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**3/6/24 Wednesday**

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Mass Grave Belonging to Black Death Victims Found in Germany

Nuremberg experienced plague outbreaks roughly every 10 years from the 14th century onward, said one expert.

At least 1,000 skeletons have been found in what archeologists are saying is possibly the largest mass grave ever excavated in Europe, according to a recent report. The grave is located at a site in the city of Nuremberg in southern Germany, and the remains most likely belong to plague victims.

The bodies were found packed tightly together, with adults either sitting up or lying on their backs or sides, while babies or newborns were squeezed in between the adults.

"Those people were not interred in a regular cemetery although we have designated plague cemeteries in Nuremberg," said Melanie Langbein, from Nuremberg's department for heritage conservation. "This means a large number of dead people who needed to be buried in a short time frame without regard to Christian burial practices," she said.

The discovery was made during a routine archaeological screening in preparation for building a retirement home, according to a development company.

At least eight plague pits were found with each containing several hundred bodies, Langbein added. At least one mass grave was dated to belong to a period between the late 1400s and early 1600s after archaeologists used radiocarbon for their dating process. Shards of pottery and coins dating from the later end of that range were also found.

A note was also reportedly found from 1634 which detailed a plague outbreak that killed more than 15,000 people between 1632 and 1633. The letter also says that nearly 2,000 people were buried near St. Sebastian Spital, where the site of the current excavation is located.

Langbein added that the plague between 1632 and 1633 had a more dire impact on the people living there at that time because it occurred during the Thirty Years War which lasted from 1618 to 1648.

These series of wars included several major events and nations who fought for various reasons including religions, dynastic, territorial, and commercial rivalries. The countries involved included Austria, Denmark, Dutch Republic, France, Holy Roman Empire, Poland, Protestant Union, Russia, Spain, and Sweden.

"Nuremberg was surrounded by different troops and the population was living in quite dire circumstances," said Langbein.

The archeologists will continue their research, and will work to find the characteristics of the society's population from that time, including the ages and genders of those people, and the general health of the population.

Collaborations from other institutions may also help them identify the genetic material of the plague that killed so many people. In the meantime they will continue to work until the excavation is completed, which may happen sometime in the fall of 2025.

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US Exploited ‘Loophole' to Sell Weapons to Israel - Report

According to the report, Israel dropped 6,000 bombs on Gaza within the first week of the war, alone.

The US has reportedly made more than 100 "quiet" weapons sales to Israel, including thousands of bombs, since the beginning of the war between Israel and Hamas. Despite half-baked calls from the administration for Israel to spare civilian lives, the US has continued to restock their supply of weapons, helping to create one of the most intense bombing campaigns in military history.

The sales were reportedly made in silence---as they escaped congressional oversight---meaning they were processed without any public debate because they each fell under a specific dollar amount that requires the executive branch to notify Congress, according to a Washington, DC newspaper, which first reported the story.

But altogether, the weapons sales make up a massive amount of arms for a country that has been accused of committing a genocide.

The sales reportedly included precision-guided munitions, small diameter bombs, bunker busters, small arms and other lethal aid. Public sales to Israel already included: $320 million in precision bomb kits in November and 14,000 tank shells costing $106 million and $147.5 million of fuses and other components needed to make 155mm artillery shells in December. The deliveries made in December were made under an emergency authority.

“That’s an extraordinary number of sales over the course of a pretty short amount of time, which really strongly suggests that the Israeli campaign would not be sustainable without this level of U.S. support,” said Jeremy Konyndyk, a former senior Biden administration official and current president of Refugees International.

Josh Paul, a former State Department official who resigned in protest over the Biden Administration's response to the conflict, said that the“arms transfer process lacks transparency by design”. He argued that foreign military sales---which is largely financed by more than $3.3 billion in US taxpayer funds---is something that US citizens deserve to know.

Matt Miller, the US State Department Spokesperson, said the Biden Administration has “followed the procedures Congress itself has specified to keep members well-informed and regularly briefs members even when formal notification is not a legal requirement.” He also said that US officials have “engaged Congress” on arms transfers to Israel “more than 200 times” since the conflict in Gaza first began.

But some US lawmakers, particularly those who belong to the same political party as US President Joe Biden, are fed up with the administration’s decisions.

“You ask a lot of Americans about arm transfers to Israel right now, and they look at you like you’re crazy, like, ‘why in the world would we be sending more bombs over there?’” said Representative Joaquin Castro (D-TX), a member of the House Intelligence and Foreign Affairs committees, during an interview.

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“These people already fled from the north to the south, and now they’re all huddled in a small piece of Gaza, and you’re going to continue to bombard them?” Castro added, in reference to Israel’s planned invasion of Rafah where nearly 1.4 million displaced Palestinians are now seeking refuge.

Castro and other House Democrats have also spearheaded a group that sent a letter to Biden on Tuesday, telling him that an Israeli invasion of Rafah could violate the administration's requirement that US military aid be used in accordance with international law.

And Representative Jason Crow (D-CO), who is also a member of the House Intelligence and Foreign Affairs committees, recently petitionedDirector of National Intelligence Avril Haines to provide details on the shared intelligence between Israel and the US including an “explanation of any restrictions the US has place on the Israeli government’s use of the intelligence we share”.

“I am concerned that the widespread use of artillery and air power in Gaza — and the resulting level of civilian casualties — is both a strategic and moral error,” wrote Crow, a former Army Ranger who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“This doesn’t just seem like an attempt to avoid technical compliance with US arms export law, it’s an extremely troubling way to avoid transparency and accountability on a high-profile issue,” added Ari Tolany, director of the security assistance monitor at the Centre for International Policy thinktank.

In January, the International Court of Justice in The Hague ordered Israel to take immediate measures to reduce the number of civilian casualties in Gaza, and to prevent the genocide of Palestinians after South Africa brought the case to their attention. At the same time, The Defense for Children International-Palestine, an international NGO, also claimed that the Biden Administration violated the Genocide Convention by supplying weapons and other military equipment to Israel’s military.

The war in Gaza, which began on October 7, 2023 has resulted in the deaths of more than 30,000 Palestinians as a famine now looms over the region. Reports of Israeli soldiers targeting civilians and preventing them from being able to access aid has led many experts to accuse Israel of committing a genocide against the Palestinians.

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Even Democrats Warn Biden Israeli Rafah Invasion Risks Violating Military Aid Conditions

The US president has come under pressure from lawmakers and constituents as the Gaza Strip war has resulted in the deaths of more than 29,000 Palestinians.

A group made up of 37 House Democrats sent a letter to US President Joe Biden on Tuesday telling him that an Israeli invasion of Rafah could violate the administration’s requirement that US military aid be used in accordance with international law, a report on Wednesday revealed.

The group has been spearheaded by Representatives Joaquin Castro (D-TX), Jamie Raskin (D-MD), and Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), who wrote that if Israel invades Rafah, it would “likely contravene” a recent memo that the Biden administration put out last month.

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“The memorandum emphasizes the importance of credible assurances from recipient countries that they will use U.S. weapons in adherence with international humanitarian law,” the group wrote. “While we continue to urge Israel to avoid an expanded operation in Rafah, we share your obvious concern about the absence of a credible plan for the safety and support of the more than one million civilians sheltering in Rafah.”

They added that any ground invasion would run “counter to specific principles outline” in the memorandum “should not be supported by US taxpayer-funded assistance.”

“We write to express our deep sense of urgency and alarm about the potentially devastating consequences to innocent civilians of an Israeli military ground invasion of Rafah. We share the position highlighted by US Ambassador to the UN [Linda Thomas-Greenfield] that ‘no attacks on Rafah should take place, given current circumstances,’” the House Democrats wrote.

“An extensive Israeli offensive in Rafah would further deteriorate the already dreadful conditions for civilians, more than half of whom are on the brink of famine, as well as risk the lives of the 130 Israeli and American hostages still held in Gaza by exposing them to the threat of aerial bombardments and derailing a negotiated agreement that could lead to their release,” they added.

In early February the Biden administration issued a memorandumoutlining restrictions on how weapons given to countries by the US should be used, though it did not single out Israel, specifically. The memo also requires, for the first time, that the administration submit an annual report to Congress about whether or not certain countries are meeting those requirements.

The memo was prompted by Democratic lawmakers who have raised concern over Israel’s military actions in Palestine. More than 29,000 Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip since the war first began, the territory's Health Ministry said in mid-February. Civilian deaths including a vast majority of women and children, the births of malnourished children, and a looming famine have also been reported.

“Intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including willfully impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions, is a war crime,” said the International Rescue Committee, according to a Wednesday report.

The Biden administration has made several statements purportedly warning Israel against invading Rafah without a humanitarian plan that would protect civilians. At the same time, the US has been providing military aid and selling military equipment to Israel, fueling the conflict. Moreover, the US has deliberately vetoed United Nations Security Council ceasefire resolutions at least three times now.

Receiving both military and diplomatic support from the US, Israeli officials seem to have set a deadline to invade Rafah on the Muslim holiday of Ramadan starting on March 10. Roughly 1.4 million Palestinians are estimated to be seeking refuge in the southern city.

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US ‘Censorship Industrial Complex’ Alive and Well

Independent journalist Steve Poikonen discusses how US military and intelligence interests help shape the discourse online.

The United States’ online censorship industrial complex showed its fangs Monday when blogger Yves Smith was sent a threatening message from Google via his website’s ad service provider. Smith, who runs the popular blog Naked Capitalism, wrote about the ordeal in a post entitled “Google Demands That We Censor Our Content.”

“We noticed that Google has flagged your site for Policy violation and ad serving is restricted on most of the pages with the below strikes,” read the email, which claimed the website had violated policies around “violent extremism,” “hateful content,” “harmful health claims," and "anti vaccination" content.

“I request you to review the page content and fix the existing policy issues flagged,” the email chided. “If Google identifies the flags consistently and if the content is not fixed, then the ads will be disabled completely to serve on the site."

Smith called the claims from Google "capricious, arbitrary, and demonstrably false," noting a blog post linked to in the email "has nothing whatsoever to do with health or health care policy. That creates the appearance that Google regards 'anti-vaxx' as a showstopper, and is for some reason desperately applying it to this site, which is not vaccine hostile. Google has blatantly mislabeled unrelated content to try to make that bogus charge."

The apparent act of intimidation is one of many faced by independent online journalists in recent years as websites such as The Grayzone that critique US foreign policy are often denied the ability to fundraise and solicit donations through online services. In the case of The Grayzone, a Gofundme campaign that raised tens of thousands of dollars was arbitrarily shut down, with an automated email cryptically claiming the measure had been taken "due to some external concerns."

Independent commentator Steve Poikonen joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program on Tuesday to discuss how private companies hide behind opaque policy enforcement and subjective claims of "disinformation" to effectively censor and repress independent voices online.

"If you are espousing genuine dissent, if you are challenging power, regardless of what its political party is, you are on the chopping block," said Poikonen, adding "this is a war for the supremacy of the digital information space."

"It's effectively, you know, the same media monopoly that we all complained about in terms of the mainstream,” he added, noting that most media in the United States is owned by just six large corporate conglomerates. Poikonen claimed the same kind of centralization and homogenization is taking place on the Internet with US military and intelligence interests perhaps exercising even more direct control over content online.

"Elon Musk is performing a service for the security state, not just on Twitter, but in every other company he owns," said Poikonen of the tech magnate, who contracts services to the United States government via SpaceX and other companies.

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Host Wilmer Leon noted that Amazon and Washington Post owner Jeff Bezos is also a major US government contractor, collecting billions of dollars to offer web hosting services for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and other government organizations. Bezos expanded his influence several years ago when he bought Twitch, an online streaming platform popular with younger audiences. Twitch has generated controversy by periodically suspending popular streamers like Hasan Piker over alleged offensive content.

"I think it's incredibly optimistic if not pollyannaish to think that those individuals can operate outside of the interests of those that are paying their mortgages," said Leon. “And we also have experienced an incredible steady decline in free speech on those social platforms that people got used to thinking were the proverbial electronic town square.”

Poikonen agreed, noting that the frequent opaqueness of social media platforms’ moderation and content serving policies is a major concern.

