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2/28/24 Wednesday

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Wildfires in Texas Grow to One of Largest in the US State's History

The blaze has become the second largest in Texas' history and is projected to grow as just 3% of its flames have been contained.

The US state of Texas suffered a devastating loss as a group of wildfires scorched the Texas Panhandle on Wednesday. The wildfire, which first ignited on Monday, has raged across 850,000 acres—larger than the US state of Rhode Island—becoming one of the largest fires ever seen in the state.

The fire, which moved quickly, consumed small towns and cattle ranches.

The blaze is being referred to as the Smokehouse Creek Fire, and has covered more than 1,300 square miles (3,370 square kilometers) and traveled into parts of the US state of Oklahoma which it borders. Officials have encouraged those in Roger Mills County (western Oklahoma) to evacuate.

Fueled by strong winds, unseasonably high temperatures and dry conditions, the blaze is projected to grow as only 3% of the flames have been contained, according to the Texas A&M Forest Service. Wind conditions on Thursday are expected to be lighter, which could help firefighters battling the fire, though heavy winds and dry conditions are expected to return on Friday.

The blaze first spread around the cattle-filled town of Canadian which holds a population of 2,200 people northeast of Amarillio, close to the state line of Oklahoma.

Evacuation efforts fell underway, but roughly 35 residents who tried to leave and found the roadways blocked by fire had to take shelter in a "safe room" at an emergency operations center, according to Lisa Johnson, a judge in Hemphill County who had to spend the night there.

More than 13,000 homes and businesses in Texas were without power as of Wednesday morning, and more than 4,000 of those in the Panhandle region alone, according to PowerOutage.us.

According to a spokesperson for the Forest Service, about 200 firefighters were on the ground, working across the Panhandle fighting several wildfires, though most were focused on the Smokehouse Creek Fire.

At least one death has been linked to the wildfires, though further details were not made available.

A cattle rancher, whose family owns a 30,000 acre cattle ranch in Roberts County, said he had been fighting the fire for "two days straight". He told a New York newspaper that nearly all of his land had burned, however, the buildings were saved. He added that some of his cattle survived the fire, but sadly, not all of them made it out alive.

"We lost some, and there are some that we're having to shoot that are still alive but are burnt up," he said. "We're in love with the animals and the country, and whenever something like this comes through and destroys it all, it's hard to swallow."

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The wildfire was reportedly burning north of the Plantex plant, near Amarillo, that is responsible for disassembling nuclear weapons. On Tuesday, the plant suspended their operations but reopened on Wednesday. Despite no reports of fire being near the plant, safety officials responded anyway, according to a nuclear safety engineer for the National Nuclear Security Administration.

The largest wildfire in Texas history, prior to this week's blaze, was the East Amarillo Complex fire in 2006 having burned about a million acres, which resulted in 13 deaths.

On Tuesday, Governor Greg Abbott (R-TX), issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties and directed the Texas Division of Emergency Management to activate more than 95 firefighters and personnel to close roads, control traffic, offer medical aid, and help protect livestock. He also reportedly urged Texas residents to avoid any activities that may fuel the fire or start a new one.

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Boiling Water May Help Remove 90% of Microplastics - Study

According to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), plastic is the most prevalent type of marine debris found in our oceans.

A new study has found that boiling your drinking water could help reduce the amount of microplastics in it by nearly 90%. The findings, published Wednesday in Environmental Research Letters, looked at the impacts of boiling on three compounds commonly found in drinking water: polystyrene, polyethylene and polypropylene.

Nanoplastics and microplastics (NMPs) are tiny bits of plastic that can be as small as one-thousandth of a millimeter in diameter, though the definition applies to any small plastic piece that is less than five millimeters long in length.

These NMPs, about the size of a virus, are the perfect size to adversely affect how human cells function, and are capable of passing through key protective filters in one's body including the intestinal lining and blood brain barrier. They have also been found in our food, breast milk and even the clouds in our skies.

While the effects of microplastics on human health is still being studied, it is believed that polystyrene is capable of inflaming the intestine and can kill red blood cells. In general, there is also growing evidence that shows plastics can accumulate in the body and trigger oxidative stress, inflammation, insulin resistance, and liver issues.

"Microplastics come from a variety of sources, including from larger plastic debris that degrades into smaller and smaller pieces," the NOAA writes, adding that the issue of microbeads appearing in personal care products first began to occur about 50 years ago.

"In addition, microbeads, a type of microplastic, are very tiny pieces of manufactured polyethylene plastic that are added as exfoliants to health and beauty products, such as some cleansers and toothpastes. These tiny particles easily pass through water filtration systems," the administration adds.

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The researchers tested their theory using hard water which is a common type of freshwater found in the US known for high levels of calcium carbonate and magnesium. During the five minute boiling process, the calcium carbonates formed in small clumps around the microplastics and trapped them. The leftover residue was then separated and removed from the water using a coffee filter or stainless steel filter.

“Elevated temperatures promote CaCO3 nucleation on NMPs, resulting in the encapsulation and aggregation of NMPs within CaCO3 incrustants,” the researchers wrote. “This simple boiling-water strategy can ‘decontaminate’ [nano- and microplastics, or NMPs] from household tap water and has the potential for harmlessly alleviating human intake of NMPs through water consumption.”

However, they found that boiling water was not effective in removing all of the polymers. And this study only proved effective using hard water or any water that has the addiction of calcium carbonate, while the soft water samples showed only 25% of microplastics were removed.

Though for now, boiling water can still improve the health and safety of one's drinking water. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that boiling water is the safest way to kill disease-causing germs, including viruses, bacteria, and parasites.

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‚Antarctica’s Doomsday Glacier Began Melting Earlier Than Previously Thought - Study

Being roughly the size of the US state of Florida, the Thwaites Glacier is the widest on Earth. According to a new study, the Thwaites Glacier in West Antarctica has been losing ice at an accelerating rate since the 1940s. Previously, scientists thought the glacier only began losing its ice much in the 1970s. This study’s findings are ominous; the glacier has been nicknamed the “Doomsday Glacier” because its collapse could result in disastrous sea level rising.

The study, published on Monday in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, analyzed marine sediment cores taken from beneath the ocean floor to reconstruct the glacier’s history from its present to over 10,000 years ago. They found that the Thwaites Glacier, and its neighboring Pine island Glacier, both lost contact with the seafloor highs in the 1940s.

They believe that a massive El Niño took place at around the same time that these glaciers began to lose their mass.

“Thwaites Glacier plays a vital role in regulating West Antarctic Ice Sheet stability and, thus, global sea-level rise,” the study authors write.

If the Thwaites Glacier collapses on its own, it will cause sea levels to rise by roughly two feet (65 centimeters). And because it is responsible for holding back the West Antarctic Ice Sheet, its collapse could trigger further melting that may spiral into a sea level rise of 10 feet (3 meters)and cause catastrophic global flooding.

“The synchronous ice retreat of these two major ice streams suggests that, rather than being driven by internal dynamics unique to each glacier, retreat in the Amundsen Sea drainage

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sector results from external oceanographic and atmospheric drivers, which recent modeling studies show are modulated by climate variability," the study authors write.
“That ice streams such as Thwaites Glacier and Pine Island Glacier have continued to retreat since then indicates that they were unable to recover after the exceptionally large El Niño event of the 1940s,” they continue. “This may reflect the increasing dominance of anthropogenic forcing since that time but implies that this involved large-scale, in addition to local, atmospheric and ocean circulation changes.”
The El Nino climate pattern was most likely the initial driving force in warming the waters of west Antarctica between 1939 and 1942. The finding describes a fragile system of ice that, once affected by a major event, does not stop retreating. Human-induced climate change has also continued to propel that warming. But even if humans stopped warming the planet, the ice would not most likely not stop retreating.
“Once an ice sheet retreat is set in motion it can continue for decades, even if what started it gets no worse,” said James Smith, a marine geologist at the British Antarctic Survey and a co-author of the study.
Similar threats have happened long ago in Earth's history and those ice sheets were able to recover and regrow, but Smith says these glaciers “show no signs of recovery, which likely reflects the growing influence of human-caused climate change.”

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‘Many Chances for Human Error’: Embarrassing Boeing Report Reveals Lack of Safety and Mistrust

In response to the report, Boeing said that they have “taken steps to foster a safety culture that empowers and encourages all employees to share their voice” but added that there is “more work to do”.
The American aerospace company Boeing is facing renewed scrutiny after federal safety experts released an embarrassing report that found issues with Boeing’s safety culture. The report noted a “disconnect” at the company between senior management and frontline workers.
The report was written by a group of experts brought together a year ago by the US Congress—before the incident on January 5 when an Alaska Airlines 737 Max airliner's door panels blew off mid-flight. The Federal Aviation Administration said it would evaluate the reports findings while it is already auditing Boeing over the Alaska Airlines incident.
Jamie Finch, a former director at the National Transportation Safety Board, spoke with Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Wednesday. He believes the report is a step in the right direction, but admits it is “scary” that the situation with Boeing has gotten to this point.
“I would take it as a step in the right direction. It's scary that things have gotten to the point where they need to have something like this, but at the same time, at least they are moving forward and moving towards a solution,” Finch explained. “So I would take it as a positive.”
“It's not like these planes are in a position where, 'oh my gosh, they're going to be flying out of the sky left and right.' No, we're not anywhere even remotely close to something like that. But,

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there are some issues that have arisen over the last few years about Boeing, about the manufacturing process and about their aircraft, and that needs to be addressed," he added.
The report also found “hesitation in reporting safety concerns for fear of retaliation” because managers could investigate reports made under their watch, meaning the investigation isn’t fully impartial.
“Yes, we've seen this happen in all types of industries and companies and places around the world, around the country in businesses, and even organizations,” said Finch. “This is, obviously, a cultural problem that Boeing has developed over the last two or three decades. At least the two decades since it merged with McDonnell Douglas, or acquired McDonnell Douglas,” Finch added, referencing the 1997 merger between the American aerospace manufacturer McDonnell Douglas and Boeing.
“Since the FAA does not have the funds to be able to regulate or be there to oversee all of the reporting and incidences or situations that develop at the company or at the plants, they rely on Boeing to be self-reporting and when you have these self reporting situations, that's when the whistleblowers essentially go to blow the whistle on their boss, and their boss is the one who's reviewing this whistleblowing,” he continued.
“But, the FAA does not have the resources to be able to properly regulate and monitor these things. And, so, maybe we'll see more funding coming out of this, I don't know. I'm not a big fan of continuing to throw money at a problem. But let's see if there's a way that we can resolve this problem and this issue without it costing another arm and a leg, but at the same time getting to safety and reaching the goals of what we need. That's the number one priority, no matter how much it costs,” said Finch.
Sputnik’s Melik Abdul referenced an article in which Ed Pierson, a former Boeing senior manager, revealed there were issues with Boeing’s supply chain regarding their engines which resulted in a ripple effect down the supply line, resulting in work that was performed out-of-sequence by “hundreds of people” as well as quality control checks that weren’t being performed. The whistleblower said it was “so bad in 2018” and questioned “where the h***” the FAA was during that time.
“He is absolutely correct,” said Finch. “The sequence of these procedures in manufacturing, in building these products are very, very specifically designed by specifically trained engineers and ergonomic people on how to properly and safely put these products together, or these parts together for whatever you're making.”
“And if you have one hiccup on that, it just ripples down. It's a rippling effect, is the way I look at it. If you drop a pebble in the water, whether everything was smooth before, it's now just rippling through because it just carries on until it gets to the end. It just changes the entire dynamics of what the product was supposed to look like, and what the process was supposed to be to get to that end product,” he added. “There's so many chances for human error involved.”
“[The FAA] created this entire process of allowing Boeing to self-report and self-regulate on some of these things because the FAA just didn't have the resources to be able to do it themselves,” said Finch. “But this entire thing is going to be based on trust. Well, as we can see now, that's been broken and that can't be repaired, at least not for a long time.”
“Trust but verify, right? And that's just where we are, and I just don't want us to get into a situation where we're seeing people losing their lives, or more people losing their lives over something like this. That situation with Alaska Airlines could have been horrendously tragic.”

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When asked if more funding or resources for the FAA could correct future problems such as these, Finch explained that the difference between the two bodies is financial.
“Here's the thing: you get the resources to the FAA. Well, the FAA is going to be competing for the same people that Boeing is going to be competing for to hire. Who do you think is going to win that money into battle?” Finch responded. “So that's a problem, that's a real problem that it takes somebody that is willing to forego a higher salary or higher money figures to say, 'oh, I want to do this work because I think it's very important work.' Just throwing money at it is not going to solve it.”
Before the recent Alaska Airlines incident, two deadly crashes involving a Max 8 killed a total of 346 people occurred between October 2019 and March of 2019. Since 2019, Boeing has made several changes to improve product safety, establishing an aerospace safety committee in August of that year as well as a chief aerospace safety office in January of 2021.
But Pierson, a whistleblower who retired from Boeing in 2018 before the deadly crashes, said that all Boeing does is “talk”, and that the leadership “doesn’t get down there and get involved with the people that are building the products.”
“They don’t value the engineers, they think the engineers are replaceable. You can’t take a 20- or 30-year employee and just dump them off to the side and think that you’re going to find somebody off the street that’s going to be able to do what that person does,” said Pierson. “Then they don’t have the support mechanisms and they’re tired and they’re fatigued and they’re working like dogs — they can make mistakes.”

