate US sanctions and arrested two US-based co-conspirators for their role in facilitating one of the schemes," the statement said.

The indictment alleges that Kostin participated in a scheme to evade sanctions and launder funds to support two superyachts, collectively worth over $135 million.

"Kostin and two US persons also allegedly engaged in a scheme to evade sanctions related to a luxury home in Aspen, Colorado," the statement said.

Facilitators Vadim Wolfson, or Belyaev, and Gannon Bond, 49, were arrested earlier in the day, it added.

In a different case, a grand jury in the Middle District of Florida returned an indictment charging

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Sergey Kurchenko, whom the Justice Department called a sanctioned pro-Russian Ukrainian oligarch, in a years-long scheme to violate and evade US sanctions.

"Kurchenko, 38, currently believed to be living in Moscow, Russia, is charged with violating the IEEPA and US sanctions on Russia in connection with a years-long scheme to do business in the United States, in violation of US sanctions," the statement said.

US authorities also said that Atlanta-based dual national Feliks Medvedev pleaded guilty to his role in laundering over $150 million through bank accounts and shell companies on behalf of Russian clients.

"In the Southern District of Florida, the United States filed a civil forfeiture complaint against two Miami luxury condominium properties owned by sanctioned Russian oligarch Viktor Perevalov. The properties are allegedly connected to a conspiracy to maintain and transfer real estate for the benefit of Perevalov," the statement said.

The properties are located at the Ritz Carlton in Bal Harbour and valued at approximately $2.5 million, it added.

The US also unsealed a superseding indictment charging Vladislav Osipov, a Russian national residing in Switzerland, with bank fraud in connection with a criminal scheme to facilitate the operation of the Motor Yacht (M/Y) Tango, a 255-foot luxury yacht that the Justice Department has previously stated is owned by sanctioned Russian businessman Viktor Vekselberg, the statement added.

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US Government Working With AT&T to Investigate Network Outage - White House

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Several US government agencies are working with telecommunications company AT&T to investigate the cause of a widespread network outage, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday.

Earlier on Thursday, tens of thousands of AT&T customers reported a network outage, as well as thousands from other carrier services.

"As I understand it, the Federal Communications Commission has been in touch with AT&T and those conversations are ongoing, and they're trying to figure out what exactly happened here," Kirby said during a press briefing.

The US Department of Homeland Security and FBI are also offering investigative assistance to network providers, Kirby said.

The outage had some impact on the US Commerce Department, although the extent of the impact is unknown, Kirby said. The impact does not appear to have been "crippling," Kirby added.

AT&T has no reason at this time to believe the outage is the result of a cybersecurity incident, Kirby said.

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

US Never Took ATACMS for Ukraine Off Table, Discussions Ongoing – White House

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration has never taken the supply of a newer version of the ATACMS long-range missile to Ukraine off the table and continues its discussions with Kiev on the matter, US National Security Communications adviser John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We never took ATACMS off the table. They are still part and parcel of the discussions that we've been having with Ukraine," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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, Allies to Conduct Large-Scale Global Military Exercises February to June - EUCOM

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The United States alongside its allies will participate in large-scale global military drills starting this month through June, European Command (EUCOM) said on Thursday.

"Large Scale Global Exercise 2024, a series of all-domain military exercises executed alongside Allies and partners around the globe, begins this month and will run through June," EUCOM said in a press release.

The exercises are designed to strengthen agility and interoperability with US allies and partners and will incorporate nearly 30 wide-ranging exercises and military activities with discrete objectives, the release added.

Eleven of the 30 planned drills are set to take place across Europe and will include Allied Spirit, Trojan Footprint, two iterations of Bomber Task Force, Nordic Response, Arctic Shock, Saber Strike, Immediate Response, Swift Response, Astral Knight, and BALTOPS, the release said.

The United States aims to display a robust presence and capabilities alongside its allies, partners and fellow US combatant commands, according to the release.

The large-scale military exercise will incorporate military personnel from the US Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force, and demonstrate joint and multinational military cooperation, the release added.

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Russian Embassy Sends Note of Protest Over Biden's Remarks About Putin - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – The Russian Embassy in the United States sent a note of protest to the Department of State on Thursday morning over US President Joe Biden's outrageous remarks about President Vladimir Putin, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said.

Biden called the Russian president a "crazy SOB" during a campaign event on Wednesday.

"As soon as the Department of State began work this morning, we sent a stern note of protest about the outrageous nature and inadmissibility of insults made by the American leadership toward the Russian president," Antonov said.

As the US presidential election approaches, these kinds of escapades are becoming routine, the ambassador observed.