“He's implemented a social credit score on Twitter,” he said of Elon Musk. “There's a whole bunch of algorithms that determine your reach and your ability to get your word out, and all of them have to do with never saying anything out of line.”

"There have been some challenges to that," Poikonen added. "But I don't think they're going to be nearly as successful until we can get outside of the partisan framing that they're almost always put in."

Poikonen concluded by noting that users should bear in mind the US government origins of many popular online services. "There's no Facebook without In-Q-Tel funding," he said, referring to the CIA's venture capital arm that funds projects useful to its mass spying and data gathering efforts. "The investment arm of both the military industrial complex and the intelligence agencies, individually, has provided the backbone for all of our social media platforms."

In 2022, journalist Lee Fang reported on a clandestine effort between the X social media platform (formerly known as Twitter) and the US Department of Defense to spread US-backed propaganda on the microblogging site.

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Kamala Harris’ Call for ‘Ceasefire’ Ignores Reality of Israel’s Brutal Occupation

The US Vice President called for a ceasefire in Gaza Sunday, but critics say her speech does not represent a true divergence from official White House policy.

Kamala Harris made headlines this week with a speech in which the US Vice President spoke about the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza amidst Israel’s five month-long military operation.

“Our hearts break for… all the innocent people in Gaza who are suffering from what is clearly a humanitarian catastrophe,” Harris said to applause from the sympathetic crowd. “People in Gaza are starving. The conditions are inhumane. And our common humanity compels us to act.”

Harris said the Biden administration was committed to delivering more food aid to the territory and urged Hamas leaders to accept a temporary six-week “ceasefire” that has emerged from negotiations in recent days.

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Dr. Hasan Unal, a professor of political science and international relations at Bashkent University in Ankara, Turkiye, joined Sputnik's Fault Lines program on Wednesday to discuss the latest developments in the Palestine-Israel conflict and examine the significance of Harris' proposal.

"They're acting like Kamala Harris went rogue," said host Jamarl Thomas of Harris' speech, which has been characterized in liberal media outlets as a break from official White House policy. "Kamala Harris just articulated [US President Joe] Biden's position, which is basically the Israeli position with the idea that they're going to occupy Gaza after the fact, or put in an administrator that they choose."

"[A] six-week ceasefire isn't too bad altogether," said Unal of the pause in fighting advocated by Harris Sunday. "But the condition is that Hamas will have to basically free all the hostages. I mean, what Hamas has as its trump card in its hands is the hostages. Hamas wants to negotiate the release of the Palestinians from Israeli prisons."

"There are thousands of them and Israel doesn't seem to be coming around to the idea of doing that," Unal noted.

Israel has held tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians without charge in "administrative detention" over the past two decades, including an estimated 10,000 people under the age of 18. The charity Save The Children once noted that Palestinian minors are "the only children in the world who are systematically prosecuted in military courts." Minors are frequently arrested for such things as throwing stones at occupying Israeli forces or sometimes, according to their families, for no apparent reason at all.

Outrage was generated over Palestinians' treatment in Israeli prisons late last year when the Palestinian man Farouq al-Khateeb was released after being held for months under what his family has called "spurious charges." Khatib appeared gaunt and, according to his family, was unable to walk. The 30 year old reportedly lost some 55 pounds of weight during his months of imprisonment, weighing only 77 pounds after his release.

Palestinians are calling for the release of these thousands of civilians detained arbitrarily in Israeli prisons, who observers say have received far less attention in mainstream media than the Israeli captives held by Hamas.

Thomas noted the widespread skepticism over the United States as a supposedly honest broker in negotiations between Israel and Hamas, recalling that the country has purportedly stood for a "two-state solution" for decades but has failed to take action as Israel expands its presence in occupied Palestinian territory. Unal agreed, noting that a permanent ceasefire is necessary to rebuild Gaza after months of seemingly indiscriminate Israeli airstrikes. But in any case, Unal explained that a two-state solution would remain impossible as long as Israel continues its policy of building settlements in the occupied West Bank.

"What sort of a two-state [policy] can you have with all the settlers within the West Bank basically preventing some sort of a contiguous territory to come under the Palestinian Authority?" asked the expert.

Meanwhile Israel has refused to offer significant concessions on the issue of Palestinian prisoners. Hamas has called for the release of prominent Palestinian political leader Marwan Barghouti as a condition of any deal to end hostilities in Gaza. Israel has so far rejected the demand, perhaps in order to prevent the emergence of any Nelson Mandela-like figure who could rally the world behind the Palestinian cause.

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The United States continues to provide Israel with billions of dollars in military aid each year, Thomas noted, even while claiming sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians.
“Other countries don't have the same sort of influence here in Washington [as Israel does],” said Unal. “There is a lobby in the United States, specifically on behalf of Israel, and they funnel lots of money, they have lots of influence, and the interesting thing about them is that their lobbying – or at least how our politicians respond to the lobbying – it is on both sides.”
“Democrats and Republicans respond pretty similarly,” he noted.

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‘Back to the Future’: Russia Honors Anti-Colonial Past as the West Backs Neo-Nazis

The more things change, the more they stay the same in terms of US foreign policy, says one analyst.
The modern political divide between Russia and the West often evokes memories of the Cold War and even World War II, according to author and human rights lawyer Dan Kovalik.
The writer and activist appeared on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour programon Wednesday to discuss Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s recent remarks at the Forum of Supporters of the Struggle Against Modern Practices of Neocolonialism.
“Over the last three decades, there's been a model of globalization engineered by the US and its closest allies which has proved to be untenable,” said Lavrov in a speech delivered in Moscow. “Western countries have led humanity not to prosperity, but to one of the most acute international crises since the Second World War. The conflict space in the world is expanding and a deep split between the West and the countries of the global majority is emerging.”
“Russia has for a long time tried to play ball with the West,” claimed Kovalik, agreeing that the rhetoric emerging from Moscow and Beijing has become more strident in recent years. “But it finally dawned on them that the West didn't want to be friends with them. So now you do hear people like Lavrov and [Security Council of Russia Deputy Chairman Dmitry] Medvedev, as you say, kind of taking the gloves off and saying it like it is.”
The lawyer pointed to Israel’s military operation in Gaza as well as the conflict in the Donbass, which The New York Times recently admitted was fomented in part by the CIA’s decade-long presence in Ukraine. Both crises risk the eruption of a major world war, he claimed.
Host Garland Nixon claimed Russia is embracing the anti-colonial or even “anti-imperialist” legacy of the Soviet Union in recent years, noting the USSR fostered strong ties with Africa and Latin America. The Soviet Union was an ally of South Africa’s anti-apartheid cause as well as popular movements in Latin American countries like Chile and Cuba.
Kovalik noted Russia released a white paper recently specifically mentioning the foreign policy legacy of the Soviet Union. “Russia's proud of that past, it's part of their legacy, and they continue to carry that forward,” he said. “And so you even see Putin, for example, hosting various Palestinian factions in Moscow, trying to get them together to agree to work as one. That is some old-timey, Soviet-like diplomacy there.”

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Meanwhile, US foreign alliances increasingly recall unflattering aspects of the West's history, including the 20th-century emergence of fascism in Europe. Earlier this week, it was announced the Ukrainian city of Nikopol had renamed a street in honor of Pyotr Dyachenko, a Ukrainian SS officer who was decorated with the Iron Cross by Nazi leader Adolph Hitler.

The incident follows the well-publicized recognition of Yaroslav Hunka by the Canadian Parliament last year, a Ukrainian World War II veteran who was revealed to have fought in a Nazi-aligned military unit. Western countries have continuously backed Ukraine's post-Maidan government, which even the NATO-aligned Atlantic Council has admitted is significantly influenced by neo-Nazi militants.

The United States has also backed reactionary elements in Syria as it was recently announced the country has appointed a former Daesh* chief as a commander in the US-backed Syria Free Army. The US has spent billions of dollars supporting fundamentalist elements in Syria in an attempt to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad.

"We live in a time in which, again, Western governments are unabashedly honoring Nazis," claimed Kovalik. "As Russia honors its Soviet past, the West is now honoring its Nazi past."

"My friends would say we would be very reluctant to make this analogy before October 7th, but I would say that the West is now supporting a Nazi-like regime in Israel at this point," Kovalik added. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has presided over the killing of more than 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza in recent months, the vast majority of them women, children, and innocent civilians.

Host Garland Nixon agreed. "If you look at Ukraine and you look at Israel, what you find in both instances [is] you have one ethnicity – although in Ukraine they just won't admit it – but you have one group who feels that the other group is inferior, maybe ethnically, however you want to call it, and they have a desire to wipe them out and have actively made a kinetic effort to wipe them out." Neo-fascist troops fighting for Ukraine have referred to their foes as "Asiatic hordes," employing racist terminologylikening Russians to "orcs."

"What we're seeing right now in Gaza is open genocidal warfare akin to the Holocaust," claimed Kovalik bluntly. "You're starting to see images out of Gaza of these emaciated bodies who look like people who've been in a Nazi concentration camp. And, of course, they have been in a Nazi-like concentration camp, and that's called Gaza."

"It's 'back to the future," the activist concluded. "We're back to the old Cold War days."

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Was Neocon Anti-Russia Hawk Victoria Nuland Forced Out?

Former CIA analyst Ray McGovern speculates that political differences between Nuland and Biden administration officials may have led to her surprise ouster this week.

Mass speculation has emerged after the sudden announcement this week that influential US Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland would be resigning from her position in the Biden White House.

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The surprising development came Tuesday amidst a difficult moment for US President Joe Biden. Former President Donald Trump has maintained a steady lead over Biden in opinion polling as questions remain about the octogenarian head of state's ability to serve a second term. Cracks have also begun to show in Biden's political coalition as pro-Palestine activists urge a show of defiance against the president's foreign policy in state primary contests.

The problems extend to the personnel of Biden's Cabinet as a scandal has arisen over Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's lack of transparency over health issues. With the president facing challenges on multiple fronts, why would the White House choose this moment for a staff shakeup? Former US Central Intelligence Agency analyst Ray McGovern speculated the answer may lie in disagreements between Biden administration officials and the notoriously strong-willed Nuland during a discussion on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Wednesday.

"The CIA would have, the NSA would have those conversations as well," said McGovern, referring to leaked recordings of discussions between Nuland and German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius that appeared to reveal plans for an imminent attack on Russian soil. The leaks generated significant embarrassment for German officials as attention was drawn to Chancellor Olaf Scholz's support for the Ukraine proxy conflict.

Nuland's bellicose rhetoric may suggest she was going rouge, according to McGovern, attempting to contrive a highly escalatory attack on a nuclear power without approval from her superiors in the State Department.

"My best guess here is that the CIA and the Defense Department and the NSA got this message around saying, 'look, Victoria's got her own agenda here,'" said the analyst. "'The president doesn't really want to strike these ammo depots in Russia or knock down the [Crimean] Bridge. So we got to rein her in, I guess it's time for her to go to early retirement.'"

Nuland has enjoyed a decades-long tenure in multiple US presidential administrations. Journalist Glenn Greenwald recently documented the controversial legacy of the arch neoconservative, criticizing her "catastrophic career fomenting bipartisan wars."

Although Nuland currently serves under President Joe Biden, a Democrat, her husband Robert Kagan was a co-founder of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), an organization home to many officials who served under Republican President George W. Bush. Nuland and Kagan's influence in both parties demonstrates the power of Washington's pro-war establishment, with the Trump administration marking the first time since the early 1990s that Nuland wasn't advising a US president on issues of foreign policy.

The discussion then turned towards French-Russian relations, which took a nosedive last week after French President Emmanuel Macron mused about the possibility of sending European troops to assist the Ukrainian regime in the Donbass. Russian State Duma chairman Vyacheslav Volodin responded forcefully to Macron's suggestion, recalling the history of military engagement between the two countries.

"To maintain his personal power, Macron could not think of anything better than to ignite a third world war," said Volodin in comments posted on social media. "His initiatives are becoming dangerous for the citizens of France. Before making such statements, it would be right for Macron to remember how it ended for Napoleon and his soldiers, more than 600,000 of whom were left lying in the damp earth."