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Today Ukraine, Tomorrow Taiwan: Western Neocons Look East

The US empire is constantly aware of the signals it sends to the world as it gears up for war with China, argues one peace activist.
The US Army raised eyebrows this week when the armed forces branch released plans for a major restructuring. Gone are the special operations forces, tight combat teams, and security force assistance brigades that helped troops face irregular fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan. In are counter-drone operations, long-range strike teams, and Pacific region task forces.
The proposal was yet another sign the United States sees war with China on the horizon.
But the US has been sending signals about its plans for Asia even when pursuing conflict in other regions, argues peace activist and political analyst KJ Noh. Noh joined host Garland Nixon on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program on Wednesday to discuss the latest machinations of Western neoconservatives.
“One, two wars are not enough, one genocide is not enough – they want more,” said Noh, referring to Ukraine and the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. “As we speak, the United States continues to prepare to engage in yet another war against China. The term 'transnational kill chain'... is their language, and they're saying, ‘this is what we need to prepare against China, in the Pacific.’”

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Noh explained that the United States just sold a $75 million weapons package to authorities in Taiwan which included a system known as Link 16. Link 16 allows armed forces in Taiwan to share data with weapons platforms in other countries, enabling Taiwan separatists to fight alongside the United States, Japan, Korea, Australia, and others against China.

"I refer to it as painting the eyes on the Buddha because when you build a Buddha sculpture or you paint a Buddha painting, the eyes are the very last thing you draw," said Noh. "It brings it to life. It makes it alive and seeing."

"And in some metaphorical sense, this is the final weapon sale that makes Taiwan's weapon sales lethal moving forward."

Although victory in the Donbass increasingly appears to be eluding the Ukrainian regime and its Western backers, Noh believes the United States is mindful of the message that's sent by their stewardship of the conflict there.

"If they were to cut and run, then it sends a message that this is what they're going to do [in Taiwan]," said Noh. "And they can't be so conspicuous about it. They need a decent interval, as they used to say about Vietnam." Thus, more Ukrainian lives are likely to be lost so the United States can save face.

Above all, Noh claims foreign policy hawks are keen to maintain the United States' projection of power and neutralize the threat to America's status as global hegemon that they perceive from China before the opportunity is lost.

"The neocons who are pushing all these wars, I think they really have a sense of urgency," said the analyst. "They have a sense of panic. They have a sense of fear. They know that their power is slipping away from them."

"Centrifugal forces are building up in Europe, certainly all across the Globe South," Noh added. "And specifically with China itself they are very, very aware that the clock is running down on their power. Rand Corporation warned about 10 years ago that they needed to go to war with China by 2025 in order to prevail. If they don't, it just gets harder."

"And so we have a General [Mike] Minihan saying that we will go to war [with China] in 2025," Noh said. "Admiral [Philip] Davidson said we'll go to war in 2027. Whatever it is, the question in Washington right now is not if we will go to war, but when, and they want it sooner rather than later."

The United States is willing to do nearly anything to maintain its hegemony, said Noh, up to even allowing "the reconstitution of fascism and fascist tendencies all across the world." Noh argued the dynamic can be seen at play with extremist leaders in Europe, Taiwan, and Korea.

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World War III Watch: US Army Restructuring to Focus on 'Large-Scale Combat'

A restructuring of the armed forces branch, which includes a renewed focus on the Pacific region, hints at where the United States plans to bring war in the years to come.

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After a decade of recruiting struggles the US Army announced a major restructuring Tuesday, with the service's revamped set of priorities revealing which areas of the world the United States plans to bring war to next.

The effort involves the cutting of 24,000 roles which are currently unfilled, representing almost five percent of the force's manpower. The Army will be left with about 470,000 troops after the restructuring, which it plans to complete over the next five years.

"We're moving away from counterterrorism and counterinsurgency," said Army Secretary Christine Wormuth, referring to roles which have been in high demand in US wars on Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. "We want to be postured for large-scale combat operations."

The Army is also planning cuts in special operations forces and other small-scale combat teams, as well as to security force assistance brigades that work to train foreign armies.

In another telling move that suggests the United States sees war with Russia or China in its future, three of five new task forces created during the restructuring will be responsible for combat in the Pacific region. Another will be assigned to Europe and Africa, while the fifth is thought to be associated with the US' Central Command in the resource-rich Middle East.

The US Armed Forces are divided into 7 separate combatant commands corresponding to different geographic regions of the world as well as outer space, while four "functional combatant commands" are responsible for efforts such as special operations and cyber warfare.

The restructuring will also create new units focused on air defense, counter-drone operations, long-range strikes, and cyber operations, suggesting the Army is closely observing the Donbass conflict where new technologies have profoundly altered modern warfare.

The Army will still need about 25,000 more troops altogether to fill every planned position, which means it will need to turn around its chronic recruiting shortfalls. Nearly every branch of the US armed forces has failed to meet recruiting targets over the last several years amidst dissatisfaction with multi-decade conquests in the Middle East. A recent survey showed high stress and low morale in the US Navy as the service struggles to operate with thousands of unfilled positions.

Recent polling has shown that approval of the country's military is at an historic low amidst a broader lack of trust in US institutions.

Is the West admitting defeat in Ukraine with the CIA's 'limited hangout?'

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Serbian-American journalist Nabojsa Malic joined Sputnik's Fault Lines program to discuss French President Emmanuel Macron's threats of military force in the Donbass as well as Sunday's revelations of the CIA's decade-long involvement in Ukraine.

"On one level this could have been an attempt by Macron to, I guess, intimidate Russia," said Malic of Macron's meeting with European leaders, "which backfired horribly because Russia is not being intimidated by this. It seems like the rapid disavowal of this option by everybody else countermanded that."

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Discussion then shifted towards reporting over the weekend on the CIA's role in turning Ukraine into an anti-Russia beachhead. Malic speculated whether the "limited hangout" represented by The New York Times' article was intended to serve as a "smokescreen" for an upcoming terrorist attack by Ukraine. The term "limited hangout" refers to a PR tactic wherein the public is given limited, carefully-selected information about something to distract from a broader, often incriminating narrative.

"It could be that all of this noise is just a smokescreen for some kind of abandonment of Ukraine because it clearly hasn't worked," said Malic, comparing the article to revelations about the CIA's role in Syria near the end of former US President Barack Obama's presidency.

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The explosive truth of the US' Nord Stream Pipeline sabotage could 'destroy' NATO, says investigative journalist Dan Lazare.

The journalist made the claim on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program after Denmark officially dropped its investigation into the 2022 Nord Stream explosions, finding they were an act of "deliberate sabotage" but refusing to investigate who was responsible.

"Everybody is afraid to say" that the United States was responsible, said Lazare, pointing out that rightwing parties like Germany's Alternative for Deutschland stand to benefit as establishment political forces avoid the subject.

"The US engaged in an act of war against a fellow NATO member," he claimed. "Once people admit what happened, NATO essentially goes up in air because an alliance is not a scheme for one member to attack another."

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Today Ukraine, tomorrow Taiwan: neoconservatives are constantly aware of the signals they send to the world as they gear up for war with China, argues peace activist and political analyst KJ Noh.

"If they were to cut and run, then it sends a message that this is what they're going to do [in Taiwan]," said Noh on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program while discussing what US support for the Ukrainian proxy war tells us about the next conflict to come.

"One, two wars are not enough, one genocide is not enough – they want more," said Noh, referring to Ukraine and the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip.

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Noh also explained that the US recently provided Taiwan with a new $75 million weapons package, including a platform that allows armed forces there to link their weapons systems with those of the United States, Japan, Korea, and other anti-China allies.

Noh says the United States is gearing up for a large-scale conflict to defend its global hegemon status against China, with some US military figures arguing the war should come next year and others predicting it will arrive in 2027. “They are very, very aware that the clock is running down on their power,” said Noh, adding that neocons are in a state of “panic” and “fear.”

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US Needs to Return to Trump's 'Remain in Mexico' Policy on Migrants - Texas Sheriff

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The United States needs to reinstate former President Donald Trump's "Remain in Mexico" policy on asylum-seekers in order to reduce the flow of migrants across the southern US border, Terrell County, Texas, Sheriff Thaddeus Cleveland told Sputnik.

“The policy that we need back is the Migrant Protection Protocols, which is the 'Remain in Mexico' policy for asylum-seekers. You wait in Mexico until you have your asylum hearing or we keep them incarcerated here in the United States,” Cleveland said on Thursday.

The Remain in Mexico policy, officially known as the Migrant Protection Protocols, required asylum-seekers to remain in Mexico until their US immigration court date.

Both Trump and President Joe Biden are expected to pay coinciding visits to the US southern border later on Thursday.

Biden will visit Brownsville, Texas, to meet with Border Patrol agents, local authorities and community leaders. He will also use the visit as an opportunity to urge Congress to pass a national security supplemental that includes funds for Ukraine and Israel, as well as border policy reforms. Republicans have rejected the supplemental, saying it does not do enough to address the border crisis.

Trump meanwhile will also visit Eagle Pass, Texas, where he is expected to deliver remarks highlighting the border policies he would introduce if re-elected as president.

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

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UPDATE - Key US Inflation Gauge PCE Continues Descent Into 2% Territory, Boosting Rate Cut Hopes

(Adds details, comments and context in paras 3-7)
WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - An inflation gauge closely watched by the Federal Reserve showed US prices continuing their descent into the 2% annual growth territory for January, boosting expectations that the world's largest economy will go ahead with interest rate cuts later in the year.
The Commerce Department's Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index, often known simply as the PCE, grew 2.4% year-on-year last month, as forecast by Wall Street economists polled by US media, data released on Thursday showed.
Core PCE, an inflationary reading that leaves out volatile food and energy prices, also came in as expected, growing 2.8% during the year to January.
"The PCE data is largely as expected," economist Greg Michalowski said in a reaction posted on the ForexLive forum. "Personal income grew nicely by 1.0%. Spending was moderate."
The Fed has indicated its desire to see the PCE return to low 2% annual growth levels in order to execute rate cuts.
The central bank's favorite inflation indicator reached a 40-year high of nearly 7% in June 2022, in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, prompting the Fed to respond with the highest rate hikes in two decades.
In late 2023, the PCE returned to below 3% the first time in nearly two years, growing at an annual pace of 2.7% in November.

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All US Presidents Except Biden Made Progress on Border Security - Sheriff

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik), Lenka White - All US presidents from Bill Clinton to Donald Trump made some progress on border security but not President Joe Biden, Sheriff for Terrell County in Texas Thaddeus Cleveland told Sputnik.
On Thursday, Biden is visiting Brownsville, Texas, in a trip coinciding with former President Trump's visit to Eagle Pass. Biden is expected to use his visit as an opportunity to urge Congress to pass a bipartisan supplemental bill with border policy reforms, which Republicans have rejected as insufficient to address the border crisis.
"Difference is in those first four administrations I've mentioned: Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, they all progressed border security. They all build a border wall. This current administration: there's currently no policy along our border," Cleveland said.
Right now the policy is "we will let you in" and we won't question you unless you are from Mexico - in this case, we would send you back, Cleveland continued.
On how to resolve the issue, Cleveland said that the US president has to send the right message.
"It starts with the President of the United States sending up a message to the world saying

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you're not going to come to our borders and enter illegally," the sheriff said.

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

President Biden's visit to the US southern border is too late and only a political attempt to save himself, National Border Patrol Council Vice President Art Del Cueto told Sputnik earlier this week.

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Biden Campaign Increases Emphasis on Abortion Rights Amid Likely Trump Showdown - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden is increasing his emphasis on abortion rights in order to gain an advantage over Republican rival Donald Trump, Bloomberg reported on Thursday, citing Biden campaign officials and allies.

The strategy comes as Biden struggles in the polls over concerns over his advanced age, the economy and inflation, and his support for Israel's war on Gaza.

Campaign officials believe that they can successfully cast the presidential election as a simple choice for Americans as to whether to uphold abortion, democracy, and civil rights by voting for Biden, particularly among moderate voters in swing states.

In recent days, Biden's campaign released a TV advertisement about a Texas woman forced to travel out of state for a medically necessary abortion. Biden also announced new executive actions regarding family planning, such as making free contraception more available.