"Obviously, rudeness, swear words, and obscene language do not strengthen strategic security, something that the world needs very much in current circumstances," he added.

The unacceptable rhetoric of the US authorities "only testifies to the impotence and lack of common sense" in the current policy toward Russia, Antonov said.

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US Believes Rutte Would Make 'Excellent' NATO Secretary General - White House

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration believes that Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte would make an excellent secretary general of the NATO alliance, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Thursday.

"What I can tell you on Mr. Rutte is that the United States has made it clear to our NATO allies that we believe Mr. Rutte would be an excellent secretary general for NATO," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Earlier this week, US media reported that Biden is supporting Rutte as successor to current NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. Two-thirds of NATO countries are now backing Rutte's nomination to lead NATO, the report said. However, the decision will require unanimity among NATO countries.

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Canada, Partners Working on Delivering More Military Supplies to Ukraine – Trudeau

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – Canada alongside its partners is working on delivering more military equipment to Ukraine, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday.

Trudeau's remarks addressed a question on whether Canada was considering taking part in a project proposed at the Munich Conference about the urgent provision of 155 mm artillery shells

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to Ukraine.

"We are working with partners around the world to make sure we're sending more military equipment, whatever we can, and continue to purchase more on the world markets to send to Ukraine. We will continue to be there to deliver for Ukrainians who are fighting for their country, fighting for all of ours," Trudeau told reporters.

Ottawa remains committed to supporting Ukraine with as many resources as required, and for as long as it is necessary, Trudeau said, despite what he described as the "opposition" of the Conservative party.

Trudeau was referring to the repeated rejection by the Conservatives to approve the updated Canada-Ukraine Free Trade Agreement, signed by him and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in September 2023 during his state visit to Ottawa.

Since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, the Canadian government has committed more than $6.7 billion in overall support to Ukraine. Out of this amount, close to $1.9 billion was given in military aid, notably through the provision of Leopard 2 main battle tanks, armored combat support vehicles, anti-tank weapons, M777 howitzers, and associated ammunition, among other items.

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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US to Take Matter of Alleged Russian-Iranian Military Cooperation to UNSC – White House

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – The United States is planning to take the issue of the alleged Russian-Iranian military cooperation to the UN Security Council and impose additional sanctions in Iran, US National Security Communications adviser John Kirby said on Thursday.

"If Iran proceeds with this provision of ballistic missiles [to Russia], I can assure you that the response from the international community will be swift, will be severe. For our part, we will take this matter to the UN Security Council. We will implement additional sanctions against Iran, and we will coordinate further response options with our allies and partners in Europe and elsewhere," Kirby said during a press briefing.

In the coming days, the Biden administration will announce additional sanctions on Iran for its support of Russia amid the conflict in Ukraine, Kirby added.

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US Urges Israel to Send Delegation to Gaza Hostage Talks in Paris This Week - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration wants to see an Israeli delegation in Paris this week for talks on a potential hostage deal with Hamas and is telling

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Israeli officials there has been some progress in the negotiations between Egyptian and Qatari mediators and Hamas, Axios reported on Thursday, citing three people familiar with the matter.

White House Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk, who is in Israel now, met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, and other senior officials earlier on Thursday to convey that the Biden administration wants to see a deal before Ramadan and that Hamas is willing to lower its demands, the report said.

McGurk also told Israeli officials that the Israeli war cabinet should send its delegation to Paris to increase the chances of reaching a deal and securing the release of hostages who are being held in terrible conditions, according to the report.

However, even if Netanyahu greenlights the delegation dispatch to Paris, it remains unknown if he will provide it with powers to negotiate, the report added.

The Israeli war cabinet is expected to convene a meeting later on Thursday to decide whether to send a delegation to Paris.

On Wednesday, Axios reported that CIA Director William Burns will be meeting with Israeli, Qatari, and Egyptian officials in Paris on Friday to discuss a hostage deal that is being pushed by the Biden administration in a bid to seal it before Ramadan, which begins on March 10 and lasts 30 days.

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US Probed Alleged Financial Ties Between Mexican President's Allies, Cartels - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The US conducted years-long inquiries into whether allies of President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of Mexico engaged in financial transactions with drug cartels following his inauguration, the New York Times reported on Thursday.

According to the report, the inquiry revealed potential links between cartel operatives and advisers close to the Mexican president, but the US did not open a formal investigation due to a lack of interest in pursuing allegations against a key ally.

Furthermore, US officials primarily relied on informants, meaning that the information they provided would be challenging to confirm and occasionally misleading. Officials also tracked payments from suspected cartel members to intermediaries, the report said.