"The Russians remember that with particular pride," said McGovern of France's crushing defeat, which serves to prove the adage that it's never wise to attack Russia during the winter. A certain

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mustachioed German chancellor would learn the same lesson more than a century later as millions of Russians made the ultimate sacrifice to save the world from Nazism.
The US Censorship Industrial Complex is alive and well, according to independent commentator Steve Poikonen. Poikonen joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program to discuss the issue after the popular blog Naked Capitalism received an email from its ad service provider conveying a threatening warning from Google over alleged content on the site.

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"If you are espousing genuine dissent, if you are challenging power, regardless of what its political party is, you are on the chopping block," said Poikonen, adding "this is a war for the supremacy of the digital information space."

Poikonen claimed the kind of corporate oligopoly that controls traditional media in the United States is emerging online as well, with the US government holding strong influence over the few social media companies that control most online discourse

"Elon Musk is performing a service for the security state, not just on Twitter, but in every other company he owns," said the journalist. "He's implemented a social credit score on Twitter. There's a whole bunch of algorithms that determine your reach and your ability to get your word out, and all of them have to do with never saying anything out of line."

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Kamala Harris' call for 'ceasefire' ignores reality of Israel's brutal occupation

Harris made headlines this week with a speech in which she called for a six-week ceasefire in Gaza, but critics say the US Vice President's rhetoric offers little of substance.

"They're acting like Kamala Harris went rogue," said host of Sputnik's Fault Lines program Jamarl Thomas as Harris' speech has been characterized in liberal media outlets as a break from official White House policy. "Kamala Harris just articulated [US President Joe] Biden's position, which is basically the Israeli position with the idea that they're going to occupy Gaza after the fact, or put in an administrator that they choose."

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“What sort of a two-state [policy] can you have with all the settlers within the West Bank basically preventing some sort of a contiguous territory to come under the Palestinian Authority?” Dr. Hasan Unal, a professor of political science and international relations at Bashkent University in Ankara, Turkiye, told the program.

Nevertheless, the US continues to provide Israel with billions of dollars in military aid each year, Thomas noted, even while claiming sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians.

“There is a lobby in the United States, specifically on behalf of Israel, and they funnel lots of money, they have lots of influence, and the interesting thing about them is that their lobbying – or at least how our politicians respond to the lobbying – it is on both sides,” Unal clarified.

“Democrats and Republicans respond pretty similarly,” he noted.

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‘Back to the Future’: Russia honors anti-colonial past as the West backs neo-Nazis

“Russia's proud of that past, it's part of their legacy, and they continue to carry that forward,” said author and human rights lawyer Dan Kovalik on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program, referring to the Soviet Union’s 20th-century support for anti-colonial forces around the globe. “And so you even see Putin, for example, hosting various Palestinian factions in Moscow, trying to get them together to agree to work as one. That is some old-timey, Soviet-like diplomacy there.”

The Soviet Union was an ally of South Africa’s anti-apartheid cause as well as various popular movements in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Meanwhile the West’s foreign alliances increasingly recall unflattering aspects of their history, including the 20th-century emergence of fascism in Europe.

The infamous recognition of Yaroslav Hunka by the Parliament of Canada last year shocked the world. A Ukrainian World War II veteran who was revealed to have fought in a Nazi-aligned unit was given a standing ovation by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and lawmakers from all major political parties.

“What we're seeing right now in Gaza is open genocidal warfare akin to the Holocaust,” said Kovalik bluntly, claiming Israel’s military operation in the besieged territory brings to mind the worst horrors of the 20th century. “You're starting to see images out of Gaza of these emaciated bodies who look like people who've been in a Nazi concentration camp. And, of course, they have been in a Nazi-like concentration camp, and that's called Gaza.”

“As Russia honors its Soviet past, the West is now honoring its Nazi past,” concluded Kovalik.

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Was neocon slay queen Victoria Nuland forced out?

Former CIA analyst Ray McGovern speculated that political differences between Under Secretary of State Nuland and Biden administration officials may have led to her surprise ouster this week.

“My best guess here is that the CIA and the Defense Department and the NSA got this message around saying, 'look, Victoria's got her own agenda here,’” said McGovern on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program, saying the leaked recording of Nuland appearing to plan an attack on Russia with German officials may have led to her downfall.

“‘The president doesn't really want to strike these ammo depots in Russia or knock down the [Crimean] Bridge. So, we got to rein her in, I guess it's time for her to go to early retirement,’” said McGovern, speculating that Biden administration officials may desire a less confrontational stance towards Russia as the US-led Ukrainian proxy war has failed to weaken the country.

The discussion then turned towards French-Russian relations, which took a nosedive last week after French President Emmanuel Macron mused about the possibility of sending European troops to assist the Kiev regime in the Donbass. Russian State Duma chairman Vyacheslav Volodin responded by referencing Russia’s 19th-century victory over Napoleon Bonaparte after the French emperor launched an invasion from the west.

“The Russians remember that with particular pride,” said McGovern of France’s crushing defeat, which serves to prove the adage that it’s never wise to attack Russia during the winter. A certain mustachioed German chancellor would learn the same lesson more than a century later as millions of Russians made the ultimate sacrifice to save the world from Nazism.

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Pentagon Assessing if Balloon Intercepted Last Week Over US Was Spy Craft - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department is looking into whether the latest balloon intercepted over the United States was a spy craft, US media reported on Thursday, citing a Pentagon spokesperson.

The balloon was discovered by the fishermen off the coast of Alaska and is now being examined at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage, CNN reported, citing Pentagon spokesperson Sue Gough.

“We do not know why the balloon was in the waters off the coast of Alaska, nor are we going to

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characterize it at this time, but hope to learn more about the balloon's origin and purpose after further analysis of the materiel, which will be conducted by multiple agencies," Gough said.

The existence of high-altitude surveillance balloons burst into US consciousness last year, when a Chinese spy balloon appeared to blow off course and transited across the continental US. That balloon entered US territory through Alaskan airspace.

In late February, the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) said in a statement to Sputnik that the US military intercepted a small balloon flying at a high-altitude over the state of Utah and determined that it did not pose a national security threat.

NORAD will continue to track and monitor the balloon, and the FAA also determined the balloon posed no hazard to flight safety.

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NATO Protocol on Sweden's Accession Enters Into Force - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The NATO protocol on Sweden's accession to the alliance has officially entered into force, the State Department announced on Thursday.

"The Secretary of State, in performance of the depositary duties of the United States of America, communicates the following: On March 7, 2024, the conditions for entry into force set forth in Article II of the Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty on the Accession of the Kingdom of Sweden were fulfilled," the release said.

The State Department added that the protocol entered into force today, on March 7, 2024.

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US Exports to Russia Drop to $30Mln in January - Census Bureau

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US exports to Russia decreased to $30 million in January, down from $58.9 million in December 2023, according to US Census Bureau data published on Thursday.

US imports from Russia decreased to $244 million in January from $292.2 million in December.

US trade deficit with Russia totaled $214 million for the first month of 2024.

Last year, the US trade deficit with Russia amounted to $3.968 billion.

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Most Americans See Divided 'State of Union' Ahead of Biden's Speech - Poll

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WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The majority of Americans describe the state of the country as divided ahead of the State of the Union speech by US President Joe Biden, according to a CBS News poll out Thursday.

When asked how they view the state of the nation today, 61% said "divided," 45% replied "declining" and 37% said "weak," the poll showed.

Only 15% of respondents believe that the United States is "strong," 12% consider it to be "united" and 11% think it is "prospering," according to the survey.

Most Americans - 66% - think that things are going badly in the country today, while 34% said they were going well.

A total of 57% of Americans rate the national economy badly with 39% rating the economy as good.

The latest CBS News/YouGov survey was conducted among 2,159 US adult residents between February 28-March 1.

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Two Adults, Four Children Murdered in Suburb of Canada's Capital Ottawa - Police

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – A multiple homicide has left two adults and four children dead in the Barrhaven suburb in Canada's capital city of Ottawa, local law enforcement said on Thursday.

"The Ottawa Police Service Homicide Unit is investigating the deaths of six people who were found at an address on Berrigan Dr. just before 11 p.m. last night [Wednesday]," the Ottawa Police said in a statement on Thursday.

Two adults and four children were among those found dead at the residence, the statement said. The identities of the victims have not yet been confirmed.

One individual was arrested following the murder, the police said. There is no further threat to public safety, the police stressed.

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An investigative unit of Ottawa Police remains on scene, the statement added.

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White House Asks State, Pentagon for List of Pending Arms Transfers to Israel – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – The White House recently asked the State Department and Pentagon for a list of weapons transfers to Israel that are either planned or pending approval, Axios reported on Thursday, citing four US officials.

The officials emphasized that White House did not have any plans to restrict military assistance to Israel.

However, the reason for the request is unclear. One official said the request for the list was to compare it against a list of weapon systems that Israel provided to the White House regarding what it is prioritizing in its war on Gaza.

Another source said the request was routine, and it was meant to provide the White House with a status update on pending defense export licenses and planned arms transfers. The source added that the White House also wanted to see if there were issues that required "deconfliction."

The Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday, citing officials, that the Biden administration has made over 100 individual transfers of arms to Israel, but has only officially notified Congress of two major shipments. In both cases, the White House used an emergency rule to avoid the review process, the report said.

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PREVIEW - Biden to Deliver Last 'State of Union' Speech to US Congress Before 2024 Election

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will deliver his final State of the Union (SOTU) speech to the US Congress before the 2024 presidential election in November, potentially making it his final SOTU address.

US presidents use SOTU speeches to satisfy a constitutional requirement to periodically address the US Congress on the status of the nation, as well as to deliver policy recommendations.

The speech, which occurs in the chamber of the US House of Representatives, is attended by members of Congress, US government officials, and guests of the president and lawmakers. The administration typically assigns certain cabinet members and lawmakers to skip the speech, so that government operations can continue in the event of a catastrophe at the US Capitol during the event.

Biden has delivered SOTU speeches in April 2021, March 2022 and February 2023. Biden's address on Thursday could be his final SOTU speech, if he loses his reelection bid.

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SOTU speeches garner tens of millions of viewers, providing an opportunity for presidents to highlight their achievements, propose new policies and criticize the opposing party.

President Biden will lay out the "historic achievements he has delivered on for the American people and his vision for the future," White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

He will talk about the success in implementing his agenda "from infrastructure to chips to lowering prices," Jean-Pierre said.

Biden will also share his plan to improve the lives of all Americans, she added.

The opposing party traditionally provides a response speech after the event. Republican Party leaders selected US Sen. Katie Britt to deliver their response to Biden this year.

Former US president and lone 2024 Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump said that he will conduct a live "play by play" reaction to Biden's speech. Trump will correct "inaccurate statements," with a focus on comments regarding border security and the alleged weaponization of government against him.

Biden will claim that the state of the union is strong, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday. However, the state of the union is not strong, and "everybody around the country knows it," Johnson said.

The United States is in decline and nothing Biden could say during his speech would change that, Johnson added.

Biden's SOTU speech is scheduled for Thursday at 9:00 p.m. ET (2:00 GMT on Friday). The White House will have a stream of the event with American Sign Language interpretation.

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Hungary Would Happily Welcome Trump in Any Position - Szijjarto

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) – Hungary would be happy to host Donald Trump "in any position," Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto told RIA Novosti.

"It would always be an honor to have President Trump in Budapest, no question. It's not a problem that he's a candidate because we would be honored to receive him in any position, regardless of whether he is a candidate or elected or whatever," Szijjarto said, when asked if Trump will attend the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest in April.

However, he added, the ongoing presidential campaign in the US provides the candidates, including Trump, a very limited chance to leave the country.

"But we hope that once we will be able to host him in Hungary in any of his positions," he said.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban is expected to meet with Trump in Florida on March 8. Orban intends to discuss with him the prospects of restoring peace in Ukraine, Szijjarto said.

Trump is the lone Republican candidate in the 2024 US presidential election.

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Szijjarto Says US Prosecution of Trump 'Very Telling' of Liberal Mainstream

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - The prosecution of former President Donald Trump in the United States is "very telling" in the context of the liberal mainstream worldwide, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto told RIA Novosti.