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Гросси посетит РФ в начале марта, подтвердил источник в МАГАТЭ

ООН, 29 фев – РИА Новости. Генеральный директор Международного агентства по атомной энергии (МАГАТЭ) Рафаэль Гросси посетит РФ в начале марта, подтвердил РИА Новости источник в агентстве.

"Гендиректор Гросси планирует визит высокого уровня в Россию в начале марта", - сказал собеседник агентства.

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Key US Inflation Gauge PCE Continues Descent Into 2% Territory, Boosting Rate Cut Hopes

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - An inflation gauge closely watched by the Federal Reserve showed US prices continuing their descent into the 2% annual growth territory for January, boosting expectations that the world's largest economy will go ahead with interest rate cuts later in the year.

The Commerce Department's Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index (PCE) grew 2.4% year-on-year last month, as forecast by Wall Street economists polled by US media, data released on Thursday showed.

The Fed has indicated its desire to see the PCE return to low 2% annual growth levels in order to execute rate cuts. The central bank's favorite inflation indicator reached a four-decade high of nearly 7% in June 2022 in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, prodding the Fed to resort to some of the highest interest rate hikes in over 20 years. The PCE returned to below 3% the first time in nearly two years in December, when it grew at an annual pace of 2.6%.

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US Concerned About Israeli Ground Incursion in Lebanon in Coming Months – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration is concerned that Israel is considering a military ground incursion into Lebanon in the late spring or early summer, if US-led negotiations do not lead Hezbollah to retreat from the border, CNN reported on Thursday, citing senior administration officials.

While Israel has not made a final decision, the Biden administration is operating on the assumption that the offensive would take place in the coming months. The concern is significant enough that the possibility has been raised in intelligence briefings for senior administration officials.

One official said that opinions in the Israeli administration were split, with some viewing it as creating a threat to gain leverage in the negotiations with Lebanon, while others saw it as a military necessity.

Since Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel, there have been daily, sometimes fatal, cross-border airstrikes launched by the Israeli military and Hezbollah. It has displaced tens of thousands of residents on both sides of the border and raised the specter of all-out war. In recent days, Israel has launched airstrikes increasingly deeper into Lebanon, coming within 27 miles (43 kilometers) of Beirut.

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US Will 'Go Bankrupt' If Voters Continue to Elect Officials Big on Foreign Aid - Candidate

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WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is at risk of getting into serious financial troubles in the future if US voters continue to elect government officials who are willing to spend trillions of dollars on foreign aid, US congressional candidate Jared Lovelace told Sputnik.

Lovelace is a Republican running for election in the 10th congressional district in Texas.

"The United States hasn't had a significant shift in foreign policy strategy in the last 70 years," Lovelace said. "If we continue to elect officials who are willing to spend trillions of dollars fighting or funding other countries' wars, we are going to go bankrupt, default on our $34 trillion national debt, ruin our economy, and slowly mortgage away our freedom to the federal government and foreign countries."

Lovelace, who is an Army veteran, said he believes the United States must stop "picking and funding sides" in conflicts where only a "flicker" of democracy exists.

The United States spent $2.3 trillion in its 20-year conflict in Afghanistan, and most recently has provided more than $75 billion in assistance to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022.

"Our elected officials have been failing for decades to secure the border," Lovelace said. "They have sent trillions of dollars overseas to fight senseless and unachievable wars without clear or measurable objectives. The result has been thousands of American lives lost and trillions of wasted taxpayer dollars."

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

However, the Senate sent over a $95 billion foreign aid bill that excludes border security reforms to the House of Representatives for consideration, but House Speaker Mike Johnson has been reluctant to take it up for a vote over differences in national security priorities. The foreign aid bill includes $60 billion for Ukraine and $14 billion for Israel, among funding for other priorities.

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Border Crisis, Rising Debt Top US Issues, Not Ukraine and Israel - Congressional Candidate

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - Resolving the US border crisis and rising national debt issues should be the top priorities of the United States instead of focusing on giving more aid to Ukraine and Israel, US congressional candidate Jared Lovelace told Sputnik.

Lovelace is a Republican running for election in the 10th congressional district in Texas.

"I'm against foreign aid funding," Lovelace said. "The money should go towards the border and balancing our budget. Our border and debt are matters of national security. Ukraine and Israel are not."

The United States cannot afford to send money anywhere until it has a balanced budget, but even then foreign aid should be used wisely, Lovelace added.

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"Once a balanced budget is achieved, I will be open to prudent foreign policy initiatives that are in America's best interests - not just idealistic or traditional," Lovelace said. "Too much of our foreign policy has been based on tradition and not practical, achievable, and measurable objectives."

Last June, Congress passed legislation that suspended the debt ceiling until January 2025 to avert an unprecedented default on the federal government's debt, which currently stands at over $34 trillion.

Republican lawmakers have sought to rein in excess federal government spending, especially when it comes to approving more funding for Ukraine.

A congressional source told Sputnik that Republican support for more Ukraine funding is waning in the House of Representatives.

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

The Senate ended up approving and sending a $95 billion foreign aid bill, that excludes border security reforms, to the House of Representatives for consideration. House Speaker Mike Johnson has been hesitant to take up the bill for a vote over differences in national security priorities like border security. The foreign aid bill includes $60 billion for Ukraine and $14 billion for Israel, among funding for other priorities.

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US Gov't Must 'Break Addiction' of Deficit Spending, Risks Downfall of Country - Candidate

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The US government must end its addiction to excessive spending to prevent the downfall of the United States by economic turmoil, US congressional candidate Jared Lovelace told Sputnik.

Lovelace is a Republican running for election in the 10th congressional district in Texas.

"The federal government must break its addiction to deficit spending or the United States will cease to exist in the coming decades," Lovelace said. "Inflation is a direct result of government mismanagement of our national finances and our hard earned tax dollars. We must make sacrifices on both sides of the isle to balance the budget."

Lovelace emphasized that the US national debt issue is an existential crisis that threatens to "destroy" the United States much faster than China or Russia could ever dream of in an open conflict.

The United States is currently $34 trillion in debt after Congress passed legislation last June that suspended the debt ceiling until January 2025 to avert an unprecedented default on the federal government's debt.

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

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

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US Border Crisis Ignored for Too Long, Exploited by Bad Actors - Candidate for Congress

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The US border crisis has taken a backseat among priorities in the United States for too long and it is being exploited by drug cartels and other bad actors, US congressional candidate Jared Lovelace told Sputnik.

Lovelace is a Republican running for election in the 10th congressional district in the state of Texas.

"The border has taken the backseat for too long," Lovelace said. "Many think that the immigrants coming illegally are all poor people, refugees, or asylum seekers. The truth is that these people are being used as human shields for the cartels, human traffickers, and foreign spies/saboteurs."

According to the US House Homeland Security Committee, criminal organizations in Mexico made an estimated $13 billion in 2021 from human smuggling on the US southern border. A US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) official previously said migrants pay cartels from $8,000 to $12,000 to smuggle them into the United States.

"Enforcing the rule of law will go a long way," Lovelace said. "Right now, illegal immigrants are knowingly released back into the country, even after committing crimes. Welfare spending supports countless illegal immigrants."

Last week, an illegal Venezuelan migrant who was released from US custody killed 22-year-old college student Laken Riley on the University of Georgia campus.

Lovelace said he supports legal immigration to the United States, which should be made more achievable for hard-working and motivated migrants who will pay taxes and contribute to the "American dream."

Earlier this month, Senate Republicans rejected a $118 billion national security supplemental package that includes $60 billion for Ukraine, $14 billion for Israel and border policy reforms. Republicans claim the border security reforms in the bill would not do enough to resolve the border crisis.

Illegal immigration is a top issue for US voters this upcoming presidential election in November, according to national polls.

CBP data shows that the Biden administration has experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the southern border, numbering more than eight million.

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Biden Orders Commerce Investigation Into Chinese Car Technology – White House

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden announced on Thursday that he had directed the Commerce Secretary to open an investigation into "connected" cars that use technology from China and other "countries of concern," according to a release.

"Today, I am announcing unprecedented actions to ensure that cars on US roads from countries of concern like China do not undermine our national security. I have directed my Secretary of Commerce to conduct an investigation into connected vehicles with technology from countries of concern and to take action to respond to the risks," the release stated.

Biden said China was "determined to dominate the future of the auto market, including by using unfair practices."

He also warned that connected cars from China could pose a risk to US national security by remotely collecting sensitive data about US citizens and infrastructure.

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Excessive Use of US Sanctions May Lessen World Trade, Create Trade Blocs - Ex-IMF Official

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The excessive use of US sanctions may lessen world trade and lead to the establishment of several powerful trading blocs, former member of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Executive Board Hossein Askari told Sputnik.

"Less world trade than what we might have had," Askari said when asked about the long-term impacts of excessive US sanctions. "Also, we could see the emergence of three or four powerful trading blocks, where the politics and economic finance of the countries are more aligned."

Askari also said that excessive use of US sanctions will restructure the global economy, which will eventually lead to even higher levels of inflation worldwide.

Last week, the United States imposed some 500 new sanctions on Russian individuals and entities, including in the energy sector, in light of the two-year anniversary of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

Overall, the United States has imposed some 3,500 anti-Russia sanctions on individuals and entities since the start of the special military operation in February 2022.

Russian officials have pointed out that Russia is solving all the problems the collective West has created to contain and weaken the country's economy, but the West lacks the courage to recognize that the sanctions regime has failed.

Russian officials have also said that the Western sanctions have dealt a serious blow to the global economy and have actually increased the prices of electricity, fuel and food products in Europe and in the United States.

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Overuse of US Sanctions Curbs Their Impact, Hard to Monitor All of Them - Ex-IMF Official

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The overuse of US sanctions hinders their effect and it is difficult to manage them all at the same time, former member of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) executive board Hossein Askari told Sputnik.

"Yes, the US has always overused the sanction weapon in large part to pound its chest and tell Americans and the world that it is acting, it is doing something to counteract the objectionable policies of an adversary," Askari said. "Yet some of these sanctions have little effect and the US cannot monitor so many thousands of sanctions to assess violations."

The United States would be more effective to have a few focused sanctions on a country's access to international finance and its major exports and imports, Askari added.

Last week, the United States rolled out approximately 500 new sanctions on Russian people and entities, including in the energy sector, in light of the two-year anniversary of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine. Overall, the United States has imposed some 3,500 anti-Russia sanctions on individuals and entities since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022.

Russian officials have pointed out that Russia is solving all the problems the collective West has created to contain and weaken the country's economy, but the West lacks the courage to recognize that the sanctions regime has failed. Moscow adds that the sanctions dealt a serious blow to the global economy and have actually increased the prices of electricity, fuel, and food products in Europe and the United States.

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Seizing Russia's Frozen Assets May Unsettle Flow of Foreign Investments - Ex-IMF Official

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - A seizure of Russia's' frozen assets abroad by the European Union and its G7 allies would unsettle the flow of foreign investments and damage the global economy, former member of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) executive board Hossein Askari told Sputnik.

The European Union (EU) is estimated to hold some $300 billion in Russian central bank assets together with its G7 allies, including the United States, Japan and Canada. The Western allies have been holding talks on how to tap the frozen funds to help pay for the reconstruction of Ukraine, but Russia argues this is illegal and will ruin the West’s image as a safe haven for global money.

“Seizing Russia’s assets now and awarding them to Ukraine would set a dangerous precedent," Askari said. "It would unsettle the flow of finance and foreign direct investment as countries would see a heightened risk of their assets being seized. Such reduced flows would in turn damage the global economy.”

Last year, the World Bank estimated that $411 billion would be needed for the reconstruction and recovery of Ukraine.

European Council President Charles Michel previously noted that drawing up a legal framework

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that would allow the EU to seize Russian state money would not be an easy task, and suggested focusing on unlocking the profits generated by those assets first.

Russia views potential attempts by the US and EU to seize Russian assets as theft and also an act of trade war, and Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has warned that Moscow would have a tough response to such an escalation of economic aggression.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Austin to Testify to Lawmakers Over Controversial Secret Hospitalization

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will be in the US Capitol on Thursday to testify before lawmakers about his secret hospitalization last month to be treated for prostate cancer, which caught everyone in the US government off guard, including the US president himself.

Austin will provide testimony to the House Armed Services Committee at 10:00 a.m. on Thursday (15:00 GMT) regarding the circumstances surrounding his failure to communicate his

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absence to the US president in a timely manner during his recent hospitalization.

Austin was initially hospitalized on January 1 for complications following a December surgical procedure to treat his prostate cancer. The Defense Department failed then to communicate Austin's hospitalization to the White House for several days, which eventually triggered an investigation by the Pentagon Inspector General into the matter.

Austin was briefly hospitalized again earlier this month for close monitoring in connection to a bladder issue.

Both Republicans and Democrats in Congress lashed out at Austin about his lack of effort to notify lawmakers and the Biden administration about his hospitalization, which prompted several bipartisan calls for him to resign.