The report cited Lopez Obrador as dismissing all the allegations and saying they would not affect Mexico-US relations, while US officials declined to comment.

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US Charges Head of Russia's VTB Bank Andrey Kostin for Sanctions Violations - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department charged Russia's VTB Bank CEO Andrey Kostin and two US-based associates with violations of US sanctions,

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Reuters reported on Thursday citing Justice Department officials.

According to the report, Kostin is accused of money laundering and sanctions violations through his alleged maintenance of two yachts and a home in Aspen, Colorado. The two US-based associates, Vadim Wolfson and Gannon Bond, have been arrested and charged for allegedly helping to take care of Kostin's property in Colorado while concealing that he owned it, the report said.

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Lawmakers Admonish Major US Banks for Muslim-American Discrimination - Letter

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Senator Elizabeth Warren and Representative Ilhan Omar disseminated a letter on Thursday demanding the heads of US banks to explain and change policies called 'de- risking' practices that they feel disproportionately target Muslim and non-white communities.

"De-risking poses a particularly severe threat for customers from the Muslim American community. Reports indicate that Muslim and Arab, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Americans may be considered 'high risk' when sending payments or remittances abroad or donating to charities or religious institutions," reads the letter, which was signed by Senator Bernie Sanders and Representatives Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib in addition to Warren and Omar.

The lawmakers argue that the de-risking practices, which involve banks monitoring and flagging customer accounts for suspicious activity to prevent issues like money laundering, disproportionately target Muslim-Americans.

"The lack of information regarding the scope of de-risking practices and the impact on Muslim American consumers and other minority communities hinder policymakers' ability to protect consumers," the letter continues.

Thursday's letter comes two years after dozens of lawmakers, also led by Omar and Warren, called on Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and other banking officials to reassess discriminatory policies and practices that targed Muslim Americans and communities of color.

Though the Treasury Department later released a report concluding that de-risking practices undermine US government policy objectives, the practice has continued, resulting in the closure of thousands of private bank accounts belonging to Muslim-Americans and people of color.

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US Crude Stockpiles Rise 4th Week in Row, Tempering Rally in Oil

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US crude stockpiles rose for a fourth week in a row, growing by a total of more than 22 million barrels, according to data on Thursday from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) that analysts said could help keep this year's oil rally in

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check.

Crude balances rose by 3.514 million barrels during the week to February 16, after expanding by almost 19 million in three prior weeks, the EIA, which serves as the data wing of the Energy Department, said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report.

But fuel inventories fell sharply too last week, suggesting oil prices may ultimately creep higher, analysts said.

Gasoline balances slid a third week in a row, showing a deficit of 0.3 million after prior declines of 3.658 million and 3.146 million. Gasoline is the primary motor fuel in the United States and accounts for the largest component in the country's energy mix.

Distillate inventories dropped for a fifth week in a row, with the latest slide of 4 million barrels adding to the prior loss of around 9 million. Distillates are primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses and ships, and also goes into making airline fuel.

"These numbers should bring some bids for oil," economist Adam Button said, referring to the drop in gasoline and distillate stockpiles.

By 12:40 am in New York Thursday (17:40 GMT), the West Texas Intermediate benchmark for US was up 1.3%, trading at $77.25 per barrel.

Since the year began, the so-called WTI benchmark has risen almost 10% on fears that the raging Israel-Hamas war could disrupt crude shipments from oil-rich countries around the conflict zone.

But this year's gain in oil prices could have been a lot more if not for nagging worries about the sliding demand for energy, reinforced by the build in US crude supplies, analysts said.

"When you zoom out, US [crude] inventories are on track to end winter below last year's levels but a few more weeks [of builds] like this would change that", Button, the economist, said in a recent posting on the ForexLive forum.

The last time US crude inventories saw builds like this was over a six-week period in October-November 2023, when stockpiles rose by almost 30 million barrels. Prices for the WTI fell 17% in that period.

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Johnson Says Biden Will Not Fool US Into Believing Intention to Secure Border

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Thursday that people in the United States will not be tricked by President Joe Biden's claims that he will secure the US' borders from illegal immigration.

Biden is considering using presidential authority to suspend the entry of migrants into the US, according to US media reports. Former US President Donald Trump used the same law to restrict immigration during his time in office.

"Americans have lost faith in this President and won't be fooled by election year gimmicks that don't actually secure the border. Nor will they forget that the President created this catastrophe and, until now, has refused to use his executive power to fix it," Johnson said in a statement.

Biden previously claimed to lack the legal authority to secure the border, Johnson added.