"That's very telling," Szijjarto said of the court cases undertaken against Trump in the United States on various pretexts.

Szijjarto emphasized that Hungary does not want to tell Americans whom to elect or not to elect in the upcoming election and fully respects their right to choose their president.

"If this happened to a liberal candidate, wherever in the world, all international organizations would jump in there, question the nature of democracy, question human rights and question the basis of the democratic political system in that given country. But now, when a patriotic, right-wing conservative leader is being put under legal torture, all the international liberal mainstream builds a context around it as if it were okay," Szijjarto said.

The minister suggested looking at developments in the European Union, specifically referring to the recent elections in Slovakia, where one of the candidates was arrested just weeks before the vote.

"Is it a coincidence? Come on," Szijjarto said.

The foreign minister also said it is not a coincidence that the Republic of Srpska leader in Bosnia and Herzegovina is under threat of being put on the EU's sanctions list.

Szijjarto noted that the entire international liberal press recently celebrated the electoral victory of Donald Tusk's party in Poland, and "no one says a word" about the new government taking over the country's public broadcasting company.

"No one raised a simple question whether it's okay or not," he said. "We in Hungary have been under legal torture for the last 14 years since we have taken office for every step of ours, regardless of what it was."

Szijjarto also pointed out that the situation is similar to the one in the United States, emphasizing that patriotic leaders and right-wing parties are "faced with international negligence when it comes to legal tortures against you."

Trump faces a total of 91 charges in four criminal cases in what the Republican politician calls an attempt by the Democratic establishment to prevent him from returning to the White House. The most serious charges could cost Trump 20 years in prison. If the sentences are added up, Trump could be imprisoned for more than 700 years.

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Szijjarto Hopes Scholz Will Resist Pressure to Supply Taurus Missiles to Ukraine

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - German Chancellor Olaf Scholz will hopefully not yield to pressure to send long-range Taurus missiles to Kiev in the wake of a leak scandal involving

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the German top military brass discussing an attack on the Crimean Bridge, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto told RIA Novosti.

"I do hope that the Chancellor will have enough power to go against the huge pressure which is being put on him very spectacularly," Szijjarto said.

Last week, Margarita Simonyan — the editor-in-chief of RT and the Rossiya Segodnya media group — published a recording of the February 19 conversation between four high-ranking German military officers. The top brass was discussing possible supply of long-range Taurus missiles to Ukraine and a potential attack on the Crimean Bridge.

German Foreign Minister Boris Pistorius confirmed the authenticity of the recording, stating that the discussion was purely theoretical in nature.

Scholz on his part once again ruled out supplying missiles to Kiev since it could require the presence of German troops on the ground to help deploy them.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the content of the leaked audio recording points to direct involvement of the collective West in the Ukraine conflict.

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New Frame Will Boost Black Hawk Combat Copter's Service by 20 Years - Pentagon Official

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - A new frame on the next version of the venerable Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk ground support combat helicopter will allow the new, improved model to operate for another 20 years, Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisitions, Logistics and Technology Douglas Bush told a congressional hearing.

"[The Army has announced its] new commitment to the UH-60M Black Hawks with a new frame," Bush told a heading of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC).

The more modern helicopters would replace the aging earlier UH-60 models that were now being phased out, Bush explained.

The long commitment would allow production lines to remain open for many years, thus contributing to expanding and stabilizing the US industrial military base and providing guaranteed continued supplies of the aircraft and its spare parts to US allies around the world as well, Bush said.

In mid-2022, the US Army awarded Sikorsky, now a division of Lockheed, a tenth UH-60 Black Hawk multiyear production contract worth $2.3 billion for 120 UH-60Ms for the Army with an option for 135 more.

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BAE Delivers New Armored Turreted 120mm Mortar Vehicle Prototype to US Army - Pentagon

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WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US Army has taken possession of a new design of an armored vehicle that will carry different kinds of turrets to house heavy 120mm mortars, BAE Systems announced in a press release.

"BAE Systems has delivered a first-in-its-kind Armored Multi-Purpose Vehicle (AMPV) Turreted Mortar prototype to the US Army," the release said.

The prototype displays a newly designed top plate system called the External Mission Equipment Package (ExMEP) to permit the easy installation of different kinds of turrets, the company said.

"This vehicle prototype is also outfitted with the Patria NEMO remote-controlled 120mm turreted mortar system," the release said.

The new turreted mortar leverages BAE Systems' ExMEP to rapidly integrate the NEMO 120mm mortar system in an indirect and direct fire support platform that can be used in multi-mission scenarios so that up to six mortar rounds can hit targets simultaneously in less than 25 seconds while the vehicle is stationary or on the move, BAE Systems said.

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First Three Advanced F-16 Falcons Sent to Boost Bahrain's Air Force - Lockheed Martin

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has sent the first three of its more advanced F-15 6 Fighting Falcon Block 16 combat fighters to Bahrain to augment the small Arabian or Persian Gulf nation's air force, the company announced in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin today marked a significant milestone with the departure of the first ferry cell of three F-16 Block 70 jets from Greenville, South Carolina, to Bahrain," the release stated.

Bahrain was the first Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member state to operate the F-16 and was now the first to integrate the F-16 Block 70 variant into its fleet, Lockheed Martin said.

"Lockheed Martin has produced five F-16 Block 70 jets for Bahrain, with an additional 11 in various stages of production and testing," the release said.

The initial aircraft are performing flight test missions at Edwards Air Force Base, California, with the 416th Flight Test Squadron, the company said.

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US Navy OKs $181Mln Contract Boost For Amphibious Combat Vehicles Program - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has approved an almost $182 million extension on its contract with BAE Systems to build 34 more new Amphibious Combat Vehicles (ACVs), the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"BAE Systems Land & Armaments is awarded a US Navy $181,888,089 modification contract for Amphibious Combat Vehicles," the release stated on Tuesday.

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The extension brings the total cumulative value of the contract to $2,732,764,209, the Defense Department said.

"This contract modification provides for the exercise of options for the procurement of 34 full-rate production ACV personnel variants and associated production, fielding and support costs, and cyclic maintenance," the release explained.

Most of the work on the contract will be performed in York, Pennsylvania (60%); Aiken, South Carolina (15%) and San Jose, California (15%) over the next two and a half years with an expected completion date of July 2026, the Defense Department said.

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US Navy Orders $187Mln New Computer Courseware Program to Train Air Crews - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has ordered new online computer courseware costing more than $187 million to train its aircrews more efficiently, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Integration Innovation is awarded a $187,317,453 US Navy contract to design and deliver self-directed interactive training and instructor-facilitated interactive courseware training products for Navy aviation and aircrew ratings," the release stated on Tuesday.

The new courseware will be used to help its users meet the Navy's Ready Relevant Learning Content Conversion Aviation training requirements, the Defense Department explained.

Work on developing and providing the courseware will be carried out in Huntsville, Alabama over the next five years and is expected to be completed in March 2029, the release said.

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Senior General Shoots Down Growing Congress Support For New US Drone Corps - Hearing

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US Army is not planning and does not see the need for and currently is not considering setting up a separate corps or organization to direct and coordinate all unmanned aerial systems (UAS) or drone operations, Army Futures Command chief General James Rainey told a congressional hearing.

"I have not been in any conversations or thought about a drone corps," Rainey told a hearing of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) on Tuesday.

Rainey's comment followed expressions of interest or support for the setting up of such a drone corps by several members of the committee.

"With the exponential growth of unmanned systems on the battlefield, I believe it is time to give consideration to the establishment of a Drone Corps," Congressman Rob Wittman earlier told the hearing.

Rainey told the committee that instead, Army Futures Command was working on a new

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concept of human-machine integrated formations, and that approach he said was "on track" and had been developed over the past 18 months.

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US Army to Phase Out Old Shadow, Raven Reconnaissance Drones - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration and the Defense Department have taken the decision to phase out the long-serving "legacy" Shadow RQ-7 and Raven RQ-11 reconnaissance and surveillance drones, Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisitions, Logistics and Technology Douglas Bush told a congressional hearing.

"The Army has decided ... to phase out the Shadow and Raven legacy unmanned systems," Bush told the US House Armed Services Committee on Tuesday.

The decision was part of a strategy of saving money by phasing out and canceling production of aging and obsolescent systems so as to concentrate resources on replacing them with new weapons and systems able to meet the rapidly changing technological demands of the 21st battlefield, Bush said.

The AAI RQ-7 Shadow is an unmanned aerial vehicle or system operated by the US Army and many of its allies for reconnaissance, surveillance, target acquisition and battle damage assessment.

The AeroVironment RQ-11 Raven is a small hand-launched remote-controlled unmanned aerial vehicle or system that was also developed for the US armed forces.

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Scholz Reasonable in Ruling Out Supply of Taurus Missiles to Ukraine - Szijjarto

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is reasonable in ruling out supplying long-range Taurus missiles to Kiev amid a leak scandal involving the German top military brass discussing an attack on Russia's Crimean Bridge, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto told RIA Novosti.

"I think it's much more important, what the Chancellor says than what some military people are alleged to say. I think Chancellor Scholz has been behaving in a very responsible way in this regard, as making clear that no Taurus type rockets would be delivered by Germany to Ukraine. I think it's a very reasonable way of behavior," Szijjarto said.

Last week, Margarita Simonyan — the editor-in-chief of RT and the Rossiya Segodnya media group — published a recording of the February 19 conversation between four high-ranking German military officers. The top brass was discussing possible supply of long-range Taurus missiles to Ukraine and a potential attack on the Crimean Bridge.

Germany has confirmed the authenticity of the recording.

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Following the leak, Scholz once again ruled out supplying missiles to Kiev since it could require the presence of German troops on the ground to help deploy them.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the content of the leaked audio recording points to direct involvement of the collective West in the conflict in Ukraine.

The leak exposes the genuine role of Germany in the Ukraine conflict and invalidates Scholz's statements to the contrary, Deputy Speaker of Russia's Federation Council Konstantin Kosachev said.

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US Army Must Learn Lessons, Apply Tech From 'Disruptive Lessons' of Ukraine - General

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US Army needs to learn and adapt to the "disruption" to previously accepted patterns of waging land warfare demonstrated in the Ukraine conflict over the past two years, US Army Futures Command chief General James Rainey told a congressional hearing.

"We need to rapidly adapt to the clear disruption that we are witnessing in the war in Ukraine," Rainey told a hearing of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) on Wednesday. "...What has been happening in Ukraine [has been] absolutely the most disruptive couple of years since World War II in terms of technology disrupting [previous tactics and patterns of conducting operations]."

The US Army had access to state-of-the-art research and development and technology but needed to be able to move faster in adapting existing technology to the changing needs of the 21st-century battlefield, Rainey explained.

"What we have to do is get better at rapidly adapting technology that [already] exists," he said.

Two of the major priority areas the army was looking at were unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and countering them, Rainey said.

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US Jury Finds 'Rust' Movie Weapons Supervisor Guilty of Involuntary Manslaughter - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - A US jury convicted Hannah Gutierrez-Reed, the weapons supervisor of the Rust movie set, guilty of involuntary manslaughter in the accidental shooting death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins, CBS reported.

The report said on Tuesday that Gutierrez-Reed was acquitted on a charge of evidence tampering.

Gutierrez-Reed faces up to 18 months in prison and a $5,000 fine for the involuntary manslaughter charge, the report noted.

The report did not mention a sentencing date for Gutierrez-Reed.

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Hutchins was killed in October 21, 2021, when a gun held by US actor Alec Baldwin fired during a scene rehearsal on the set at the Bonanza Creek Ranch. A wrongful death lawsuit was filed against Baldwin and other important members of the movie production on February 15, 2022.
In February 2023. Baldwin pleaded not guilty to involuntary manslaughter charges.