Following the mass outcry from the public, Austin held a press conference to apologize for failing to notify President Joe Biden and others in a timely manner. The defense chief said he felt embarrassed to announce he has prostate cancer.

The White House has said Biden still has confidence in Austin to serve as defense secretary despite the incident. However, lawmakers have taken issue with the potential national security risks Austin's lack of communication could have instilled, especially as the United States was in the middle of operations in the Middle East to thwart attacks from militant groups.

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Russian Energy Exports to China, India Key to Thwarting US Sanctions - Ex-IMF Official

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - US sanctions on Russia have not had the desired consequences of slowing Moscow's economy due to the continued flow of Russian energy exports, especially to key economic powerhouses like China and India, which the United States is hesitant to sanction, former member of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) executive board Hossein Askari told Sputnik.

"Two countries that need oil and gas are China and India, these are big countries that are willing to defy secondary US sanctions," Askari said. "As long as the price of oil and gas is at an acceptable discount and they know that the US cannot afford to sanction them too, especially not China."

Russia, Askari added, has learned some lessons on how best to evade certain sanctions.

Last week, the United States rolled out approximately 500 new sanctions on Russian people and entities, including in the energy sector, in light of the two-year anniversary of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine. Overall, the United States has imposed some 3,500 anti-Russia sanctions on individuals and entities since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022.

Earlier this month, International Monetary Fund (IMF) spokesperson Julie Kozack said that Russia's economy has surprised spectators in terms of strength and growth despite Western efforts to restrict its economy through sanctions.

However, Kozack added that the IMF projects these sanctions and human capital issues may impact the Russian economy in the medium term.

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Texas Executes Inmate Ivan Cantu For Murder of His Cousin, Cousin's Fiance - Media Witness

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The state of Texas executed inmate Ivan Cantu on Wednesday evening for the murders of his cousin and his cousin's fiance in November 2000, according to a media witness.

The media witness reported that Cantu was pronounced dead at 6:47 p.m. Central Time.

Cantu, 50, reportedly used his final words to say he did not kill his cousin James Mosqueda and his cousin's fiance Amy Kitchen.

Cantu also said he does not believe his execution will bring the families any closure or peace, the media witness said.

A jury sentenced Cantu to death in 2001 for the murder of Mosqueda and Kitchen, who were shot in Dallas in November 2000.

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Trump to Appeal Judge Order to Be Removed From Primary Ballot on March 19- Statement

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump will appeal a judge's order to have him removed from the Illinois Republican primary ballot on March 19, Trump's spokesman Steven Cheung said.

"Today, an activist Democrat judge in Illinois summarily overruled the state's board of elections and contradicted earlier decisions from dozens of other state and federal jurisdictions," Cheung said on Wednesday. "This is an unconstitutional ruling that we will quickly appeal."

Earlier, Cook County judge Tracie Porter ordered the state election board to remove Trump from the March 19 primary ballot but put her order on hold until Friday.

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Johnson Swears Congressman Suozzi Into US House as Replacement for George Santos

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson swore Democratic Congressman Tom Suozzi into office as a replacement for ousted lawmaker George Santos, leaving Republicans in the House of Representatives with a 219-213 majority.

Suozzi on Wednesday officially took over the New York seat once held by Santos, whom House lawmakers expelled from the lower chamber of the US Congress in December.

Suozzi won a special election to replace Santos, altering the balance of power in the House of

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Representatives.
Suozzi previously served in the House of Representatives from 2017 to 2023, but left the seat to unsuccessfully run for governor of New York.

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Canadian Government to Airdrop Aid in Gaza 'Within Next Week' - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has decided to airdrop aid into Gaza within the next week, a CBS News Correspondent said, citing Canadian officials.
"CBC News has learned that the government has decided to airdrop aid into Gaza. A Canadian government source says that the airdrop will happen within the next week," said Kate McKenna on Wednesday.
The news comes as the Biden administration is mulling delivering humanitarian aid to besieged Gaza by airdropping it from US military planes while Israelis continue blocking the free passage of aid to the enclave.
Earlier in the day, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said that Israel, together with the United States, France, and several Arab countries, had carried out a joint humanitarian campaign in which they dropped parcels containing food and medical equipment from planes in 17 locations across the Gaza Strip.
In February 2016, the World Food Program carried out its first airdrop, delivering 21 tons of food products to Syria. Over 18 months, it totaled 309 drops for 100,000 people, as stated on its website.
On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from Gaza and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages.
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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US Notified Russia About Potential Crash of Spacecrafts Wednesday - Space Force

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The United States notified Russia about a potential collision of a US spacecraft and a Russian satellite early Wednesday, a US Space Force spokesperson told Sputnik.

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"Screening results predicted the objects would approach each other close enough that the US government notified Russia," the spokesperson said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, NASA told Sputnik that there was no collision.

The US Defense Department is still conducting a post-analysis of the event, the Space Force noted.

Late Tuesday, NASA warned that its Thermosphere Ionosphere Mesosphere Energetics and Dynamics Mission (TIMED) spacecraft and the Russian cosmos 2221 satellite were at risk of colliding, which could result in a "significant debris generation."

NASA said the two non-maneuverable orbiting spacecraft were expected to make their closest pass at about 1:30 a.m. Eastern Time on Wednesday at an altitude of about 373 miles.

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US Judge Orders Trump Be Removed From Republican Primary Ballot on March 19 - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - A US judge ordered the removal of former President Donald Trump from the Republican primary ballot in the state of Illinois, the Chicago Sun-Times reported.

The report said on Wednesday that Cook County judge Tracie Porter ordered the state election board to remove Trump from the March 19 primary ballot but put her order on hold until Friday.

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US House Passes Legislation to Bolster Nuclear Power System

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation to bolster nuclear energy technologies in the United States, through licensing and regulatory reforms.

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Atomic Energy Advancement Act, in a vote on Wednesday of 365 in favor, 36 opposed and one present.

“This legislation is the biggest reform in nuclear power in more than a generation and takes the commonsense steps needed to restore America to the global forefront of nuclear innovation,” Congressman Jeff Duncan and Congresswoman Diana DeGette said in a previous joint statement on the bill.

The legislation modernizes the US’ nuclear regulatory structure and streamlines the process of introducing more nuclear-generated power through predictable licensing, the statement said.

The legislation is a conglomeration of 11 bills authored by House Energy and Commerce Committee members, the statement added.

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Overuse of US Sanctions Curbs Their Impact, Hard to Monitor All of Them - Ex-IMF Official

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"Yes, the US has always overused the sanction weapon in large part to pound its chest and tell Americans and the world that it is acting, it is doing something to counteract the objectionable policies of an adversary," Askari said. "Yet some of these sanctions have little effect and the US cannot monitor so many thousands of sanctions to assess violations."

The United States would be more effective to have a few focused sanctions on a country's access to international finance and its major exports and imports, Askari added.

Last week, the United States rolled out approximately 500 new sanctions on Russian people and entities, including in the energy sector, in light of the two-year anniversary of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine. Overall, the United States has imposed some 3,500 anti-Russia sanctions on individuals and entities since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022.

Russian officials have pointed out that Russia is solving all the problems the collective West has created to contain and weaken the country's economy, but the West lacks the courage to recognize that the sanctions regime has failed. Moscow adds that the sanctions dealt a serious blow to the global economy and have actually increased the prices of electricity, fuel, and food products in Europe and the United States.

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US Congressman Says One-Third of House Lawmakers Could Stop Government Funding Deal

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - One-third of lawmakers in the US House of Representatives could put a stop to a multi-phase government funding plan released by the congressional leadership, US Congressman Thomas Massie said.

“The first installment of the Omnibus is allegedly coming up for a vote next week,” Massie said in a statement via the social media platform X on Wednesday. “If just one-third of US Representatives will oppose it we can stop this monstrosity.”

Earlier on Wednesday, congressional leadership released a plan to avert a government shutdown and fund the federal government in several steps. The plan involves passing a short-term resolution this week, passing a set of six appropriations bills before March 8 and then another six before March 22.

Congressional negotiators have been working on the legislation behind closed doors for weeks, Massie said.

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House Freedom Caucus Chairman Bob Good said on Wednesday that a full-year continuing resolution is a superior option to the current deal, which would cost $100 billion more, Massie said.

Earlier this week, Massie said that he supports a full-year continuing resolution because it would require a 1% discretionary spending cut if lawmakers extend funding beyond April 30.

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BAE Systems Wins $400Mln Deal to Maintain Danish Army's CV90 Vehicle Force - Release

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - BAE Systems has signed a $400 million agreement with Denmark's Ministry of Defense to maintain its fleet of CV90 infantry fighting vehicles over the next 15 years through 2039, the company announced in a press release.

"BAE Systems has signed a framework agreement with the Danish Ministry of Defense Acquisition and Logistics Organization (DALO) to provide repair and maintenance services for the Danish Army's CV90s over a period of 15 years," the release said on Wednesday.

Under the $400 million agreement, BAE Systems will provide an upgraded level of operability for the infantry fighting vehicles, the company said.

"The agreement covers repair and maintenance services for the Danish Army’s fleet of 44 CV90s, such as the delivery of spare parts at a time when the service’s operational tempo remains at a high level," the release said.

Some 1,700 CV90s operate in 17 different variants in service with ten European nations, of which seven are NATO members, and it has seen combat in Liberia, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, BAE Systems said.

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US Space Force Orders BAE Systems Resilient Ground Control, Command System - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The US Space Force has ordered a new resilient command system to be developed for them by BAE Systems, the company announced in a press release.

"BAE Systems has been selected by the Space Systems Command (SSC) Space Enterprise Consortium (SpEC) to provide a prototype ground system for the US Space Force’s SSC Future Operationally Resilient Ground Evolution Command and Control (FORGE C2) project," the release said on Wednesday.

The goal of the FORGE C2 effort is to evolve the current ground architecture, leveraging newer technologies and architecture approaches, the release said.

"BAE Systems will integrate proven capabilities into a prototype ground system that will allow the Space Force to provide command and control capabilities for Next-Generation Overhead

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Persistent Infrared (OPIR) GEO (NGG) and Next-Generation OPIR Polar (NGP) systems as well as enabling the transition of the legacy Space Based Infrared System (SBIRS) assets," the release added.

FORGE C2 will be designed to integrate functionality such as telemetry, tracking, command, flight dynamics, mission management and ground resource management into a consolidated framework, according to the release.

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Texas Wildfire Poses No Imminent Threat to US Nuclear Weapon Facility Pantex - Statement

EL PASO, February 29 (Sputnik) - The US nuclear weapon plant Pantex is no longer under any imminent threat by the massive Smokehouse Creek Fire in the state of Texas, the company said in a statement.

"There is no imminent wildfire threat to the plant at this time," the company said on Wednesday afternoon.

The Pantex facility, located near the Texas city of Amarillo, returned to normal operations on Wednesday following non-essential personnel evacuations and shift cancellations on Tuesday due to the wildfires north of the plant site.

As of Wednesday afternoon, media reported that the fire has burned through 850,000 acres and is only 3% contained. Earlier in the day, data from the Texas A&M Forest Service showed that the Smokehouse Creek Fire has become the second-largest wildfire on record in the state.

Since 1975, the Pantex Plant has been the United States' primary assembly, disassembly, retrofit, and life-extension center for nuclear weapons. In 1991, the plant assembled its last nuclear bomb and has since been dismantling the weapons retired from the stockpile and storing the resulting plutonium.

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High Winds, Weather Doubts May Delay Friday Astronaut Launch to ISS - NASA Official

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - Rising winds and a looming trough of low pressure may lead NASA officials to delay the planned launch on Friday of three US astronauts and a Russian cosmonaut to the International Space Station (ISS) on a SpaceX Dragon spacecraft, NASA Commercial Crew Program Manager Steve Stitch told reporters.

"The East Coast weather is not as favorable as we would like for Friday," Stitch told a press conference at Kennedy Space Center in Florida on Wednesday. "There is a weather trough [of low pressure] that is moving through. I would say it is marginal right now based on the forecast."

A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket is scheduled to launch NASA astronauts Matthew Dominick, Michael Barratt, and Jeanette Epps and Roscosmos cosmonaut Alexander Grebenkin on as crew 8 in

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the current series of missions to the ISS just after midnight at 12:04 am Eastern Standard Time (EST) on Friday on a Dragon Endeavor Spacecraft, NASA said.

However, "The vehicle is only designed to handle a certain amount of wind. We just have to look at the data a bit more. ...The winds where Dragon would land are right now a little out of the limits," Stitch said.

The mission will be the eighth crew rotation mission and the ninth human spaceflight mission to the ISS on a SpaceX Dragon since 2020, the US space agency said.