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Biden could demonstrate his seriousness about securing the border by reinstituting a so-called "Remain in Mexico" policy and ending his administration's "abuse" of the parole system, the statement said.

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US Lawmaker Suggests Some Chinese Migrants May Be Saboteurs Should There Be War With China

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US House Homeland Security Chairman Mark Green on Thursday suggested that some of the Chinese migrants illegally entering the US southern border may be potential saboteurs should there ever be a conflict between the United States and China.

"I'm not suggesting that China is going to be attacking the United States, but if we defend Taiwan, I can't imagine there aren't people in there [United States] who are going to be tracking our railheads, looking at our ports," Green said during remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference.

Green highlighted that some 20,000 Chinese migrants have come into the United States illegally on the US southern border since early October.

Earlier this week, former President Donald Trump also suggested some of the Chinese migrants could be saboteurs as well.

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

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Confiscation of Russian Assets by West Could Threaten International Monetary System – IMF

(Updates with paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned on Thursday that Western plans to confiscate frozen Russian assets could threaten the international monetary system and carry other unanticipated risks.

"From our perspective, it is important that any actions have sufficient legal underpinnings to avoid potential risks, and these include risks of litigation, risks of countermeasures, and risks to the international monetary system," IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack told reporters.

IMF spokesperson emphasized that countries holding those assets should discuss this issue.

"The decision of what to do with frozen assets rests with the countries who are holding the assets," Kozack said.

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Western

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and EU countries imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, including the freezing of nearly half of the country's foreign currency reserves. Russia has maintained that any attempt to confiscate its frozen assets would violate international law. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said earlier that the EU plans to seize Russian central bank assets were an "escalation of economic aggression" and warned that Moscow would respond in a harsh manner.

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US Federal Agencies Investigating AT&T Outage as Possible Cyberattack - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US federal law enforcement agencies are investigating whether an AT&T network disruption was caused by a cyberattack, ABC News reported on Thursday.

Tens of thousands of AT&T users reported network outages on Thursday through internet monitor website Downdetector, as well as thousands of Verizon and T-Mobile customers.

The FBI, US Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies are probing whether the outages were the result of a cyberattack, the report said, citing two sources briefed on the situation.

A confidential US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency memo issued Thursday morning reportedly said that the cause of the outage is unknown, although there were no indications of "malicious" activity.

Three-quarters of AT&T's network has been restored, the company reportedly said, adding that it is working quickly to restore service for all customers.

Verizon and T-Mobile reportedly said that their networks have not been impacted, noting that user reports of problems are likely the result of attempting to communicate with customers served by another carrier.

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US Pharmacies Experience Delays Due to Cyberattack on Healthcare Tech Company - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Pharmacies in the United States are experiencing service delays due to a cyberattack on technology company Change Healthcare, Fox News reported on Thursday.

"Change Healthcare is experiencing a network interruption related to a cyber security issue and our experts are working to address the matter," the company reportedly said in a statement.

The company took immediate action to disconnect its systems to prevent further impact and protect partners and patients, the statement said.

US pharmacies subsequently issued notices that the cybersecurity incident may disrupt the

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processing of patient orders, the report said.

Canadian Lakes Pharmacy in the state of Michigan said in a statement via social media that the "nationwide outage" may prevent it from billing insurance companies for prescriptions, although the pharmacy can receive prescriptions. The statement requests that patients wait a day or so to pick up prescriptions.

Change Healthcare has not provided a firm timeline for restoring service but issues are expected to last until Friday, the report said.

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UNSC Seeks Immediate Ceasefire in Gaza, China Hopes US Will Act Responsibly – UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) – Beijing hopes that the United States adheres to a "responsible attitude" as it proceeds to draft a new ceasefire resolution at the UN Security Council (UNSC), China's Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun said on Thursday.

"We are aware the United States has tabled a new draft resolution. We hope the US will show a responsible attitude, respond positively to the international voice, and respect the established consensus among council members," Zhang told the UNSC. "We need to point out that the essence of any action of this Council is to achieve an immediate ceasefire."

Ambassador Zhang also lamented Tuesday's veto by the US delegation, describing it as a missed opportunity to push for a ceasefire in the Palestinian enclave.

On Tuesday, the US vetoed an Algerian resolution that called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. Thirteen council members voted in favor, while the UK abstained.

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

Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia noted that by vetoing another resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, the United States 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.

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US, China Associations Ink Deal to Return Pandas to San Diego Zoo - Official

SAN FRANCISCO, February 22 (Sputnik) - Conservation officials in the United States and China have reached a deal that will potentially see the return of giant pandas to the San Diego Zoo, officials said on Thursday.