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Johnson Invites Parents of Soldiers Killed in Afghanistan to State of Union - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said in a statement for ABC News that he had invited family members of those soldiers who were killed during the botched US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 to the State of the Union address.
The United States withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021 after a rapid takeover of the country by the Taliban. The US military led the chaotic evacuation of thousands of people from Afghanistan via the airport in Kabul at Abbey Gate, where a terrorist attack killed 13 US troops and 170 Afghans.
"President Biden's hasty, unconditional withdrawal from Afghanistan was a failure for America and its allies. It led to the tragic deaths of brave American servicemembers, including Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Taylor Hoover and Cpl. Hunter Lopez," the report cited Johnson as saying in the statement on Wednesday.
On Thursday, US President Joe Biden will deliver his annual State of the Union address to lawmakers, which could be his final State of the Union speech as president if he loses his reelection bid in November.
Republicans in Congress have accused the Biden administration of fleeing Afghanistan, as well as leaving behind hundreds of thousands of Afghans who had been collaborating with the American military in the country against the Taliban for 20 years.
In late February, US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul threatened to hold US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in contempt of Congress for withholding documents related to a State Department review of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

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US CENTCOM Says Houthi Attack on True Confidence Commercial Vessel Killed 3 Crew Members

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Three members of the True Confidence commercial vessel were killed after a Houthi missile hit the ship as it sailed through the Gulf of Aden, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a press release.
"At approximately 11:30 a.m. (Sanaa time) March 6, an anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) was launched from Iranian-backed Houthi terrorist-controlled areas of Yemen toward M/V True

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Confidence, a Barbados-flagged, Liberian-owned bulk carrier, while transiting the Gulf of Aden," the release said on Wednesday. "The missile struck the vessel, and the multinational crew reports three fatalities, at least four injuries, of which three are in critical condition, and significant damage to the ship."

The crew abandoned the ship and coalition warships responded and are assessing the situation, the release said.

According to CENTCOM, Wednesday's attack is the fifth anti-ship ballistic missile fired by the Houthis in the last two days, two of which hit the shipping vessels MSC Sky II and True Confidence.

The United States and the United Kingdom reportedly launched air strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen following the deadly Houthi attack.

The Defense Department and CENTCOM did not respond to Sputnik's request for comment about reports of the US and UK airstrikes.

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ANALYSIS - After Super Tuesday Trump Sure to Win Republican Nomination, Likely to Win Presidency

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - After sweeping almost all the Republican primary votes on Super Tuesday, former president Donald Trump now looks certain to win the Republican Party's presidential nomination for the third time in a row and then will likely trounce incumbent President Joe Biden in November's national election too, US analysts told Sputnik on Wednesday.

After being beaten by Trump by landslide margins by registered Republican voters across the United States, Trump's last remaining rival, former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley pulled out of the race on Wednesday morning. But in conceding defeat, she did not recommend that her followers throw their support behind Trump.

OPEN PATH

Haley's withdrawal nevertheless gave Trump an open path to the Republican nomination and beyond that, a return to the White House, constitutional historian and political commentator Dan Lazare predicted.

"Now that Nikki Haley has pulled out, I think Trump is unstoppable not only in terms of the Republican nomination in July but the presidency in November," he said.

Haley's collapsed political fortunes were bad news for Biden too, Lazare pointed out.

At age 82, and showing it, Biden had lost any remaining credibility, Lazare observed.

"The age factor is bad enough, but his refusal to admit that there's a problem is even worse. Americans see a stubborn old man who has no idea how out of it he really is," he said.

OVERHEATING ECONOMY

Biden was also facing an unstable economy and growing inflation that worried voters, Lazare said.

On foreign affairs issues, the president's record could have been better, Lazare noted.

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"There is Ukraine, where the military situation is deteriorating rapidly. With one debacle on his watch in Afghanistan, Biden would be dead in the water if another were to occur in Eastern Europe," he said.

The Middle East crisis also was now tearing the Democratic Party apart, Lazare commented.

"Finally, there is Gaza. The 'uncommitted' protest votes in Michigan, Minnesota, and North Carolina are a sign of things to come. So were the protests that erupted at Adam Schiff's victory celebration" in the California Democratic primary to choose a Senate candidate to run for the late Diane Feinstein's old seat, he said.

CONTRAST WITH TRUMP

Political commentator, investigative journalist, and former hedge fund manager Charles Ortel said Biden's unremitting pattern of failures and lack of any significant achievements contrasted sharply with Trump's record of a booming economy at home until the COVID pandemic stuck and the former president's ability to keep the United States safely out of any new foreign conflicts.

"In 2024, Trump has an enviable track record as a proven accomplished tackler of problems that Republicans and Democrats have allowed to fester and get worse for many decades," he said.

The November election would also see more and more voters pull out of the old established US political party structure, Ortel prophesied.

Haley had been rejected because she lacked any authentic policies or personal credentials that conservative Republican voters demanded, Ortel explained.

CRUSHING TRUMP VICTORY

Ortel, like Lazare, predicted a crushing Trump victory in November.

"If the election were held today, Trump would likely crush Biden in a free and fair counting of eligible votes," he said.

The Democrats remained in deep denial about Biden's physical and mental incapacity when his decline was obvious to all, and this had destroyed all their remaining national credibility, Ortel emphasized.

Biden’s unprosecuted corrupt acts would certainly be the subject of unrelenting and aggressive focus and should disqualify him from another presidential term, Ortel insisted.

Change for the good was coming, even while mainstream US commentators and influence shapers miss the obvious, Ortel concluded.

TRUMP CERTAIN TO WIN

Historian, TNT Radio host and political commentator Bruce De Torres agreed that Trump now looked certain to win his party's 2024 presidential nomination, barring any unforeseen developments.

"Trump either becomes the nominee, or some courts might rule against him in new/weird ways that prevent his nomination ...Or he might develop health problems (natural) that take him out of the running. (He is of that age)," he said.

George Mason University Professor of Law Francis Buckley shared the consensus that the results of Super Tuesday had again put Trump within reach of the White House.

After Super Tuesday, Trump dominated the field with 1,022 delegates pledged to support him at the Republican convention in Milwaukee from July 15 to July 18. That puts him close to the

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1,215 delegates he needs to confirm his nomination.

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US Arrests China Citizen for Theft of AI-Related Trade Secrets From Google - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has arrested a Chinese national residing in California for alleged theft of Artificial Intelligence-related secrets from Google, the US Justice Department of Justice announced.

"A federal grand jury indicted Linwei Ding, aka Leon Ding, charging him with four counts of theft of trade secrets in connection with an alleged plan to steal from Google LLC (Google) proprietary information related to artificial intelligence (AI) technology," the Justice Department said in a release on Wednesday.

Ding, 38, is alleged to have transferred sensitive Google trade secrets and other confidential information from Google's network to his personal account while secretly affiliating himself with AI-related companies in China, the release said.

"As alleged in today's charges, the defendant stole from Google over 500 confidential files containing AI trade secrets, while covertly working for China-based companies seeking an edge in the AI technology race," the release said.

While Ding began secretly uploading trade secrets in May 2022, he continued periodic uploads until May 2023, the release also said.

The US authorities arrested Ding earlier on Wednesday and charged him with four counts of theft of trade secrets, the release added.

If convicted, Ding faces a maximum penalty of ten years in prison and up to a $250,000 fine for each count, according to the release.

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UN Continues to Deal With Ariel Henry as Prime Minister of Haiti - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations continues to regard and work with Ariel Henry as prime minister of Haiti, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"We continue to deal with Mr. [Henry] as prime minister of Haiti," Dujarric said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

Dujarric also said it is important for political actors in Haiti and other stakeholders to work toward restoring safety and supporting the country's institutions.

Earlier on Wednesday, the US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said the United States is not calling on Henry to step down, but wants him to expedite the transition to what the US government terms to be "empowered and inclusive governance."

On Sunday, an armed gang stormed Haiti's largest prison and freed an as of yet unconfirmed

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number of inmates and also stormed another prison. The Haitian authorities in the capital of Port-au-Prince declared a 72-hour state of emergency and a curfew in order to detain the offenders.

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US House Passes $460Bln Government Funding Bill, Sending Legislation to Senate

(Updates with more details in paras 4-7)
WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation with approximately $460 billion in spending, in an effort to avoid a partial government shutdown before the end of the week.
House lawmakers on Wednesday passed the bill under suspension of the rules in a vote of 339 in favor and 85 opposed, with two-thirds support required for passage.
The legislation now heads to the US Senate for consideration. US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that he would bring the bill to the Senate floor quickly after passage in the House of Representatives.
The legislation provides $68.537 billion in discretionary funding, including $12.6 billion in earmarks, including 170 earmarks by Schumer.
The bill also provides $191 million for the US Bureau of Industry and Security to support enforcement of Russian and Belarussian export controls.
The legislation covers six appropriations areas, for which funding is set to expire on March 8. The US Congress must pass funding for six other appropriations areas by March 22. The legislation covers some 30% of the overall budget for the year, estimated at $1.6 trillion.
The bill faced opposition from some Republican lawmakers, including US Senator Mike Lee. All Republicans should oppose the bill, including any senator vying to replace outgoing US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Lee said.

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US House Passes $460Bln Government Funding Bill, Sending Legislation to Senate

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation on Wednesday with approximately $460 billion in spending, in an effort to avoid a partial government shutdown before the end of the week.
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Biden In Annual Address To Layout His Historic Achievements – White House

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden, in his upcoming annual State of the Union address on March 7, will talk about his "historic achievements" in the office, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

"You will hear the President lay out the historic achievements he has delivered on for the American people and his vision for the future," Jean-Pierre told reporters.

She expressed confidence that Biden was able to do more in his first three years in the White House than most presidents have accomplished in two full terms.

"He will talk about the success in implementing his agenda from infrastructure to chips to lowering prices," Jean-Pierre said.

Biden will also share his plan to improve the lives of all Americans, she added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) –

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The shelling of civilian facilities with multiple rocket launch systems in Russia's Belgorod is a war crime, Russia will not leave alone those who did it, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday.

* The Biden administration is considering using some $200 million from US Army funds to provide Ukraine immediate security assistance while efforts to approve new funding in Congress are stalled, Bloomberg reported, citing sources.

* The Russian military attacked a hangar in the port district of Odesa, where preparations were underway for the combat use of Ukrainian unmanned boats, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* US Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland is a talented diplomat but she had a role to play in destabilizing the situation in Ukraine, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, when commenting on her plans to step down.

* The very fact of discussing the possibility of deployment of European troops in Ukraine is "dangerous," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

HOUTHIS ATTACK IN RED SEA

* Yemeni forces attacked a US cargo ship True Confidence in the Gulf of Aden after which the vessel caught fire, Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree said on Wednesday.

* White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday that the ship targeted in a deadly attack by the Houthis earlier in the day was Liberian-owned and flying under a

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Barbados flag.
* US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said "this was sadly inevitable" as he commented on reports of the death of two sailors during a Houthi attack on a cargo ship in the Red Sea

SITUATION IN MOLDOVA

* Gagauzia head Yevgenia Gutsul said on Wednesday that she had discussed with Russian President Vladimir Putin the political situation in Moldova.
* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov confirmed to Sputnik that Putin met with Gutsul on the sidelines of International Youth Festival in Russia's Sirius.

RUSSIA-AFRICA RELATIONS

* The West's attitude towards Africa is unfair, and everything must be done to change the current situation, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday.
* None of the leaders of African countries have asked Russia for anything directly, but Moscow is ready to help, Putin said.
* Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu wants to pay a visit to Russia in the near future, Nigerian Foreign Minister Yusuf Maitama Tuggar said.

MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

* The United States is going to convey to the government of Israel that the expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank weakens its security and mounts a challenge for reaching a long-term peace with the Palestinians, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.
* The United States has approved since the onset of the Gaza conflict on October 7 more than hundred military sales to Israel and quietly delivered the weapons systems and munitions, the Washington Post reported.
* Israeli military attacks that led to casualties among police officers in the Gaza Strip in February complicated the delivery of humanitarian aid to the besieged Palestinian enclave as security crumbles across the territory, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said.

INFLATION IN RUSSIA

* The annual inflation in Russia amounted to 7.59% as of March 4 compared to 7.58% a week earlier, the Russian Economic Development Ministry said on Wednesday.
* Inflation in Russia has slowed down to 0.09% on February 27-March 4 from 0.13% one week earlier, Rosstat said.