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US Says Struck 'Good Deal' to Buy 3.2Mln Barrels For Oil Reserve at Below $78 Per Barrel

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has contracted to buy from three US companies 3.2 million barrels of locally-produced crude at below the market price of $78 per barrel to help refill the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR), the US Energy Department said in a statement.

"The 3.2 million barrels are being purchased for an average price of $77.39, well below the average of about $95 per barrel that SPR crude was sold for in 2022, securing a good deal for taxpayers," the statement said on Wednesday.

In Wednesday's New York trading, a barrel of US crude's West Texas Intermediate benchmark for April delivery settled at $78.54 per barrel.

The statement said that ExxonMobil Oil Corp provided the single largest portion of the purchase order announced on Wednesday, with 1.4 million barrels. Macquarie Commodities Trading US came up with 1.2 million and Sunoco Partners Marketing and Terminals the balance of 600,000.

To date, the Energy Department has purchased 26.28 million barrels of crude for the SPR at an average price of $76.47, the statement said.

It said the department has also done exchange deals for 4 million barrels with local energy companies that provided crude to the market initially, before being repaid with the exact number of barrels and an agreed financial compensation.

The Energy Department said it will "continue to evaluate options to refill the SPR while securing a good deal for taxpayers."

The Biden administration announced various installments of crude purchases in recent months aimed at refilling the SPR, which saw outflows totaling more than 200 million barrels over the past two years.

Concerns of oversupply have brought US crude prices down sharply in recent months from the highs of 2022, when they peaked at more than $130 a barrel.

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Judge Denies Trump Request to Delay Enforcement of Fraud Case Fines- Court Docs

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The Judge presiding over former President Donald Trump's civil fraud case has rejected a request by Trump's attorneys to delay the enforcement of the penalties in the case but did grant a stay, court documents show.

"The judgment orders unprecedented and punitive disgorgement of nearly $460 million and overbroad permanent injunctive relief . . . in the absence of legal authority or factual support," Trump's attorneys argued in the request.

Though the judge, Arthur Engoron, denied the request to stay the fines, he did grant the former president an interim stay of the judgment barring him from running New York businesses or taking out loans from New York banks for three years.

"Over opposition, appellants are granted an interim stay of the branches of Supreme Court's judgment, entered February 23, 2024, which enjoined the individual defendants from serving in the financial control function of any New York corporation or similar business entity...in New York State...and which enjoined certain individual and corporate defendants from applying for loans from any financial institution chartered by or registered with the New York State Department of Financial Services for 3 years," wrote Engoron.

Last week, a US judge ruled that Trump is liable for more than $354 million in his civil fraud trial in New York.

The civil fraud case against Trump was brought by New York Attorney General Letitia James for allegedly lying about the value of Trump properties, for which James sought $370 million in fines and to ban Trump from the New York State real estate industry. Trump has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing in the case.

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US Lawmakers Agree on Short-Term Funding Measure, Plans to Pass Spending Bills - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - US lawmakers reached a deal to temporarily fund the federal government with a continuing resolution to allow more time to pass appropriations bills and avert a government shutdown, congressional leaders said in a joint statement.

“To give the House and Senate Appropriations Committees adequate time to execute on this deal… and to allow members 72 hours to review, a short-term continuing resolution to fund agencies through March 8 and the 22 will be necessary, and voted on by the House and Senate this week,” the statement said on Wednesday.

The statement was issued by House Speaker Mike Johnson, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell. Lawmakers face a partial government shutdown deadline on Friday and a full shutdown deadline on March 8.

Congressional negotiators agreed to six appropriations bills, on which lawmakers will vote prior to March 8, the statement said. The remaining six appropriations bills will be finalized and voted

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on prior to March 22, the statement said.

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US Supreme Court Says Will Hear Trump Immunity Case, Sets Arguments for Week of April 22

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court said it will consider former President Donald Trump's immunity claims in the 2020 election interference case and has scheduled to hear oral arguments in the week of April 22.

The Supreme Court granted a certiorari in the case earlier on Wednesday and ordered lower courts to suspend consideration of the issue until the top court sends down its judgment.

The Supreme Court set the required briefs in the case to be filed on or before March 19.

Earlier this month, a US federal appeals court ruled that Trump is not immune from prosecution in his 2020 election interference case, which Trump appealed to the Supreme Court.

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UPDATE- Air-dropping Humanitarian Aid 'Challenging', Remains as Option for Gaza - UN Spokesman

(Updates with additional details, background in paras 4-5)

UNITED NATIONS, February 29 (Sputnik) - The airdropping mechanism of dropping food aid is challenging, however, it remains on the table as an option for the people of Gaza, the UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said during a press briefing.

"The pictures of the airdrop tell the story … Airdrops are extremely challenging. But they are an option," Dujarric said on Wednesday.

Ideally, the UN wants more roads opened but all options remain on the table for the World Food Programme, he added.

Later on Wednesday, Axios reported that the Biden administration is mulling delivering humanitarian aid to besieged Gaza by airdropping it from US military planes while Israelis continue blocking the free passage of aid to the enclave.

Earlier in the day, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said that Israel, together with the United States, France, and several Arab countries, had carried out a joint humanitarian campaign in which they dropped parcels containing food and medical equipment from planes in 17 locations across the Gaza Strip.

In February 2016, the World Food Program carried out its first airdrop, delivering 21 tons of food products to Syria. Over 18 months, it totaled 309 drops for 100,000 people, as stated on its website.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from Gaza and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around

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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.

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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Biden Remains Fit for Duty, Can Fully Execute Responsibilities - White House Physician

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden remains fit for duty and can fully execute his responsibilities without any exemptions or accommodations, physician Kevin O'Connor said after conducting an annual physical examination of the US president.

"The president feels well and this year's physical identified no new concerns. He continues to be fit for duty and fully executes all of his responsibilities without any exemptions or accommodations," O'Connor said in a letter on Wednesday.

This year's physical examination included consultations with specialists in optometry, dentistry, orthopedics, physical therapy, neurology, sleep medicine, cardiology, radiology and dermatology, the letter said.

Biden has had a stiff gait for several years, but the situation has not worsened since 2023, the letter said.

"The President's arthritic changes remain moderate to severe, but still do not result in nerve root compression significant enough that they would warrant any specific treatment," the letter said.

O'Connor described Biden as a healthy, active, robust 81-year-old man who remains fit to execute his duties, according to the letter.

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Comer Says US House Will Hold Public Hearing With Hunter Biden

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - US House lawmakers will hold a public hearing with Hunter Biden as part of their impeachment inquiry into his father, President Joe Biden, House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer said.

On Wednesday, US House oversight and judiciary panel lawmakers held a closed-door deposition with Hunter Biden as part of their inquiry.

"This impeachment inquiry will now go to the next phase, which would be a public hearing," Comer said after attending the deposition.

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Biden made contradictory statements that require further review, Comer said. A public hearing will hopefully clear up the discrepancies between statements made by Hunter Biden and his associates, Comer said.

House lawmakers will release transcripts of the closed-door deposition as soon as both parties agree, which could be in the next two to three days, Comer said.

House lawmakers are investigating the Biden family for alleged foreign influence peddling and bribery. Hunter Biden denies that his father either profited from or engaged in his business activities.

Republican US Congresswoman Nancy Mace said that Biden was dishonest and defiant during the deposition, whereas Democratic Congressman Jamie Raskin defended Biden's testimony and called the inquiry a waste of legislative time and resources.

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US Congressional Leaders Strike Deal to Avoid Government Shutdown – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) – Congressional leaders have struck a funding deal to avoid a government shutdown and US lawmakers are expected to vote on a stopgap legislation by the end of this week, Politico reported citing a senior leadership aide.

The deal was also struck on the Agriculture, Energy-Water, Military Construction, Transportation, Interior-Environment, and Commerce-Justice-Science bills, pushing the deadline for them to March 8, the report said.

Senate and House will have two more days to sign off on the deal before the US Treasury runs out of funds to finance the government on Saturday.

The deadline for the rest of the fiscal bills, including those providing funding for the Pentagon, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education, will be pushed to March 22, according to the report.

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Mississippi Corrections Facilities Breach Conditions of Confinement- Justice Department

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The Justice Department announced that three Mississippi Department of Corrections facilities' conditions breach the 8th and 14th Amendments.

"The Justice Department announced today its findings that conditions of confinement at three Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) facilities violate the 8th and 14th Amendments to the US Constitution," the Justice Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

The 8th Amendment prohibits excessive bail, fines, and cruel and unusual punishments, while the 14th Amendment ensures no state can infringe on the privileges of US citizens, deprive

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anyone of life, liberty, or property without due process, or deny equal protection under the law.
"Today's announcement follows the Department's April 2022 report finding that conditions at the Mississippi State Penitentiary violated the constitutional rights of persons incarcerated," the statement said.
According to the statement, since February 2020, the Justice Department has been investigating Parchman, Central Mississippi Correctional Facility, South Mississippi Correctional Institution, and Wilkinson County Correctional Facility for violations under the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act (CRIPA).
The report found that MDOC consistently breaches the constitutional rights of inmates across the three facilities, citing failures in protection against violence, supervision, contraband control, investigation of harm, and living conditions, with issues worsened by understaffing and gang influence, the statement said.
The statement added that the report discovered that individuals at MDOC and CRIPA are subjected to extended solitary confinement under severe conditions.

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US, Mexico, Guatemala Agree to Deepen Cooperation to Address Migration - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - The United States, Mexico and Guatemala will take steps to further deepen cooperation among the three countries in order to address mass migration issues in the shared region, according to a joint statement.
US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, and other US officials met with their counterparts from Mexico and Guatemala in Washington on Wednesday for talks on dealing with mass migration in the region and other related issues.
"Discussion also focused on the need to increase coordinated joint efforts on humane border management and enforcement, including at the US-Mexico and Mexico-Guatemala borders," the joint statement said on Wednesday. "The three delegations committed to share data about migration flows by launching a new dashboard, which will enhance data-driven decision-making and coordination."
The three delegations expressed an "urgency" to address the root causes of irregular migration and displacement, which could include responses such as encouraging investments in Guatemala that improve quality of life, the joint statement noted.
"Participants also emphasized the need to foster economic productivity, foster supply chains between our countries, and create jobs in the region," the statement said.
The three countries also committed to strengthen joint law enforcement efforts to combat human trafficking, including by enhancing information sharing and working collectively to investigate and prosecute human trafficking and migrant smuggling networks, according to the statement.
Moreover, the statement said the three governments also committed to establish a trilateral working group focused on improving security, law enforcement, and infrastructure along their

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international borders.

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US Treasury Says No Significant Move to De-Dollarization in Global Economy

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) – The United States does not see significant moves toward de-dollarization of the global economy, US Treasury Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson said.

"There is nothing that we have seen that suggests that there is any significant move to de-dollarization that we proceed in the global financial system," Nelson said during a conversation at the Hudson Institute on Wednesday.

The position of the US dollar is very strong, the official said.

Nelson also highlighted the strength of the US economy and financial system.

In an interview with Tucker Carlson, Russian President Vladimir Putin called the US's use of the dollar as a foreign policy tool one of the biggest strategic mistakes by the US leadership. Even American allies are now downsizing their US dollar reserves, Putin pointed out.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said earlier this month that the de-dollarization of Russia's foreign trade is underway, with about 90% of all mutual payments with China and about 50% with India being made in national currencies.

US Federal Reserve Governor Christopher Waller said that the US dollar's dominance is likely to stay despite headlines about trade blocs, cryptocurrencies and sanctions supposedly undermining its standing as the world's reserve currency.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) -

WESTERN MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE

* NATO will not become a party to the conflict in Ukraine, and German military personnel will not be sent to Ukraine, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said on Wednesday.

* The NATO countries agree that the alliance will not deploy its ground forces in Ukraine, German government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit said.

* The United States lets its allies and partners decide for themselves whether to send their troops to Ukraine following French President Emmanuel Macron's comments on the issue.

INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL SYSTEM

* Russia stated during the G20 finance ministers meeting that there is need to reform the

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international financial and monetary system and its position was supported by a number of countries, Russian Deputy Finance Minister Ivan Chebeskov told Sputnik.
* Western countries recognized the surge in inequality in the world after the pandemic, but did not link it with their monetary policy at the meeting of G20 finance ministers, Chebeskov told Sputnik.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* The Russian armed forces have taken control over the Petrovskoye village in the Avdiivka, also known as Avdeyevka, direction, the Defense Ministry said on Wednesday.
* Ukraine has lost up to 230 soldiers both killed and wounded in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* Ukraine does not need external assistance when it comes to escalating internal tensions, as such processes are maturing from within the country, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

SITUATION IN TRANSNISTRIA
* Transnistria, also known as the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR), has turned to Russia for assistance in connection with the economic blockade by Chisinau, according to a declaration adopted by PMR lawmakers on Wednesday.
* Tiraspol has asked Russia to intensify the political and diplomatic settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, Transnistrian Foreign Minister Vitaly Ignatiev, said.
* Russia prioritizes protection of interests of residents of unrecognized republic of Transnistria and carefully considered all its requests, the Foreign Ministry told Sputnik.
* Russia believes that it is necessary to intensify the work within the 5+2 format on Transnistria with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) performing the role of a mediator, Russian Permanent Representative to the OSCE Alexander Lukashevich told Sputnik.