"We are humbled by the potential opportunity of continuing our collaborative conservation efforts to secure the future for giant pandas. As such, San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance is taking

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important steps to ensure we are prepared for a potential return," Megan Owen, vice president of wildlife conservation science at the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, said in a statement.

The San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance said it "took an important step forward" toward returning pandas to the facility by signing a cooperative agreement with China Wildlife Conservation Association and applying for a US Fish and Wildlife Service permit.

China's Foreign Ministry confirmed the agreement and said Chinese authorities are also involved in ongoing discussions with the National Zoo in Washington DC and Schonbrunn Zoo in Austria on new panda cooperation.

"We look forward to further expanding the results of scientific research on the protection of endangered species such as the giant panda through the new round of international cooperation, promoting people-to-people connectivity and enhancing civilian friendship with relevant countries," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said at a news briefing in Beijing.

Last year, three giant pandas were returned to China from their temporary home at the National Zoo in Washington. The White House said that the US was sad to see the pandas go and expressed an openness to welcoming the animals back in the future.

Chinese President Xi Jinping said that he was prepared to continue cooperation with the US on panda conservation, characterizing the creatures as envoys of friendship between China and the US.

Earlier this year, during an event on the Future of China and China-US relations, Chinese Minister Liu Jianchao said he hoped for the prompt return of pandas to the US.

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US Consumption Heady as Americans Likely 'Keeping up with the Joneses' in Spending - Fed

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Socially-motivated consumption, or "keeping up with the Joneses", is likely prodding Americans to spend more than they should as the US economy sees more spending despite biting inflation, Federal Reserve Vice Chair Philip Jefferson said Wednesday. Speaking at an economic event organized by a think tank in the US capital, Jefferson said growth in real gross domestic product, or GDP, came in much higher in 2023 than expected by most professional forecasters, buoyed by strength in consumer spending.

At the same time, towards the end of the year, household balance sheets began to weaken, as indicated by higher delinquency rates and a further decline in savings. These developments led him to expect slower growth in spending and output in 2024. Yet the opposite has been happening since the year began, the Fed vice chair said. "Without a clear understanding of why consumer spending has been so resilient, I see continuing strength in spending as an important upside risk to my forecast," Jefferson said. "One possible explanation is that consumers do not want to give up previous levels of consumption. Socially motivated consumption — or "keeping up with the Joneses" — could cause individuals to consume more than what is predicted by models that only consider household wealth and income."

Jefferson also outlined another reason that could be bolstering the American appetite for

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spending — a steady job market. While there is evidence of cooling labor demand, such as the decline in job openings by 3 million from their peak in March 2022, employment has remained strong.

"The labor market remains tight and job openings remain about 20% above their pre-pandemic level. At the same time, layoffs have remained very low, and the pace of payroll employment gains remains strong," Jefferson said, pointing to non-farm payroll monthly job gains in the past three months averaging 289,000. The unemployment rate in January at 3.7% was already near historical lows, he said.

"The fact that the unemployment rate and layoffs have remained low in the US economy over the past year amid disinflation suggests that there is a path to restoring price stability without the kind of substantial increase in unemployment that has often accompanied significant tightening cycles," he added. There has also been progress from moving away from high prices despite inflation still nibbling away at the economy, Jefferson said.

The most striking moderation, he said, has been in core goods prices, which have declined outright over the past year. Inflation in core services, both in its housing component and non-housing services, has also slowed, though not as much, he said. As the labor market continues to cool, core services price increases will likely continue to moderate, Jefferson said.

"I believe that this progress reflects both the unwinding of pandemic-related supply and demand distortions in the economy as well as restrictive monetary policy, which has cooled strong demand and given the supply side of the economy time to catch up."bInflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, grew 3.1% in the year to January. The Fed's long-term target is to bring CPI growth to 2% or lower per annum.

Prior to the 2020 coronavirus outbreak, CPI rarely crossed 2% a year. In June 2022, the reading, however, hit a four-decade high of more than 9% per annum.

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Confiscation of Russian Assets by West Could Threaten International Monetary System – IMF

(Updates with paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned on Thursday that Western plans to confiscate frozen Russian assets could threaten the international monetary system and carry other unanticipated risks.

"From our perspective, it is important that any actions have sufficient legal underpinnings to avoid potential risks, and these include risks of litigation, risks of countermeasures, and risks to the international monetary system," IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack told reporters.

IMF spokesperson emphasized that countries holding those assets should discuss this issue.

"The decision of what to do with frozen assets rests with the countries who are holding the assets," Kozack said.