HALEY'S DECISION TO SUSPEND PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

* Former United States Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said on Wednesday that she is suspending her 2024 presidential campaign after failing to make up ground on former President Donald Trump in the so-called Super Tuesday primary and caucus elections.
* Trump must continue to earn the support of Republicans and other voters in the United States, Haley said.

PUTIN-GROSSI MEETING

* Russia is engaged in active cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on many issues, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday.
* Russia is doing everything to strengthen the security of nuclear facilities, Putin said during a meeting with IAEA Director-General Rafael Mariano Grossi in Sochi.

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* Russia is ready to share its developments in nuclear energy with all interested partners, Russian Putin said.
* The meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi was constructive, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik.

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US Looking to Buy Another 3Mln Barrels of Oil to Fill Reserve in September - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The US Energy Department announced on Wednesday that it is looking to purchase an additional 3 million barrels of oil that will be used to continue refilling the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) in September.
"Today, the US Department of Energy's Office of Petroleum Reserves announced a solicitation for approximately 3 million barrels of oil for delivery to the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) in September," the Energy Department said in a press release.
Energy companies must submit bids for this contract by March 13, the release noted.
The US government to date has purchased a total of 26.3 million barrels of oil for the SPR for an average price of $76.47 per barrel, according to the Energy Department.
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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House Oversight Panel Says Invited Hunter Biden, His Associates to Testify at Hearing

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – House Oversight Committee chair James Comer invited Hunter Biden and his business associates to testify at a hearing on Joe Biden's alleged abuse of public office during his vice presidency as part of the ongoing impeachment probe, the committee said in a press release on Wednesday.
"House Committee on Oversight and Accountability Chairman James Comer (R-Ky.) today invited Hunter Biden and his business associates to testify at an upcoming hearing titled, 'Influence Peddling: Examining Joe Biden's Abuse of Public Office,'" the release said.
Besides Hunter Biden, the panel wants to hear testimony from business associates Devon Archer, Tony Bobulinski, and Jason Galanis during a hearing that will take place on March 20 at 10:00 a.m. ET.
"Evidence obtained in the House of Representatives impeachment inquiry reveals Joe Biden

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knew about, participated in, and benefited from his family cashing in on the Biden name. Multiple witnesses have testified Joe Biden allowed his family to sell him as 'the brand' around the world to enrich the Biden family. Joe Biden met with nearly all of his son's foreign business associates," the release quoted Comer as saying.

House Republican 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.

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Trump Says Important for Good of US That Biden Agree to Take Part in Debate With Him

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – Former US President and Republican nominee hopeful in the November 2024 election Donald Trump said on Wednesday that it is important for the good of the United States that President Joe Biden takes part in a debate with him "anytime, anywhere, anyplace."

"It is important, for the Good of our Country, that Joe Biden and I Debate Issues that are so vital to America, and the American People. Therefore, I am calling for Debates, ANYTIME, ANYWHERE, ANYPLACE!" Trump said in a Truth Social post. "I look forward to receiving a response. Thank you for your attention to this matter!"

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Nikki Haley Says Suspending 2024 US Presidential Campaign

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - Former United States Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said on Wednesday that she is suspending her 2024 presidential campaign after failing to make up ground on former President Donald Trump in the so-called Super Tuesday primary and caucus elections.

"I am filled with gratitude for the outpouring of support we have received from all across our great country, but the time has now come to suspend my campaign," Haley said in a speech.

Haley also said that she wishes Trump well, adding that he will likely win the Republican Party presidential nomination.

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US Supreme Court to Hear Arguments in Trump Immunity Case on April 25 - Calendar

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WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) -The US Supreme Court is scheduled to hear former President Donald Trump's immunity case on April 25, the SCOTUS monthly argument calendar for April 2024 said on Wednesday.

The Supreme Court granted certiorari to the special counsel's request, agreeing to examine the extent of presidential immunity from criminal prosecution for Trump's conduct related to official acts while in office.

In February, 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.

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

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New York Governor Mobilizes 1,000 Personnel to Aid Police Check Bags at Subway - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - New York State said in a statement on Wednesday that Governor Kathy Hochul would mobilize 1,000 state personnel to bolster the New York Police Department's (NYPD) enhanced baggage inspections at subway locations.

"To supplement the NYPD’s enhanced baggage checks at heavily trafficked areas, Governor Hochul is deploying 1,000 members of State personnel to assist the NYPD’s mission to further this effort," the statement said. "These checks will be targeted at heavily trafficked locations."

Earlier on Wednesday, Hochul unveiled a five-point strategy to deploy state resources to enhance the safety of New York residents using the subway system, the statement said.

"Since taking office, I have been laser-focused on driving down subway crime and protecting New Yorkers," Hochul said. "I am sending a message to all New Yorkers: I will not stop working to keep you safe and restore your peace of mind whenever you walk through those turnstiles."

The five-point plan includes increasing state personnel for NYPD bag checks; introducing legislation for transit bans against assailants; adding more security cameras; improving collaboration between district attorneys and law enforcement; and expanding subway outreach teams.

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Pentagon Says Aware of Reports Biden Mulling Use of Army Funds to Aid Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - A US Defense Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Wednesday that they are aware of reporting claiming the Biden administration is considering

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using funding from the US Army to provide Ukraine immediate aid, but have nothing more to offer on this matter.

"We've seen the report but have nothing to offer on this," the spokesperson said.

Earlier in the day, Bloomberg reported that the Biden administration is considering using some $200 million from US Army funds to provide Ukraine immediate security assistance while approval for some $60 billion in new funding is stalled in Congress. No final decision has been made, the report noted.

The funding would be used for critical weapons, supplies and other equipment that Ukraine needs, the report said.

Last 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.

The Senate ended up sending a $95 billion foreign aid bill to the House of Representatives, which House Speaker Mike Johnson has been reluctant to take up at the moment while lawmakers prioritize passing full year spending budgets instead of relying on short-term spending bills.

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White House Says Ship Targeted by Houthis in Deadly Attack Was Liberian-Owned

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday that the ship targeted in a deadly attack by the Houthis earlier in the day was Liberian-owned and flying under a Barbados flag.

"The ship they attacked was a Barbados flag, Liberian owned bulk carrier, it was not a US ship," said Jean-Pierre during a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, the Houthis said that they attacked the cargo ship True Confidence in the Gulf of Aden after which the vessel caught fire. At least two sailors have died in the attack, the UK embassy in Sanaa said.

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US State Department Says Created Public-Private Partnership to Rebuild Cities in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The US State Department said on Wednesday that is is creating a public-private partnership program with the German Marshall Fund (designated an undesirable foreign organization in Russia) to help rebuild Ukrainian cities with inclusivity and sustainability in mind.

"On March 6, the United States Department of State and the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) announced the creation of the Ukraine Cities Partnership (UCP) for

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Sustainable Urban Recovery, a new public-private partnership to help Ukrainians redesign and rebuild sustainable, inclusive, and resilient cities," the State Department said in a statement.
The US State Department and GMF will work to include key stakeholders, technical experts and funding partners in the UCP, the statement said.
The UCP will empower Ukrainian officials, urban planners, architects, engineers and construction crews to "build back better" with sustainable methods, the statement said.
The UCP will also engage with the Ukrainian government, the European Union, multilateral development banks and bilateral donors, the statement said.
The UCP is designed as a three-year initiative and will formally launch in June at the Ukraine Recovery Conference in Berlin, the statement said.

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US Tracking Reports of China, Maldives Signing Deal on Military Assistance - State Dept

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is following reports that the Maldives and China inked an agreement on military assistance, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.
“We are tracking reports that the government of Maldives has reached a military assistance agreement with the PRC,” Miller said.
Miller stressed that the Maldives is a valued partner of the United States, and Washington remains committed to enhancing their partnership across many spheres including economic development, education, security cooperation and climate change response.
The Maldivian Ministry of Defense announced earlier in the week that the country signed an agreement “on China's provision of military assistance gratis to the Republic of Maldives.”
On Tuesday, Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu announced that the Indian troops will leave the island by May 10.

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US to Convey to Israel That Settlements in West Bank Harm Its Security – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – The United States is going to convey to the government of Israel that the expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank weakens its security and mounts a challenge for reaching a long-term peace with the Palestinians, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.
"The settlements continue to be inconsistent with international law, and so the point that we will make to the government of Israel is that these settlements don't just harm the Palestinian people, but that they ultimately weaken Israel's security, and weaken the prospects for a lasting agreement that would provide real peace and real security for the Israeli people," Miller said

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during a press briefing.
Earlier on Wednesday, media reported that the Israeli government has approved plans to build more than 3,400 new homes in the occupied West Bank.

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Biden Weighs Using $200Mln From US Army Funds to Provide Ukraine Immediate Aid - Reports

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-5)
WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering using some $200 million from US Army funds to provide Ukraine immediate security assistance while efforts to approve new funding in Congress are stalled, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday citing sources.
The report said no final decision has been made.
The funding would be used for critically-needed weapons, supplies and other equipment, the report added.
Last 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.
The Senate ended up sending a $95 billion foreign aid bill to the House of Representatives, which House Speaker Mike Johnson has been reluctant to take up at the moment while lawmakers prioritize passing full year spending budgets instead of relying on short-term spending bills.

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US Calls on Haiti Prime Minister to Expedite Transition to 'Inclusive Governance' - Miller

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is not calling on the Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry to step down, but wants him to expedite the transition to an "empowered and inclusive governance," US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.
"We are not calling on him [Prime Minister] or pushing for him to resign, but we are urging him to expedite the transition to an empowered and inclusive governance structure that will move with urgency to help the country prepare for a multinational security support mission to address the security situation and pave the way for free and fair elections ," Miller said during a press briefing.
On Sunday, an armed gang stormed Haiti's largest prison and freed an as of yet unconfirmed

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number of inmates and also stormed another prison. The Haitian authorities in the capital of Port-au-Prince declared a 72-hour state of emergency and a curfew in order to detain the offenders.

Haiti has long been mired in a social and political crisis that escalated after the assassination of President Jovenel Moise on July 7, 2021. The country has faced an unprecedented increase in the activities of criminal groups, while the humanitarian situation has been further deteriorating due to a multitude of natural disasters.

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5 Massachusetts Schools Lockdown Amid Police Operation in Barnstable - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik)- Five schools in Massachusetts, including Barnstable High School, Barnstable Intermediate School, Hyannis West Elementary School, Enoch Cobb Early Learning Center, and Barnstable Community Innovation School, initiated lockdowns on Wednesday morning in response to a police operation in the area, Masslive reported on Wednesday.

According to the statement from the Barnstable Police Department (BPD), early morning on Wednesday, they were summoned to a residence on St. Francis Circle in Hyannis due to a report of an individual holding someone at knife-point. It was also reported that while the occupants managed to exit the home, the suspect stayed inside.

BPD reported that their patrol units quickly contained the suspect within his home upon arrival at the scene, after which the Cape Cod Regional SWAT Team arrived and assumed command of the situation, the statement said.

"Initially, a shelter-in-place was sent out for a one-mile radius from the incident location, and homes in the immediate vicinity were evacuated by the police department for emergency purposes," the statement said.

However, later that day, the BPD Chief of Police informed local school administrators that students attending nearby schools were not in danger, as the suspect was confined to his home, the statement said.

The statement added that negotiations with the suspect are underway, with the anticipation of reaching a peaceful resolution shortly.

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State Dept. on Death of Two Sailors in Houthi Attack: This Was Sadly Inevitable

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said "this was sadly inevitable" as he commented on reports of the death of two sailors during a Houthi attack on a cargo ship in the Red Sea on Wednesday.

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"I think this was sadly inevitable. The Houthis have continued to launch these reckless attacks with no regard for the well-being of innocent civilians who are transiting through the Red Sea, and now, they have, unfortunately and tragically, killed innocent civilians," Miller said during a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, the Houthis said that they attacked the cargo ship True Confidence in the Gulf of Aden after which the vessel caught fire. At least two sailors have died in the attack, the UK embassy in Sanaa said.

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US Congressman Dean Phillips Says Suspending 2024 Presidential Campaign, Backing Biden

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Dean Phillips said on Wednesday that he is ending his own bid for the 2024 Democratic Party presidential nomination and instead supporting President Joe Biden's reelection campaign.