CHAD
* Gunfire can be heard in Chad's capital of N'Djamena, the ChadOne news agency reported on Wednesday.
* A group of military personnel is heading to the presidential palace in N'Djamena and is trying to take control, the agency reported.
* The leader of the Chadian opposition Socialist Party Without Borders (PSF) and cousin of the country's transitional President Yaya Dillo is dead, the agency reported.
* The government of Chad has declared a curfew to protect the population of the country, Chadian Ambassador to Russia Adam Bechir Mahamoud told Sputnik.

RUSSIAN ENERGY
* Russia is not considering the introduction of the a complete ban on the export of diesel fuel, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Wednesday.
* Russia's current oil output complies with all agreements and amounts to about 9.5 million barrels per day, Novak said.
* Russia's oil output by the end of 2024 is forecast to amount 520-530 million tonnes, Novak said.
* Russia will not revise the proportion of oil exports reduction due to the ban on gasoline

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exports, currently the total volume of 500,000 barrels per day is important, Novak said.

LEAK AT INTERNATINOAL SPACE STATION

* Experts have registered an air leak on board the International Space Station (ISS), but the crew and the station are not in danger, Russian state space corporation Roscosmos said on Wednesday.

* The long-running leak in the Russian segment of the ISS has doubled in its rate but the section is sealed and NASA and Roscosmos are cooperating smoothly in dealing with it, NASA ISS Program Manager Joe Montelbano said.

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PREVIEW - Austin to Testify to Lawmakers Over Controversial Secret Hospitalization

WASHINGTON, February 29 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will be in the US Capitol on Thursday to testify before lawmakers about his secret hospitalization last month to be treated for prostate cancer, which caught everyone in the US government off guard, including the US president himself.

Austin will provide testimony to the House Armed Services Committee at 10:00 a.m. on Thursday (15:00 GMT) regarding the circumstances surrounding his failure to communicate his absence to the US president in a timely manner during his recent hospitalization.

Austin was initially hospitalized on January 1 for complications following a December surgical procedure to treat his prostate cancer. The Defense Department failed then to communicate Austin's hospitalization to the White House for several days, which eventually triggered an investigation by the Pentagon Inspector General into the matter.

Austin was briefly hospitalized again earlier this month for close monitoring in connection to a bladder issue.

Both Republicans and Democrats in Congress lashed out at Austin about his lack of effort to notify lawmakers and the Biden administration about his hospitalization, which prompted several bipartisan calls for him to resign.

Following the mass outcry from the public, Austin held a press conference to apologize for failing to notify President Joe Biden and others in a timely manner. The defense chief said he felt embarrassed to announce he has prostate cancer.

The White House has said Biden still has confidence in Austin to serve as defense secretary despite the incident. However, lawmakers have taken issue with the potential national security risks Austin's lack of communication could have instilled, especially as the United States was in the middle of operations in the Middle East to thwart attacks from militant groups.

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Biden Says Doctors Think He Looks 'Too Young' Following Annual Physical Examination

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that doctors think he looks "too young" after they conducted the president's annual physical examination.
"They think I look too young," Biden told reporters, "There is nothing different than last year."
Earlier on Wednesday, Biden underwent an annual physical examination - his third since becoming a president - at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.
At 81 years of age, Biden is the oldest president in US history and has been constantly criticized for his cognitive decline and a tendency to fall to the ground. Some lawmakers and pundits have called on Biden to step down due to his declining psycho-physical condition.

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Ex-RNC Chair Says Doesn't Expect McConnell Resignation to Have Impact on US Foreign Policy

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's decision to step down from his leadership role will not have much of an impact on US foreign policy, former Republican National Committee chairman Jim Gilmore told Sputnik on Wednesday.
Earlier in the day, McConnell announced that he intends to step down as Senate Republican leader in November. McConnell has previously said that he intends to continue serving in the Senate through the end of his current term.
"I don't think so," Gilmore said when asked if the leadership change will impact US foreign policy. "The reason, of course, is that the Republicans obviously don't have a majority in the Senate at this point."
Moreover, Gilmore said he does not expect former President Donald Trump to have a heavy influence on who Republicans vote to serve as the party's new leader in the Senate.
McConnell's age and health are catching up with him, so he may feel obliged to step away in the best interest of the United States, Gilmore added.

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White House Says US House Impeachment Inquiry, Hunter Biden Deposition ‘Stunt’

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - The White House believes that the US House of Representatives’ impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden is a stunt, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.
Earlier on Wednesday, Joe Biden’s son, Hunter, provided closed-door deposition to US House judiciary and oversight panel lawmakers. The US House of Representatives is investigating alleged foreign influence peddling and bribery by the Biden family.

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"We've been very clear here that we think it's a stunt that has dragged on for months," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing, when asked about the inquiry and Hunter Biden's deposition.

The inquiry has not uncovered wrongdoing by Joe Biden, Jean-Pierre said. Hunter Biden told lawmakers that his father neither engaged in nor profited from his business activities.

However, Republican US Congresswoman Nancy Mace said that Hunter Biden was dishonest and defiant during the deposition.

In contrast, Democratic Congressman Jamie Raskin called the inquiry and deposition a waste of legislative time and resources.

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US Inmate Execution by Lethal Injection in Idaho Halted Over Failure to Find Vein

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - The attempt by prison officials in the US state of Idaho to execute Thomas Creech failed because they could not find a vein to inject a lethal cocktail intravenously, the Idaho Department of Corrections said on Wednesday.

"At approximately 11:00a.m., Director Tewalt, after consulting with the medical team leader, determined that the medical team could not establish an IV [intravenous] line, rendering the execution unable to proceed," the release said. "Mr. Creech will be returned to his cell and witnesses will be escorted out of the facility."

The death warrant will expire at 11:59 p.m. and the state of Idaho will now consider next steps, the release said.

The inmate was set to be executed in the second execution in the United States this year.

Creech has been in prison since 1974, initially sentenced to death for the murders of John Wayne Bradford and Edward Thomas Arnold. Later, his sentence was commuted to life in prison due to unconstitutional sentencing laws, but he was convicted again in 1983 for the fatal beating of David Dale Jensen, a disabled 22-year-old.

Creech also faced convictions for the murders of William Joseph Dean in Oregon and Vivian Grant Robinson in California in 1974, was charged but not convicted for Sandra Jane Ramsamooj's murder in Oregon. He was acquitted for the murder of 70-year-old Paul Schrader in Tucson, Arizona in 1973.

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Biden's Doctors Don't Believe US President Requires Cognitive Test - White House

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's doctors do not believe he needs to take a cognitive exam, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

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"The president doesn't need a cognitive test. That is not my assessment. That is the assessment of the president's doctor. That is also the assessment of the neurologist," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing, when asked about a cognitive test.

Biden passes a cognitive test everyday simply by serving as US president, Jean-Pierre said.

Earlier on Wednesday, Biden received an annual health exam. The White House will publish a memo from Biden's doctor once the document is complete, Jean-Pierre said.

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US Does Not Recognize Palestine as Sovereign State, But Backs Independence - State Dept

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - The United States does not currently recognize Palestine as a sovereign state but supports an independent Palestinian state, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"We do not treat them as a sovereign state but we are trying to establish an independent Palestinian state and we do support self-determination for the Palestinian people," Miller said during a press briefing.

Russia will host an inter-Palestinian meeting in Moscow from Thursday to Saturday, where Palestinian factions are expected to discuss the prospects of forming a unity government and the future of the Gaza Strip's post-conflict reconstruction.

Since the start of war with Hamas last October, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly expressed his opposition to a Palestinian state.

Last week, the Israeli parliament voted to oppose any "unilateral" recognition of a Palestinian state.

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Biden Says 'Sorry to Hear' McConnell Stepping Down as Senate Republican Leader

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he is sad to hear Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's announcement about stepping down as the Senate's top Republican in November.

"I'm sorry to hear he's stepping down," Biden said.

Earlier on Wednesday, McConnell announced that he intends to step down as Senate Republican leader in November. McConnell has previously said that he intends to continue serving in the Senate through the end of his current term.

Biden said that he has a "great relationship" with McConnell. The top Senate Republican never misrepresented his positions, Biden said. However, the two politicians nevertheless "fight like hell," Biden added.

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Effort to Condemn Ukraine for Death of US Blogger Provoked 'Troll Farm' - State Senator

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - Maine state senator Eric Brakey said on Wednesday that his effort to condemn Ukraine for the death of US citizen blogger Gonzalo Lira in its detention provoked a reaction from pro-Ukrainian trolls online.

Earlier this year, Lira died in a Ukrainian prison, where he was detained on charges of justifying Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. On Monday, Brakey proposed a resolution to condemn Ukraine for Lira's death and alleged torture in Ukrainian custody.

"Looks like I hit a nerve with a Ukrainian troll farm with this one," Brakey said in a statement via social media platform X, in response to criticisms of his effort.

Dying of pneumonia in a Ukrainian prison does not qualify as "natural causes," Brakey said. Regardless of if Lira broke Ukrainian law, any law punishing political speech is illegitimate, Brakey said.

Lira was a US citizen "abandoned" by the Biden administration in Ukraine, Brakey said.

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US to Explain Using Veto on Gaza Resolution During UN Meeting on March 4 - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, February 28 (Sputnik) - The United States will have to explain during an upcoming meeting on March 4 the reason for casting a veto on a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, General Assembly presidential spokesperson Monica Grayley said on Wednesday.

"On Monday, March 4, the General Assembly will call the plenary debate on use of the veto," Grayley said during a press briefing.

The debate will be held at the General Assembly hall under the agenda item "The situation the Middle East, including the Palestinian question" and will take place at 10:00 a.m. ET, Grayley said.

The president of the General Assembly will chair the meeting, Grayley added.

On February 20, the United States vetoed an Algeria-drafted UN Security Council resolution that was calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. Thirteen members of the UN Security Council voted in favor of adopting the resolution, with the United Kingdom abstaining.

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

Air-dropping Humanitarian Aid 'Challenging', Remains as Option for Gaza - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 28 (Sputnik) - The air-dropping mechanism of dropping food aid is challenging, however, it remains on the table as an option for the people of Gaza, the UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"The pictures of the airdrop tell the story … Airdrops are extremely challenging. But they are an option," Dujarric said in a briefing.

Ideally, we want more roads opened but all options remain on the table for the World Food Programme, he added.

In February 2016, the World Food Program carried out its first airdrop, delivering 21 tons of food products to Syria. Over 18 months, it totaled 309 drops for 100,000 people, as stated on its website.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from Gaza and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages.

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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UN Promises to Comment on Transnistria Appeal to Prevent Escalation With Chisinau

UNITED NATIONS, February 28 (Sputnik) - The United Nations will provide a reaction to the breakaway republic of Transnistria's appeal to the UN secretary-general in connection with Chisinau's economic blockade and what the region says are other violations of the rights of its residents, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"I have seen the press reports. We are trying to get a bit more information. I would like to hope to have some answers for you a bit later today," Dujarric said during a briefing.

Earlier in the day, the unrecognized breakaway region of Transnistria turned to Russia for assistance in connection with the economic blockade by Chisinau, according to a declaration adopted by its lawmakers.

Tiraspol hosted a congress of lawmakers at all levels. Their declaration notes that the breakaway region is faced with unprecedented challenges and threats of an economic, social, humanitarian, and military-political nature.

The Transnistria lawmakers have also sent appeals to the UN and other international organizations, asking to prevent an escalation between the breakaway region and Moldova and

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facilitate comprehensive dialogue between them.

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Biden Says Intends to Ban 'Assault' Weapons, High-Capacity Magazines in Future

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he intends to ban so-called assault weapons and high-capacity magazines in the United States in the future.

"My plan goes after the scourge of gun violence in America," Biden said during remarks at the White House. "We're going to finish the job. We're going to ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines next time around."

Biden said that his administration have taken more executive actions to address the flow of illegal firearms than any other administration.

Biden has repeatedly called on the US Congress to pass legislation banning assault weapons and imposing other gun control measures.

The Second Amendment of the US Constitution guarantees citizens the right to keep and bear arms.

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US Allies Decide for Themselves Whether to Send Troops to Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - The United States lets its allies and partners decide for themselves whether to send their troops to Ukraine following French President Emmanuel Macron's comments on the issue.

After a Paris-hosted conference on Ukraine on Monday, French President Emmanuel Macron said Western leaders had discussed the possibility of sending troops to Ukraine and no consensus had been reached, but nothing could be ruled out, and they would do everything to stop Russia from winning.