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Western and EU countries imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, including the freezing of nearly half of the country's foreign currency reserves. Russia has maintained that any attempt to

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confiscate its frozen assets would violate international law. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said earlier that the EU plans to seize Russian central bank assets were an "escalation of economic aggression" and warned that Moscow would respond in a harsh manner.

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'Appalling' That US Exercising Its Veto in UNSC While Civilians Dying in Gaza -NGO Chief

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) - It is appalling that the United States is exercising its veto powers at the UN Security Council while civilians are dying in Gaza, the Médecins Sans Frontières Secretary General Christopher Lockyear said on Thursday.

"We have watched members of this Council deliberate and delay while civilians die. We are appalled by the willingness of the United States to use its powers as a permanent Council member to obstruct efforts to adopt .... resolutions. One demanding an immediate and sustained ceasefire," Lockyear said.

Three times the Council had an opportunity to vote for it, and three times the US has used its veto to block it, he added.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from Gaza and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. At least 29,300 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, local authorities said.

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

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UPDATE - Nebenzia Says Decision to Suspend UNRWA Funding 'Donor Blackmail', Should be Reconsidered

(Adds background in para 2-3, details in para 6)

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) – The decision by some countries to halt financial assistance to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is "donor blackmail" and should be reconsidered, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

In January, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini said Israel had shared data with the agency on the alleged involvement of some of its staff members in the October 7 Hamas

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attack and vowed to hold accountable anyone involved in "acts of terror." The US, Finland, Italy, Australia, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, and others have since suspended UNRWA funding.

In early February, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appointed an independent review panel to examine UNRWA activities, led by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna.

"We are appalled, dismayed at the incomprehensible decision of its donors to suspend financing for UNRWA in connection with suspicions of its employee's participation and cooperation with Hamas … We call for the decision for the suspension of financing for UNRWA to be reconsidered," Nebenzia told the UN Security Council.

The collective punishment of the Palestinian population of Gaza in need of assistance is amoral and can only be seen as "donor blackmail," Nebenzia said, adding that it was a politicization of humanitarian issues.

The Ambassador further noted that suspending assistance to the UN agency meant increased suffering for Gazans related to the disruptions in the deliveries of humanitarian aid, and limited provision of healthcare and educational services.

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Biden Administration Wants Ukraine Conflict to Continue, Refusing Diplomacy - US Senator

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US Senator Tommy Tuberville said on Thursday that the Biden administration wants the conflict in Ukraine to continue, which is why it has declined to engage in diplomatic efforts to end the conflict.

"We need to get diplomacy, but there's nobody in this White House — Secretary of State or Biden — that can actually go over and negotiate," Tuberville said during an interview at the Conservative Political Action Conference. "We've done more negotiating in one month with Israel and Hamas… than we have for two years with Ukraine and Russia. We just want that war to continue on."

The United States "forced" the conflict by pushing NATO on Ukraine, Tuberville said.

Tuberville said he has not voted for more money to go to Ukraine because he believes the country cannot win the conflict.

Former US President Donald Trump would end the conflict if reelected in 2024, Tuberville said.

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US CENTCOM Says Shot Down Six Drones Launched by Houthis in Red Sea

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – The US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Thursday that a US aircraft and a coalition warship shot down six UAVs launched by the Houthis in the Red Sea after the drones were identified as an imminent threat to the coalition forces.

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"Between 4:30 a.m. and 5:30 a.m. (01:30 GMT to 02:30 GMT), on Feb 22, U.S. aircraft and a coalition warship shot down six Iranian-backed Houthi one-way attack (OWA) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) in the Red Sea. The OWA UAVs were identified by U.S. Central Command as likely targeting U.S. and coalition warships and were an imminent threat," CENTCOM said in a statement.

Later in the day, the Houthis also struck a UK-owned and Palau-flagged cargo vessel, MV Islander, with two two ballistic missiles causing a minor injury and damage, the statement added.

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IMF Urges Central Banks To Avoid 'Premature Easing' of Monetary Policy

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) –Central banks throughout the world have to avoid easing monetary policy ahead of time, International Monetary Fund (IMF) spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"We are urging central banks to guard against a premature easing of monetary policy," Kozack told reporters.

She warned that countries did not reach the target level of inflation, even though it has been coming down.

"Our line or view remains the same, which is the job is not yet done on monetary policy," she added.

Kozack also pointed out that the IMF sees less synchronization in central banks' efforts. Some emerging countries have begun to reduce policy rates, while advanced economies still keep restrictive rates, she added.