"The fact of the matter is people have registered their opinion. I'm suspending my campaign and right now, I'm endorsing Joe Biden," Phillips said in an interview with radio host Chad Hartman.

Phillips is leaving the presidential race after failing to win a primary or caucus nominating contest against Biden.

Phillips launched his campaign in an effort to resist former US president and 2024 Republican candidate Donald Trump, the congressman said in a statement via social media platform X.

Phillips urged supporters to mobilize in support of the Biden campaign. Biden is a man of "decency and integrity," Phillips said.

Earlier on Wednesday, former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley also ended her bid for the Republican Party presidential nomination, after failing to gain ground on Trump in the so-called Super Tuesday nominating contests.

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SpaceX Says Third Starship Flight Test Scheduled for as Soon as March 14

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - SpaceX said on Wednesday that it plans to conduct its third flight test of a fully integrated Starship rocket on March 14 from Boca Chica, Texas, if it receives federal regulatory approval.

"The third flight test of Starship could launch as soon as March 14, pending regulatory approval," SpaceX said in a statement.

SpaceX founder Elon Musk has previously expressed hope that the third flight will reach orbit after the second test flight fell short of that goal due to a mishap.

The Starship spacecraft triggered its automated flight termination system during the second

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phase of its flight, destroying the vehicle before reaching orbit.

However, Starship's second test flight demonstrated its first successful hot-stage separation, which detaches the booster rocket, designed to be reusable, from the Starship spacecraft.

The Starship is the centerpiece of SpaceX efforts to develop a fully reusable transportation system designed to carry humans to the Moon and on long-duration flights to Mars and beyond. The system is designed for in-space refueling and the ability to land at destinations across the solar system and return to Earth.

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NYCB Stock Tumbles 40%, Triggering New Worries About US Banks

NEW YORK, March 6 (Sputnik) - Shares of New York Community Bank (NYCB) plunged more than 40% on Wednesday with a halt placed on their trading amid reports that the Long Island-based lender was seeking a major cash infusion, triggering new worries about the health of small and medium-sized banks in the United States.

NYCB, buffeted by fears over potential real-estate loan losses, weaknesses in its internal controls and a sharp drop in its stock price, has dispatched bankers to gauge investors' interest in buying stock in the company, the Wall Street Journal reported, citing people familiar with the matter.

The business daily added that there was "no guarantee there will be a deal, or that one would succeed in addressing the bank's challenges."

By 1:00 p.m. ET, NYCB settled trading at $1.86 per share, down 42.24%.

The plunge came amid questions over whether the bank was facing a run on deposits. A similar pullout by deposits of their money sank more than a couple of small and mid-sized US banks a a year ago.

The NYCB troubles were accelerated by a surprise loss declared in the last quarter due partly to soured commercial real estate loans. Last week, in a regulatory filing, the bank said it had identified "material weakness" in company controls that sparked a $2.4 billion loss to shareholders last quarter.

NYCB also delayed publication of its required annual financial disclosure, known as a 10-K, that would have elaborated on the issues cited. That release is now due March 15. The delay on the 10-K is identical to the situation faced by San Francisco-based First Republic Bank, which postponed reporting its quarterly earnings last year before its collapse.

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Biden Weighs Using $200Mln From US Army Funds to Provide Ukraine Immediate Aid - Reports

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WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering using some $200 million from US Army funds to provide Ukraine immediate security assistance while efforts to approve new funding in Congress are stalled, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday citing sources.

The report said no final decision has been made.

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US Interest Rate Cuts Could Be Significant in Coming Years - Powell

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The United States could experience substantial interest rate cuts in the coming years if economic growth keeps at its current pace with appropriate moderation in inflation, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"We expect inflation to come down, the economy to keep growing and labor markets to remain strong," Powell told the US Senate Banking Committee. "If that's the case, it will be appropriate for interest rates to come down significantly over the coming years."

Powell said growth for all of 2023 was in excess of 3% and thus far into 2024, there had been "continued solid growth."

"What will really happen … and it's not a plan … is that the economy will do something different from (all) that (action). And that is what will actually happen," Powell said, referring to the likelihood of interest rates tumbling along with inflation.

The Fed's favorite inflation indicator - the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index (PCE) - grew at a rate of 2.4% year-on-year in January. That was markedly lower than the four-decade high of above 9% charted by the PCE in June 2022.

The Fed raised interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023 in response to the runaway post-pandemic inflation. Rates currently hover at between 5% and 5.25% versus the pre-pandemic level of between zero and 0.25%.

Powell said Wednesday that the Fed will likely cut rates once it is confident that price growth will remain controlled in the lower 2% per annum bracket.

"We're not looking for inflation to go all the way down to 2%," he said. "That's not what we're looking for. What we want is just more evidence that will give us more confidence that inflation is on a path down to 2% sustainably. That will come in the form of good inflation readings (that) we really want to see."

Powell explained that he did not want a situation where inflation suddenly turned higher after a significant time of moderation.

"We're just trying to be careful because the economy is so strong and the labor market is so strong, we think we can and should be careful as we approach that decision [to cut rates]," Powell said.

Ideally, the relatively low readings on price growth seen recently should continue as these would force the 12-month inflation rate - which determines interest rates - to drop, giving the

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Fed reason to cut rates, Powell added.

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No Sign of US Recession; Soft Landing Likely Though Fed Won't Announce One - Powell

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - There is no immediate threat of a US recession and the economy seems headed for a so-called soft landing, though the Federal Reserve will not announce its success by claiming that this had been achieved, the central bank's head said on Wednesday.

"US growth last year was in excess of 3% and what we're seeing so far this year is continued solid growth and my expectation — and that of other forecasters and my colleagues — is that we'll see continued growth at a solid pace." Fed Chair Jerome Powell said, testifying before the US Congress. "I will say there is no evidence (or) there's no reason to think the US economy is in some kind of short-term risk of falling into recession."

While the current momentum of growth could falter at some point, meaningfully raising the possibility of a recession, "I don't think that possibility is elevated at the current time", Powell added.

The Fed chair broke down what he described as an economy in top flight: Growth at a solid pace, a labor market coming into better balance between supply and demand and inflation retreating from the four-decade highs it stood at just two years ago, without wages plummeting.

Thus, even without runaway performance, the economy might achieve a soft landing, he said.

"That's the economy we are trying to achieve and we're on a good path so far to get there," he said.

But Powell also said the Fed would not categorically announce the soft landing to appease its critics, saying the central bank was committed to work and not glory. "We're just going to keep our heads down and do our jobs and try to deliver what the public is expecting from us. We wouldn't be declaring victory like that."

The talk of a soft landing for the US economy versus the picture of a recession has been around for more than a year since inflation began retreating from post-pandemic highs.

The Fed's favorite inflation indicator — the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index often known as just PCE — grew at a rate of 2.4% year-on-year in January. That was markedly lower than the four-decade high of above 9% charted by the PCE in June 2022.

The Fed raised interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023 in response to the runaway post-pandemic inflation. Powell said Wednesday that the Fed will likely cut rates once it is confident that price growth will continue declining into the lower 2% per annum zone.

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US Approved Over 100 Military Sales to Israel, Sent Weapons Amid Gaza Conflict - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The United States has approved since the onset of the Gaza conflict on October 7 more than hundred military sales to Israel and quietly delivered the weapons systems and munitions, the Washington Post reported on Wednesday.

According to the report, the transactions referred to as "foreign military sales" were conducted quietly, bypassing public discussion since their values did not reach the threshold necessitating individual congressional notice.

Only two of the foreign military sales to Israel, valued at $106 million for tank ammunition and $147.5 million for 155 mm shell components, have been disclosed, the report said.

They drew public attention due to the Biden administration's use of emergency authority to bypass Congress for their approval, the report added.

Earlier this month, Senate Republicans blocked a $118 billion national security supplemental package that includes $14 billion in aid for Israel and $60 billion in aid for Ukraine as well as funding fir US border security.

The Senate sent 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 on national security priorities.

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US Senate Approves Nomination of Ronald Keohane as Assistant Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday approved the nomination of Ronald Keohane as Assistant US Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs.

Senators confirmed Keohane’s nomination in a vote of 69 in favor and 30 opposed.

US President Joe Biden first nominated Keohane to the role in September 2022 and renominated him in January 2024.

The Assistant US Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs is responsible for policies and procedures related to supporting the military’s total force, which includes both active-duty and reserve components.

The position is currently held in an acting capacity by former North Carolina state lawmaker Grier Martin.

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Hard to Achieve Progress on Afghanistan Peace if Steps Need West's Approval - Evstigneeva

UNITED NATIONS, March 6 (Sputnik) - Attaining progress on peace in Afghanistan is difficult if the reciprocal steps taken by the international community need the approval of Western donors,

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Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Eva Evstigneeva said on Wednesday.

"It is very difficult to obtain progress on this track if the reciprocal steps on behalf of the international community as a whole will depend on the approval by a number of Western donors who are pursuing their own narrow interests," Evstigneeva said during a UN Security Council briefing on the situation on Afghanistan.

Sustainable peace in Afghanistan is an imperative for stability in the entire region, Evstigneeva added.

Earlier in the briefing, UN Special Representative for Afghanistan Roza Otunbayeva said it is important to keep consultations with Afghanistan's de facto authorities.

The United Nations has been focusing primarily on the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, especially on issues pertaining to the rights of women and girls.

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US Very Concerned About 'Imminence of Famine' in Gaza Strip - USAID

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is very concerned about the "imminence of famine" in the Gaza Strip, USAID Global Food Crisis Coordinator Dina Esposito said in a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"We do have great concern about the imminence of the famine," Esposito told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee during a hearing on global food security.

Esposito also said that the USAID team is working on getting more food in the Gaza Strip and there is opportunity for available food to move in.

Earlier on Wednesday, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki said that about half a million Palestinians out of 2.3 million in the Gaza Strip have been suffering from severe hunger under the blockade of the Palestinian enclave imposed and enforced by Israel.

International organizations have said that a portion of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are facing starvation.

In addition, the UN World Health Organization (WHO) has warned about an unprecedented spike in malnutrition in children in the enclave, saying children under the age of two years faced severe food poverty leading to irreparable harm to their health. Israel has approved only three out of 16 WHO humanitarian missions to the northern Gaza Strip in January, the WHO said.

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Dozens of House Democrats Warn Biden Against Israeli Ground Invasion of Rafah – Letter

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – More than three dozen US House Democrats warned President Biden that Israel's planned ground invasion of Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah

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would mean the US would violate its own rules that its military aid must be used in accordance with international law, according to a letter published by Axios on Wednesday.

"We wish to highlight that further expansion into Rafah would likely contravene the principles set forth in NSM-20," the House members wrote in the letter, referring to National Security Memorandum 20 on Safeguards and Accountability with Respect to Transferred Defense Articles and Defense Services that Biden recently signed.

They expressed concern about "the absence of a credible plan for the safety and support of the more than one million civilians sheltering in Rafah" and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's failure to consult with the US regarding his plans.

They called on Biden to "use every tool at your disposal to ensure that the norms of American and international law are observed throughout this conflict and that all recipients of US aid are held accountable to the commitments demanded by NSM-20."

In the five months thus far of Israel's war on Gaza, more than 30,000 Palestinians have been officially confirmed killed and more than 72,000 injured. More than half a million, or approximately a quarter of Gaza's remaining population, are also at risk of famine due to the siege imposed by Israel that has blocked access to food, water, fuel, medicine and other essential supplies.

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Important to Create Favorable Conditions for Dialogue With Afghanistan - China Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, March 6 (Sputnik) - China believes it is important to maintain dialogue with the leaders of Afghanistan in order to promote confidence, Chinese Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Geng Shuang said on Wednesday.

"It is important to create favorable conditions for dialogue and engagement and avoid presuppositions and impose programs on Afghanistan, as an important step for confidence building," Shuang said during a UN Security Council meeting on Afghanistan.

Practical cooperation with Afghanistan should be prioritized, he added.

Earlier during the same briefing, UN Special Representative for Afghanistan Roza Otunbayeva said it is important to keep consultations with Afghanistan's de facto authorities.