"Other countries will decide what they want to do, but on behalf of the United States, the President [Joe Biden] has been very clear that he's not going to put US boots on the ground [in Ukraine]," Miller said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Latvia Defense Ministry said Riga was ready to send troops to Ukraine if there was a consensus on the issue among the NATO member states.

On Tuesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia had taken notice of Macron's remarks and was well aware of his position regarding the desire to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia. Peskov also said some of the countries that participated in the meeting held in Paris on Ukraine had quite a "wise assessment" of the potential dangers of being involved in a conflict

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with Russia.

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US Senator Says Wendy's Plan to Experiment With Surge Pricing is Form of Price Gouging

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - US Senator Elizabeth Warren said on Wednesday that the decision by the fast food company Wendy's to possibly experiment with "surge pricing" is a form of price gouging.

Surge pricing, also known as dynamic pricing, is the practice of changing the price of items based on demand at any given time.

"Wendy's is planning to try out 'surge pricing' - that means you could pay more for your lunch, even if the cost to Wendy's stays exactly the same," Warren said in a statement via X. "It's price gouging plain and simple, and American families have had enough."

Earlier this month, Wendy's indicated that it could experiment with surge pricing as part of the rollout of new digital menu boards.

Wendy's will not raise prices at busy times, but rather, discount items during slower times, the company said in a statement to media earlier on Wednesday.

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US Keeping Close Eye on Russia's Actions in Transnistria - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is closely watching Russia's alleged actions in Transnistria, US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"Given Russia's increasingly aggressive and destabilizing role in Europe, we're watching Russia's actions in Transnistria and the broader situation very closely," Miller said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Wednesday, Transnistria turned to Russia for assistance in light of the economic blockade imposed by Moldova. The Russian Foreign Ministry said it prioritizes the protection of the region's residents' interests and is carefully considering all requests.

Transnistria held a referendum in 2006 in which 96.62% of the population there voted in favor of joining Russia. However, no decision was made by Russia at that time on the results of the referendum.

Transnistria had sought to secede from Moldova even before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was known then as Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, formed in 1990 on the eastern periphery of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic.

In 1992, the Moldovan authorities attempted to reclaim Transnistria by force, when the latter effectively became a territory beyond Chisinau's control.

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Pentagon Mulls Using Remaining Ukraine Funds in Light of Inaction From Congress - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon is considering using the little remaining funding of security assistance for Ukraine regardless of the absence of additional funding approved by Congress, CNN reported on Wednesday citing multiple defense officials.

The report said that the Pentagon has some $4 billion available in presidential drawdown authority (PDA), but there is hesitation since it is uncertain if those weapons would be to be replenished without additional Ukraine aid funding approved yet.

No decisions have been made on the issue, according to the officials.

In response to Sputnik's request on this matter, a Pentagon spokesperson said the US Defense Department continues to urge Congress to pass a supplemental package to support Ukraine in its time of need and to replenish our stocks.

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

The Senate followed up with passage of a $95 billion foreign aid bill, that excludes border security reforms. It has been sent to the House of Representatives for consideration, but House Speaker Mike Johnson has been reluctant to take it up for a vote over differences on national security priorities. The bill includes $60 billion for Ukraine and $14 billion for Israel, among funding for other priorities.

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Hunter Biden Claims Joined Burisma Board to Counter 'Russian Aggression' - US Congressman

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, told lawmakers that he joined the board of Ukrainian energy company Burisma in an effort to counter alleged Russian aggression, US Congressman Matt Gaetz said on Wednesday.

Hunter Biden appeared at the US Capitol complex on Wednesday for a closed-door deposition with the House judiciary and oversight panels. The US House of Representatives is conducting an impeachment inquiry into Joe Biden, based on allegations of foreign influence peddling and bribery by the Biden family.

"There were a number of interesting moments, but perhaps none more interesting than when Hunter Biden told us that he joined the Burisma board to counter Russian aggression," Gaetz said after the deposition. "I hadn't heard that one before."

Biden's role on the Burisma board was a bribe masqueraded as an international business

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transaction, Gaetz said.
Hunter Biden told lawmakers that his father neither engaged in nor profited from his business activities.
Biden has been defiant and dishonest during the deposition, Congresswoman Nancy Mace said earlier on Wednesday.
However, Democratic Congressman Jamie Raskin said that the inquiry was a waste of legislative time and resources.

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Coolant Leak at Int'l. Space Station Doubles in Rate But Craft, Crew Safe - NASA Official

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - The long-running leak in the Russian segment of the International Space Station (ISS) has doubled in its rate but the section is sealed and NASA and Roscosmos are cooperating smoothly in dealing with it, NASA ISS Program Manager Joe Montelbano said on Wednesday.
"The leak is now up to two pounds a day: Previously it was one pound a per day," Montelbano said during a press conference at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. "That hatch [to the section] is closed till early April and we are working on the next steps with our Russian colleagues."
Montelbano pointed out that the leak is in an area three feet in length in the sealed off section.
"We have done some repairs. The rest of the Russian and Japanese modules [of the ISS] and everything else is solid," Montelbano added.
The ISS has been troubled by three coolant leaks over the past year, but none has threatened the safety of the crew. The current leak affected a radiator circuit on the Nauka module of the ISS but it occurred on an external, backup radiator that was delivered on a space shuttle mission in 2010, according to NASA.

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McConnell Confirms Departure as US Senate Republican Leader

(Updates to add details in paras 4-5)
WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Wednesday that he will step down from his congressional leadership role in November, after having served as the top Senate Republican since 2007.
“This will be my last term as Republican leader of the Senate,” McConnell, 82, said during remarks on the Senate floor. “I’m not going anywhere anytime soon. However, I’ll complete my job my colleagues have given me until we select a new leader in November and they take the helm next January.”

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Last year, McConnell said that he intends to serve the remainder of his Senate term, which ends in 2027.

McConnell said that he has “enough gas in [his] tank” to disappoint his critics, adding that he intends to do so with enthusiasm.

McConnell began his career during the administration of US President Ronald Reagan. Reagan once called the senator “Mitch O’Donnell,” McConnell said. Reagan’s attempt was “close enough,” McConnell said.

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US Crude Stockpiles Rise 5th Week in Row, Weighing on Oil Rally - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - US crude stockpiles rose for a fifth week in a row and by around 27 million barrels since late January, according to Energy Information Administration (EIA) data on Wednesday that weighed again on this year’s rally in oil prices.

Crude balances rose by 4.199 million barrels during the week to February 23, after expanding by almost 22 million barrels over four prior weeks, the EIA, which serves as the data wing of the Energy Department, said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report.

While crude stockpiles grew, US inventories of fuel products made up of gasoline and distillates continued their decline, the report showed. These declines mitigated somewhat the downward pressure on oil prices.

Gasoline balances slid a fourth week in a row, showing a deficit of 2.832 million in the latest week after declines of around 7.0 million over three prior weeks. 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 six week in a row, with the latest slide of 0.510 million barrels adding to the 13 million barrels or so lost over five previous weeks. Distillates are primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses and ships, and also goes into making airline fuel.

“The builds in US crude stocks are not letting up and these are outsized compared to the draws in gasoline and distillates,” John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said. “This is continuing to weigh on oil prices, though the impact is blunted by the outflows in fuel.”

In Wednesday’s New York trading, US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude for April delivery was down 0.1% at $78.79 per barrel, after a session low of $77.80 earlier.

London-traded Brent crude was down 0.3% at $82.38 per barrel after an intraday bottom at $81.25.

Since the year began, the WTI benchmark has risen about 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.

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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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ISS Medical Research Reaching Breakthrough Levels on Cancer, Other Issues - NASA Chief

WASHINGTON, February 28 Sputnik) - The SpaceX's Crew 8 mission to the International Space Station (ISS) will carry out some 200 scientific experiments over the next six months as part of "breakthrough" research on cancer and other issues, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said on Wednesday.

"This mission to the ISS really has a lot of exciting science that they are doing. There are some 200 science experiments and a lot of the stuff dreamed of in the old days is just coming to fruition. The use of protein crystal growth, the medical research into the use of and growing of stem cells in microgravity," Nelson told a press conference.

All of these are "breakthrough research not only toward helping find cures for cancer but things like bone loss, osteoperosis, and even some things having to do with medical research with regard to the brain," Nelson said.

The Crew 8 mission is scheduled to launch on Friday.

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US Claims on Russian Space Weapons Raise Safety Concerns for ISS Crew - NASA Administrator

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby's claim that Russia is deploying nuclear weapons in space is a matter of concern to NASA and potentially to both the astronauts and cosmonauts on the International Space Station (ISS), NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said on Wednesday.

"It does concern me about the safety of the astronauts and cosmonauts on the ISS," Nelson said during a press conference at Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

Two weeks ago, Kirby expressed the Biden administration's concern about Russia's alleged development of anti-satellite weapons and other military capabilities in space but did not go into any details.

Nelson said the monitoring of all developments in space was part of NASA's mission.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that Russia has always been categorically against deploying nuclear weapons in space and that the country's position on this issue is clear and transparent.

Russia's activities in space are no different from those of other countries, including the United

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States and they know about it, Putin said, adding that Russia has never refused dialogue regarding strategic stability.

In addition, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said the recent contacts between Russia and the United States on the issue have proved to be completely unproductive.

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McConnell Confirms Departure as US Senate Republican Leader

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Wednesday that he will step down from his congressional leadership role in November, after having served as the top Senate Republican since 2007.

"This will be my last term as Republican leader of the Senate," McConnell, 82, said during remarks on the Senate floor. "I'm not going anywhere anytime soon. However, I'll complete my job my colleagues have given me until we select a new leader in November and they take the helm next January."

Last year, McConnell said that he intends to serve the remainder of his senate term, which ends in 2027.

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US Air Force Official Frames Airman's Self-Immolation Protest as Mental Health Issue

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force on Wednesday sought to frame airman Aaron Bushnell's self-immolation protest against the US government's support for Israel's war in the Gaza Strip as a mental health issue.

"Any suicide, whether by political protest or by resiliency issues, or whatever it is, is a tragedy. And as we're looking at whatever the rationale might be, there's a standard investigation process… we have about 100 or so suicides per year and every year we try and get after, how do we reduce this," US Air Force Chief of Staff David Allvin said during a question and answer session during a talk at the Brookings Institution.

Allvin pointed out that the Air Force views Bushnell's suicide as having lost "one of ours."

Bushnell, 25, publicly broadcast his suicide on Sunday in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington. He introduced himself on camera, saying he was an active-duty member of the US Air Force. He emphasized that he would no longer be complicit in genocide and would engage in an extreme act of protest.

However, Bushnell also said that his act was not extreme at all compared to what Palestinian people have been experiencing at the hands of what he termed were their Israeli colonizers. Bushnell also said that the ruling class in the United States had decided to normalize the colonizers' actions. As he proceeded to pour an accelerant on himself and set himself on fire,

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Bushnell yelled “Free Palestine.”

Bushnell was taken to a hospital with life-threatening injuries but was reported dead on Monday.

Bushnell is the second reported person in the United States to have self-immolated in protest of the US staunch government’s support for Israel’s war on Gaza, in which nearly 30,000 people have been officially confirmed killed and more than 70,000 wounded. The first reported case occurred in December outside the Israeli consulate in Atlanta, Georgia.

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Denver Mayor Says City to Cut Costs in Migrants Programme Amid Budget Crisis

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - Denver Mayor Mike Johnston announced on Wednesday that the city would adjust its budget and cut costs in its migrant programme, in response to a budget crisis exacerbated by federal inaction on immigration.

"We knew that as a result of federal inaction on immigration and the resulting budget crisis there were two important steps we needed to take: one was to adjust city budgets to help support these needs, and the second was to reduce the overall cost of our migrant programme," Johnston said during a press briefing.

Johnston said that to cut costs in the migrant programme four key steps were necessary: reinstating a length of stay policy, enhancing case management, connecting arrivals to resources, and launching work authorization clinics.

Moreover, Denver plans to close four of its migrant shelters over the next month, which Johnston anticipates will save the city up to $60 million in the 2024 budget.

"These changes to our programme structure will save the city up to $60 million in costs. That means the $180 million deficit that we were facing is now closer to $120 million, that still leaves us $120 million of cuts to make," Johnston added.

In December 2023, the US documented a record 302,000 migrants at the southern border, which is the highest number in a single month. Furthermore, record numbers of illegals have been recorded in all three years that US President Joe Biden has led the country.

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McConnell to Step Down as Senate Republican Leader in November - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, will step down from his post in November, The Associated Press reported on Wednesday.

"One of life’s most underappreciated talents is to know when it’s time to move on to life’s next chapter. So I stand before you today ... to say that this will be my last term as Republican leader of the Senate," McConnell said in remarks obtained by AP.