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Will to Help Ukraine Hasn't Weakened Despite Domestic Economic Pressures – US Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) – Support for the Ukrainian government in countries who are currently experiencing financial hardships has not decreased and the United Nations fully backs Ukraine, US Envoy to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday.

"I would not agree that that [resolve] has decreased. We are still fully backing Ukraine, and the vast majority of people here in New York are supporting Ukraine," Thomas-Greenfield said during a press conference.

The diplomat was addressing a question on whether she was worried that support in favor of assisting Ukraine from economically stressed countries was wavering.

Thomas-Greenfield further noted that an entire session of the UN Security Council would be

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dedicated to Ukraine on Friday, while the UN General Assembly would convene in a bid to "raise concerns" over the situation in the country.

"Our support for Ukraine continues", the diplomat said, adding that Ukrainian resolve depends on consistent and continued support for its war efforts.

Since the onset of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, Western states and some of its allies have been providing significant military and financial support to Kiev, while also approving several sanction packages targeting Russian companies and individuals as well as its alleged "enablers" in Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova.

The Kremlin has also consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it would lead to further escalation of the conflict. Russia has been attempting to reach an agreement with NATO on security principles in Europe with the alliance for the past 30 years, but despite Moscow's protests, the alliance has continued to expand closer to Russian borders.

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Nebenzia Says Decision to Suspend UNRWA Funding 'Donor Blackmail', Should be Reconsidered

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"We are appalled, dismayed at the incomprehensible decision of its donors to suspend financing for UNRWA in connection with suspicions of its employee's participation and cooperation with Hamas … We call for the decision for the suspension of financing for UNRWA to be reconsidered," Nebenzia told the UN Security Council.

The collective punishment of the Palestinian population of Gaza in need of assistance is amoral and can only be seen as "donor blackmail," Nebenzia said, adding that it was a politization of humanitarian issues.

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US Working 'Very Closely' With Ukraine to Prepare for NATO Membership - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – The United States is working "very closely" with Ukraine to help prepare it for NATO membership as soon as possible, a senior State Department official said on Thursday.

"The President's been very clear that we see Ukraine's future in NATO. And we along with all the other allies in NATO are working very closely with Ukraine to ensure that they can be as ready as possible, as quickly as possible," Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for European

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and Eurasian Affairs Yuri Kim said at a press briefing.

At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, NATO affirmed its commitment that Ukraine will eventually join the alliance.

However, its members have been divided over the particulars, especially as it could draw NATO into a direct conflict with Russia.

Ukraine's non-aligned status is extremely important to Russia, and the expansion of NATO to Ukraine creates threats for Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

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US Has Raised Russian War Supplier Allegations With China – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – The US has raised with China reports that Chinese companies have been supplying Russia's war efforts, a senior State Department official said on Thursday.

"We're … disturbed by reports that Chinese companies may be providing supplies to the Russian war effort, and there are sanctions in place. China is well aware of them and we have engaged in discussions on this topic," Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Yuri Kim said at a press briefing.

Kim declined to comment further.

The US has long suspected that Chinese companies have been providing military support for Russia's war on Ukraine, and Congress is in the midst of discussing possible sanctions.

China has denied the accusations, saying it is a neutral party in the Ukraine conflict. China's Foreign Ministry has emphasized that Beijing does not take advantage of the conflict to sell weapons to any party.

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US Envoy to UN Says Up To Ukraine to Decide Whether to Negotiate With Russia

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) - Only the Ukrainian government should decide on whether to negotiate with Russia, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday.

"Any decision about negotiations with the Russians is a decision that Ukrainians themselves have to make," Thomas-Greenfield told a press briefing, when asked if the Biden administration is planning to change its course and encourage peace talks after President Vladimir Putin said Russia was open to negotiations.

Russia should withdraw its troops from Ukraine, she also claimed.

The United States will stand with Ukraine "for as long as Ukraine needs us," the ambassador stated.

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In October 2022, Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a decree stating that Kiev could not hold peace talks as long as President Putin is in power in Russia.
Russia has never refused negotiations with Ukraine, Putin said in an interview with US journalist Tucker Carlson earlier this month.

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Russia's Economy Has Surprised in Terms of Strength of Growth Under Sanctions - IMF

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – Russia's economy has surprised in terms of the strength of growth under Western sanctions, International Monetary Fund (IMF) spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.
"What I can say is that Russia's economy has indeed surprised in terms of the strength of growth so far," Kozack told reporters when asked about the impact of existing sanctions.
However, she warned that the IMF sees signs of overheating of the economy in Russia. She also said that issues related to sanctions and the loss of human capital would impact the economy in the medium term.
"We do expect that these effects will have a significant impact on growth and prospects for the medium term," Kozack said.