The United Nations has been focusing on the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, particularly on the rights of women and girls. Doha hosted the second international meeting on Afghanistan under UN auspices from February 17-18.

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Biden Tells Haley Supporters They Are Welcome to Join His Presidential Campaign

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WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that as former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley withdraws from the presidential campaign, her supporters are welcome to join his ranks.

"Donald Trump made clear he doesn't want Nikki Haley's supporters. I want to be clear: There is place for them in my campaign," Biden said in a statement.

Biden acknowledged that his supporters and Haley's supporters disagree on many issues, but said he believes they can find common ground on "fundamental issues" such as the preservation of both the country's democracy and NATO, as well as standing up for the rule of law and to US adversaries.

Biden said that despite strong political differences, Democrats, Republicans, and independents are united by their "love for America."

Earlier on Wednesday, Haley suspended her presidential campaign, after failing to gain ground on Donald Trump in the so-called Super Tuesday primary and caucus elections.

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US Crude Stocks Rise 6th Week in Row But Fuel Draws Higher, Helping Oil Prices Jump - EIA

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - US crude inventories rose for a sixth week in a row and by more than 28 million barrels since late January, Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report on Wednesday.

However, drawdowns in fuel stockpiles, under the gasoline and distillate categories, were more than triple the levels seen in crude, the report said. That helped crude prices to stage a strong rebound in Wednesday's trading from two prior days of declines.

Crude balances rose by 1.367 million barrels during the week to March 1, after expanding by almost 27 million barrels over five prior weeks, the report said.

While crude stockpiles grew, US inventories of fuel products made up of gasoline and distillates continued their decline, the report said. Gasoline balances slid a fifth week in a row, showing a deficit of 4.46 million in the latest week after declines of around 10 million over four 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 seventh week in a row, with the latest slide of 4.131 million barrels adding to the approximate 13.5 million barrels lost over six previous weeks. Distillates are primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses and ships, and also goes into making airline fuel.

In Wednesday's New York trading, US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude for April delivery was up $2.12, or 2.7%, to $80.27 per barrel by 11:00 a.m. ET. The WTI benchmark earlier hit a session high of $80.32.

London-traded Brent crude rose by $1.68, or 2.1%, to $83.72 per barrel after an intraday peak at $82.78.

Since the year began, the WTI has risen about 12% and Brent nearly 9% on fears that the raging Israel-Hamas war could disrupt crude shipments from oil-rich countries around the

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conflict zone.

Crude prices also benefited Wednesday from the commitment taken by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies to extend production cuts into the second quarter. The so-called OPEC+ alliance, led by Russia and Saudi Arabia, intends to maintain its current run of 2.2 million barrels per day supply cuts until the end of June.

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

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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US Justice Dept. Seeks to Sell Seized Russian Yacht Due to Upkeep Costs - Filing

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department is seeking to sell a seized Russian yacht due to upkeep costs that are passed on to taxpayers, according to a document filed in the US District Court for the Southern District of New York.

"Here, it is 'excessive' for taxpayers to pay nearly a million dollars per month to maintain [the yacht] when these expenses could be reduced to zero through interlocutory sale," the document, filed on March 1, said.

The filing requests that the court order an interlocutory sale of the seized Russian yacht.

Maintaining the yacht is costing US taxpayers $600,000 per month, in addition to $144,000 in insurance and other costs, the filing said.

Claimants have failed to demonstrate any prejudice from a fair-market sale of the vessel, the filing added.

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UN Says Important to Keep Consultations With Taliban's 'De Facto Authorities'- Official

UNITED NATIONS, March 6 (Sputnik) - The United Nations believes it is important to maintain communications with Afghanistan's de facto authorities, UN Special Representative for Afghanistan Roza Otunbayeva said during a UN Security Council meeting on Wednesday.

"An important part of the consensus established at the first Doha meeting was the need to continue consultations with the de facto authorities. In my discussions with them after the Doha meeting, they explained that their decision to not attend was not a rejection of their stated desire to engage with the international community," Otunbayeva said in the Council chamber.

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The de facto authorities welcomed the secretary-general's statement in Doha on the need for deeper consultations, she added.

The United Nations has been focusing on the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, particularly on the rights of women and girls.

Doha hosted the second international meeting on Afghanistan under UN auspices from February 17-18.

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US Lawmaker Says 'Very Confident' Can Force House Vote on Ukraine, Israel Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick said Wednesday that he is "very confident" he can secure the required 218 signatures to force a vote on a new $66 billion bipartisan bill he is spearheading to provide aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, as well as border security.

"I'm very confident because it's an indefensible position, if nothing else is coming to the floor, to do nothing," Fitzpatrick said at a press conference, when asked if he believed he could secure 218 signatures.

The bill will be eligible for a discharge petition on Friday, meaning the House can petition for the bill to discharged from consideration by the standing committee. If the petition is signed by at least 218 voting members, the House can consider the petition and take a vote after 20 minutes of debate. If the vote passes with all those who originally signed the petition, the House will take up the bill.

The latest bill proposes $47.69 billion to support Ukraine, including $13.77 billion for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative. It also allocates $10.4 billion to support Israel, including $4 billion for Iron Dome and David's Sling procurement, as well as $1.2 billion for Iron Beam procurement. It also provides $4.91 billion to support US and allied deterrence operations in the Indo-Pacific region, $2.44 billion for US Central Command operations, and $542 million for US Indo-Pacific Command operations.

The bill's border security provisions include requiring the US Secretary of Homeland Security to suspend the entry of inadmissible migrants if the secretary determines it necessary to achieve operational control of the border. The bill also requires immigration officers to detain inadmissible migrants and expel them to Mexico or their home country without a hearing or review.

The legislation includes a so-called "remain in Mexico" policy as well, which requires migrants seeking admission to the US to stay in the country from which they attempted to enter it until a court adjudicates their status.

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US Imposes Houthi-Related Sanctions on 2 Ship Owners, 2 Vessels - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on two ship owners and two vessels for their alleged role in shipping goods on behalf of Sa'id al-Jamal - an Iran-based, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force-backed Houthi financial facilitator, the US Department of the Treasury said in a release on Wednesday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control took additional action to target shipments of Iranian commodities undertaken by the network of Iran-based, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force-backed Houthi financial facilitator Sa'id al-Jamal," the release said.

The Treasury Department alleges that the Palau-flagged vessel Reneez, owned and managed by Marshall Islands-based Reneez Shipping Limited, has transported tens of thousands of metric tons of Iranian goods on behalf of al-Jamal, the release said.

The second designated vessel, the Eternal Fortune, is owned by the Hongkong Unitop Group Ltd. and is alleged to have been a part of a ship-to-ship transfer scheme from the previously sanctioned Panama-flagged Artura vessel, the release said.

The new measures are aimed at disrupting the Houthis' destabilizing activities in the Red Sea amid a surge of attacks on cargo and navy ships in one of the key maritime corridors in response to Israel's hostilities in Gaza, the release added.

Yemen's Ansar Allah movement, whose members are also known as Houthis, vowed in November 2023 to attack any ships associated with Israel until it halts military actions in the Gaza Strip. This led the United States to announce a multinational operation to secure navigation in the Red Sea. US and UK forces later launched numerous strikes against Houthi positions in a bid to degrade their ability to target commercial vessels.

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US House Speaker Says State of Union 'Not Strong' Regardless of Biden Claims

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is not in a strong position, regardless of what US President Joe Biden may say in his State of the Union speech later this week, House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday.

"During his address, President Biden is going to try to suggest that the state of the union is strong … but of course the state of the union is not strong, and everybody around the country knows it," Johnson said during a press conference.

On Thursday, Biden will deliver his annual State of the Union address to lawmakers, which could be his final State of the Union speech as president if he loses his reelection bid in November.

The US is in decline, and nothing Biden could say in his speech would change that, Johnson said.

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McConnell Says Supports Trump's 2024 US Presidential Campaign

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - Outgoing US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell supports the 2024 presidential campaign of former President Donald Trump, the senator reportedly said on Wednesday.

"It should come as no surprise that as nominee, he will have my support," McConnell said in a statement, as quoted by The Washington Post.

It is clear that Trump has earned the requisite support of Republican voters to become the party's nominee, McConnell said.

Earlier on Wednesday, former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley suspended her presidential campaign, after failing to gain ground on Trump in the so-called Super Tuesday primary and caucus elections.

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Musk Says Not Donating Money to Any US Presidential Candidate

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Wednesday that he will not donate money to any candidate in the 2024 US presidential election, after having reportedly met with former President and leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination Donald Trump.

"Just to be super clear, I am not donating money to either candidate for US president," Musk said in a statement via the social media platform X.

Musk reportedly met with Trump with potential donors during a meeting in New York on Sunday.

Trump plans to have a one-on-one meeting with Musk soon, the report said.

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Bank of Canada Maintains Policy Rate at 5% Amid Persistence in Underlying Inflation

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) – The Bank of Canada on Wednesday maintained its overnight rate at 5% as it continues to be concerned over the persistence in underlying inflation.

"The Bank of Canada today held its target for the overnight rate at 5%, with the Bank Rate at 5¼% and the deposit rate at 5%. The Bank is continuing its policy of quantitative tightening," it said in a statement.

The bank's governing council is still concerned about risks to the outlook for inflation,

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particularly the persistence in underlying inflation, the statement added.
Although the consumer price index inflation eased to 2.9% in January, the year-over-year and three-month measures of core inflation remain in the 3% to 3.5% range.
The bank expects inflation to remain close to 3% throughout the first half of 2024 before gradually easing, it added.
The next policy rate announcement is scheduled for April 10.

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US Urges New Restrictions on China's Access to Semiconductor Technologies - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is urging US allies and partners to impose additional restrictions on China's access to semiconductor technologies, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday.
The Biden administration wants allied and partner nations to close existing loopholes that allow China to continue to develop its own microchip capabilities, the report said, citing people familiar with the matter.
Specifically, the Biden administration wants the Netherlands to ensure that its companies do not provide chip-making equipment to Chinese clients and Japanese firms to limit exports to China of specialized chemicals needed for chipmaking, the report said.
However, Japan and the Netherlands have had a lukewarm response to the United States' requests, saying it is necessary to assess possible consequences before making any restrictions, the report said.
The US government attaches such importance to this matter that US Commerce Department officials have raised the issue during a meeting on export controls in Tokyo last month, the report said.
The sources pointed out that US officials were shocked when China's Huawei Technologies demonstrated last August a smartphone based on a homemade chip, which was far more sophisticated than Washington expected, the report said.
In addition, the Biden administration is also trying to bring Germany and South Korea to an agreement on export controls, which already includes Japan and the Netherlands, the report added.
Last year, the United States imposed export controls designed to prevent China from accessing advanced US semiconductor technology with dual-use purposes that could benefit China's military.

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Haley After Suspending Campaign: Trump Must Continue to Earn Support of Republican Voters

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WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump must continue to earn the support of Republicans and other voters in the United States, former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said on Wednesday.

Haley suspended her own 2024 US presidential campaign after failing to make up ground on Trump in the so-called Super Tuesday primary and caucus elections.

"It is now up to Donald Trump to earn the votes of those in our party and beyond it who did not support him, and I hope he does that," Haley said in a speech.

Haley also congratulated Trump and wished him well, adding that he is likely to be the Republican party's presidential nominee.

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US Senate Committee Advances Bill to Restrict Federal Funds From Chinese Biotech Firms

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs on Wednesday voted to advance legislation that would restrict federal funding from Chinese biotech companies.

The committee voted 11-1 in favor of the measure, sending it to the Senate floor for consideration.

The bill concerns the following companies BGI, MGI, Complete Genomics, WuXi AppTec, as well as any subsidiary, parent affiliate, or successor of these firms, according to the text.

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Nikki Haley Says Suspending 2024 US Presidential Campaign

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - Former United States Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said on Wednesday that she is suspending her 2024 presidential campaign after failing to make up ground on former President Donald Trump in the so-called Super Tuesday primary and caucus elections.

"I am filled with gratitude for the outpouring of support we have received from all across our great country, but the time has now come to suspend my campaign," Haley said in a speech.

Haley also said that she wishes Trump well, adding that he will likely win the Republican Party presidential nomination.

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