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McConnell, who recently turned 82, is the longest-serving Senate leader in history.

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Trump Civil Fraud Judge Receives Letter With White Powder, Substance Not Harmful - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - New York State Supreme Court judge Arthur Engoron received a letter with white powder enclosed, although the substance is not believed to be toxic, ABC News reported on Wednesday.

An envelope addressed to Engoron arrived at an office of the downtown Manhattan courthouse, the report said, citing law enforcement sources.

A pair of court officials were the only people exposed to the white powder, the report said. Engoron was never in any danger, the report added.

Engoron led a civil fraud trial against former US President Donald Trump. Engoron found Trump and others liable for fraud and ordered them to pay $464 million, of which Trump owes $355 million in fines and approximately $100 million in interest.

Earlier this week, Trump's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr., also received a letter containing white powder, which prompted an emergency response at his Florida home.

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US Sanctions Guatemala's Los Pochos Organization, 3 Members for Drug Trafficking

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - The United States has redesignated the Los Pochos drug trafficking organization and sanctioned three of its members as well as four affiliated companies based in Guatemala, the US Department of the Treasury said in a release on Wednesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) redesignated, pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 14059, the Los Pochos Drug Trafficking Organization (DTO), and designated three members and four affiliated companies based in Guatemala," the release said.

First sanctioned in 2019, Los Pochos primarily engages in cocaine trafficking from Guatemala through Mexico to the United States. The organization controls narcotics trafficking activities on the Guatemala-Mexico border and is associated with Mexico's Sinaloa cartel.

The Treasury Department sanctioned Los Pochos leaders Juan Jose Morales Cifuentes and Isel Aneli Suniga Morfin, as well as affiliated narcotics trafficker Erick Manuel Ochoa Villlagran, the release said.

It also sanctioned four companies owned or controlled by Los Pochos members: the car dealership Importadora Jireh; hardware store Construhogar; industrial parking lot WIV Sociedad Anonima; and real estate company Condado Real, the release added.

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The Treasury Department coordinated the sanctions with the Guatemalan government as well as with US law enforcement agencies, according to the release.

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US Congresswoman Says Hunter Biden Giving Defiant, Dishonest Deposition to Lawmakers

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, has been defiant and dishonest during a closed-door deposition with House lawmakers, US Congresswoman Nancy Mace said on Wednesday.

"Hunter Biden is being defiant and also dishonest," Mace said after the first hour of the deposition.

Biden's testimony directly conflicts with the testimony of other witnesses, Mace said. Biden has also said he "doesn't recall" in response to multiple questions, Mace said.

Biden arrived at the US Capitol complex on Wednesday for a deposition with House oversight and judiciary panel lawmakers, as part of their impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden. The inquiry is rooted in allegations of foreign influence peddling and bribery by the Biden family.

Hunter Biden told lawmakers that his father neither engaged in nor profited from his business activities. The deposition is a waste of legislative time and resources, Democratic Congressman Jamie Raskin said on Wednesday.

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Important Announcements Expected From US-Mexico-Guatemala Meeting on Wednesday - Official

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - Important announcements are expected from a meeting between the United States, Mexico, and Guatemala when officials from all three countries meet in Washington on Wednesday, a senior US administration official told reporters.

"We see this meeting as an important opportunity to further our trilateral cooperation on issues related to economic development, border enforcement, labor mobility pathways, and orderly, humane irregular migration in the region," the official said. "We expect to make several important announcements about commitments for deeper cooperation."

The US delegation will be led by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and White House Homeland Security Adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall, among others.

US President Joe Biden is scheduled to visit the US-Mexico border on Thursday, a trip which Republicans have criticized as being meaningless.

The White House said Biden will use the visit to push for Congress to pass a national security supplemental bill that has been stalled due to the US House refusing to approve any Ukraine

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aid until sufficient border security measures are taken.

National polls show that the border crisis is the top issue on US voters' minds.

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

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US Supreme Court Declines to Halt Execution of Longest-Serving Death Row Inmate - Order

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court on Wednesday rejected a stay of execution request for the longest-serving death row prisoner Thomas Creech.

"The application for stay of execution of sentence of death presented to Justice [Elena] Kagan and by her referred to the Court is denied. The petition for a writ of certiorari is denied," the Supreme Court said in a miscellaneous order.

Creech is set to be executed later on Wednesday by lethal injection in the second death penalty execution in the United States this year.

Following Creech's execution, there will be seven remaining death row inmates in the state of Idaho.

Creech has been in prison since 1974, initially sentenced to death for the murders of John Wayne Bradford and Edward Thomas Arnold. Later, his sentence was commuted to life in prison due to unconstitutional sentencing laws, but he was convicted again in 1983 for the fatal beating of David Dale Jensen, a disabled 22-year-old.

Creech also faced convictions for the murders of William Joseph Dean in Oregon and Vivian Grant Robinson in California in 1974, was charged but not convicted for Sandra Jane Ramsamooj's murder in Oregon. He was acquitted for the murder of 70-year-old Paul Schrader in Tucson, Arizona in 1973.

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US Congressman Says Hunter Biden Deposition 'Embarrassing Spectacle' for House Republicans

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - US House Oversight Committee Ranking Member Jamie Raskin said on Wednesday that Hunter Biden's deposition was an embarrassing spectacle for House Republican lawmakers, who are conducting an impeachment inquiry based on allegations of criminal activity by the Biden family.

"What we saw, I think, was a rather embarrassing spectacle, where the Republicans continued to belabor completely trivial points," Raskin said after the first hour of deposition.

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Biden appeared for a closed-door deposition with the US House oversight and judiciary panels, which are leading the impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden. Lawmakers are investigating the Biden family for alleged foreign influence peddling and bribery.
Hunter Biden said that his father neither engaged nor profited from his business activities.
The impeachment inquiry is a waste of legislative time and resources, Raskin said.

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US Air Force Official Frames Airman's Self-Immolation Protest as Mental Health Issue

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force on Wednesday sought to frame airman Aaron Bushnell's self-immolation protest against the US government's support for Israel's war in the Gaza Strip as a mental health issue.
"Any suicide, whether by political protest or by resiliency issues, or whatever it is, is a tragedy. And as we're looking at whatever the rationale might be, there's a standard investigation process… we have about 100 or so suicides per year and every year we try and get after, how do we reduce this," US Air Force Chief of Staff David Allvin said during a question and answer session during a talk at the Brookings Institution.
Allvin pointed out that the Air Force views Bushnell's suicide as having lost "one of ours."
Bushnell, 25, publicly broadcast his suicide on Sunday in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington. He introduced himself on camera, saying he was an active-duty member of the US Air Force. He emphasized that he would no longer be complicit in genocide and would engage in an extreme act of protest.
However, Bushnell also said that his act was not extreme at all compared to what Palestinian people have been experiencing at the hands of what he termed were their Israeli colonizers. Bushnell also said that the ruling class in the United States had decided to normalize the colonizers' actions. As he proceeded to pour an accelerant on himself and set himself on fire, Bushnell yelled "Free Palestine."
Bushnell was taken to a hospital with life-threatening injuries but was reported dead on Monday.
Bushnell is the second reported person in the United States to have self-immolated in protest of the US staunch government's support for Israel's war on Gaza, in which nearly 30,000 people have been officially confirmed killed and more than 70,000 wounded. The first reported case occurred in December outside the Israeli consulate in Atlanta, Georgia.

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US Senate Majority Leader Says 'Very Close' to Reaching Deal to Avoid Government Shutdown

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WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Wednesday that congressional leaders are "very close" to reaching an agreement to keep the government funded and avoid a looming shutdown.

"I am hopeful that the four leaders can reach this agreement very soon, so we can not only avoid a shutdown on Friday but get closer to finishing the appropriations process altogether," Schumer said in his remarks on the Senate floor.

The US government will initiate a partial shutdown if lawmakers fail to pass a funding measure by Friday at midnight. A full shutdown will begin if lawmakers do not reach a deal on the funding of the government by March 8.

On Tuesday, Schumer met with President Joe Biden, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, House Speaker Mike Johnsonand House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries to discuss funding for the US government as well as foreign aid.

Schumer said the congressional leaders agreed during the meeting that the situation on the battlefield in Ukraine was getting increasingly dire and that Kiev would lose the war without additional US assistance.

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Trump’s Approval Rating Hits Highest Level Since 2022 – Polls

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) – US President Donald Trump's approval rating has hit its highest level since 2022, an aggregate of polls compiled by RealClearPolitics showed on Wednesday.

The aggregate data compiled from more than a dozen different polls showed that 42.1% of potential voters have a favorable view of Trump, compared to only 35.9% as measured in December 2022.

The current rating is Trump's highest since April 22, 2022, when only 45.8% of potential voters viewed him favorably.

At the same time, 54% of voters currently have an “unfavorable” view of Trump, the aggregate data showed.

Republican Trump now has a slight advantage over his major rival in the presidential race, Democrat Joe Biden. Only 39.8% of Americans have a favorable view of Biden, while 55.5% say their view of him is unfavorable, according to the data.

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Ukraine CIA Bases Leak May Be Ploy to Get Congress Aid Deal Passed - Ex-UK Diplomat

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WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - The front page New York Times story that sheds light on the long existence of at least a dozen secret CIA bases in Ukraine may have been an authorized leak by the US deep state to persuade a wavering Congress to finally pass the latest $61 billion military aid package for Kiev, former UK Ambassador to Syria Peter Ford told Sputnik.

"You would have to be naive enough to believe in Father Christmas if you had not already assumed that the CIA had used Ukraine as a forward spying base against Russia for years," Ford said.

The wide extent of US intelligence operations in Ukraine, a non-NATO partner, has long been suspected but its scale and depth as revealed in the New York Times report "prompts a sharp intake of breath," he said.

"What would we in the West not be saying if Russia had established intelligence hubs on this scale in Mexico's province of Baja California?" Ford asked.

Indications of US and CIA tolerance and possibly even approval of Ukrainian assassination attacks carried out inside Russia should also have come as no surprise, Ford recalled.

"Only the cognitively impaired could have assumed otherwise," he said. "The only mystery here is why has the leak been authorized (leaks like this are virtually never unauthorized) and why now?"

A likely reason was to stampede the US Congress into passing the latest gigantic $61 billion aid and ammunition package to keep the Ukrainian armed forces fighting, Ford advised.

"Could the leak have been designed to reinforce the belief of Congress at this pivotal moment, when Congress is hovering over an aid package for Ukraine, that Ukraine is an indispensable ally that cannot be allowed to go to the wall? This seems to be the most likely explanation, although it can be doubted whether such a leak could win over many waverers," he said.

Whatever the motive, the New York Times revelations offered a devastating insight into US motivations toward Russia over the past three administrations starting with that of President Barack Obama, Ford observed.

During more than a decade of secret cooperation, the CIA has also trained Ukrainian spies to operate in Russia, Europe, Cuba, and other places where Russians are present, The New York Times reported on Sunday.

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Writer Marianne Williamson Says Decided to Return to 2024 Campaign to Stop Trump

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - Writer and contender for the Democratic party presidential nomination Marianne Williamson announced on Wednesday that she has decided to resume her 2024 campaign to prevent Donald Trump from winning in the upcoming November election and to fix the bad state of the US economy under President Joe Biden.

"As of today, I am unsuspending my campaign for the presidency of the United States. I had suspended it because I was losing the horse race. But something so much more important than the horse race is at stake here. And we must respond. Right now, we have a fascist [Trump]

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standing up the door," Williamson said in a video clip posted on the social media platform X.

Williamson noted that 39% of Americans say they are regularly skipping meals in order to pay their rent and only 20% say the US economy is doing well. She particularly criticized the Biden administration for benefiting US corporations and not the American people.

"We are government for all intents and purposes of the corporations, by the corporations and for the corporations, and we need a president who says this. We need a president who lays down an agenda and says we're going to turn this thing around. We're going to take an economic U-turn," Williamson said.

Letting Biden stand against Trump in the November election is nothing else but watching a "car crash in slow motion," Williamson added.

On February 8, Williamson announced the end of her presidential campaign after she secured only 4% of votes in the first presidential primary on January 23 in the US state of New Hampshire while Biden received nearly 65% of the vote.

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Hunter Biden Arrives at US Capitol for Deposition in House Impeachment Inquiry

WASHINGTON, February 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, arrived at the US Capitol complex on Wednesday to participate in a closed-door deposition with the House of Representatives Oversight and Judiciary committees.

Hunter Biden ignored questions from reporters when entering the complex, where he will face questions from lawmakers about alleged foreign influence peddling and bribery.

The House of Representatives is conducting an impeachment inquiry into Joe Biden, based on allegations that he and his family engaged in criminal activity.

Hunter Biden said in his opening statement to the lawmakers that he never involved his father in his business activities.

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