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Confiscation of Russian Assets by West Could Threaten International Monetary System - IMF

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"From our perspective, it is important that any actions have sufficient legal underpinnings to avoid potential risks, and these include risks of litigation, risks of countermeasures, and risks to the international monetary system," IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack told reporters.

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US House Oversight Panel Says Never Talked to Source Accused of Lying About Biden, Burisma

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The US House Oversight Committee said on Thursday that it never talked to a former FBI informant now accused of lying about ties between US

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President Joe Biden, his son and Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

Earlier this month, federal prosecutors charged Alexander Smirnov with making a false statement and creating a false and fictitious record. Smirnov allegedly lied to investigators about Burisma lobbying Hunter Biden to have his father, who was then serving as vice president, protect the company from problems in exchange for millions of dollars.

US Congressman Dan Goldman subsequently urged the Justice Department to investigate whether Republican lawmakers knew about Smirnov's alleged lies.

"We can clear this up for you. 1) We never knew the informant's name. 2) We never talked to the informant," the House Oversight Committee said via social media platform X, in response to Goldman. "No one is falling for this Russia Hoax 2.0 you're peddling."

The FBI told lawmakers, including Democrats, that the informant was highly credible, the panel said.

The situation comes amid an impeachment inquiry by House lawmakers into alleged criminal activity by the Biden family, including foreign influence peddling and bribery.

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US Justice Department Says Appointed First Science, Artificial Intelligence Chief

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department said on Thursday that it appointed Jonathan Mayer as its first Chief Science and Technology Advisor, as well as its Chief Artificial Intelligence (AI) Officer.

"The Justice Department must keep pace with rapidly evolving scientific and technological developments in order to fulfill our mission to uphold the rule of law, keep our country safe, and protect civil rights," US Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a statement.

Mayer will advise the Justice Department on complex issues requiring technical expertise, including cybersecurity, AI and other emerging technologies, the statement said. Mayer will serve in the Justice Department's Office of Legal Policy, which is assembling a team of technical and policy experts in technology-related areas, the statement said.

In his role as Chief AI Officer, Mayer will work on intra-departmental and interagency AI efforts, as well as lead the Justice Department's Emerging Technology Board, the statement said.

Mayer has experience as an assistant professor at Princeton University's computer science and international affairs programs. Mayer holds a Ph.D. in computer science from Stanford University and a law degree from Stanford Law School, the statement said.

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Canada Pledges $70.4Mln in Development Assistance to Jordan - Foreign Ministry

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WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government will provide C$95 million ($70.4 million) in development assistance funding to Jordan, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said on Thursday.

"Today in Jordan, the Honourable Ahmed Hussen, Minister of International Development, announced $95 million in new development assistance funding for 7 projects in the country," GAC said in a statement.

C$71.8 million will be directed to fund education projects, including the second phase of the Education for Jordan Prosperity initiative and the Developing Jordan's Public School Educators project at Queen Rania Teacher Academy.

C$23.2 million will go to renewable energy and biodiversity projects in the country, GAC said. The funds will be allocated for Cowater International's second phase of the Sustainable Energy and Economic Development Project and a UN marine biodiversity protection project in the Gulf of Aqaba

Hussen is on a visit to Jordan from February 21-22.

Under its Middle East engagement strategy, Canada has committed over C$354 million in development assistance funding to Jordan since 2016.

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One in Four Canadians Wants Gov't to Boost Military Assistance to Ukraine - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – A quarter of Canadians believe that Canada should send more ammunition and other forms of military assistance to Ukraine, according to a Leger poll released on Thursday.

"Since October 2023, significantly more Canadians wish for the Canadian government to boost its efforts in supplying ammunition and other military supplies (20% in October vs 25% now)," the pollster said.

Twenty-eight percent of respondents think Canada should increase humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, another 27% believe it should step up diplomatic support for the country, and 26% say it should provide more military training, the poll said.

Nearly two in five (38%) Canadians believe Ottawa should maintain the current levels of financial aid to Kiev, and only 16% want it to be increased, whereas 31% think it should be reduced.

More broadly, 47% of Canadians are unable to say whether Ukraine or Russia would win the conflict. Twenty-eight percent believe in Kiev's odds, whereas a quarter think Russia will emerge victorious.

Since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, the Canadian government has committed more than $1.8 billion in military assistance to Kiev, providing Leopard 2 main battle tanks, armored combat support vehicles, anti-tank weapons, M777 howitzers and associated ammunition, among other items.

The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it will

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lead to further escalation of the conflict.

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