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US Court Refuses to Remove District Attorney Fani Willis From Trump's Georgia Case – Order

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) – The Superior Court of Fulton County in the State of Georgia declined on Friday to remove District Attorney Fani Willis from former US President Donald Trump election interference case, arguing that the allegations against her were legally insufficient.

"After consideration of the record established on these motions, the Court finds the allegations and evidence legally insufficient to support a finding of an actual conflict of interest. However, the appearance of impropriety remains and must be handled as previously outlined before the prosecution can proceed," the court order reads.

In January one of Trump's co-defendants filed a motion to disqualify Willis in the case, alleging an improper relationship between her and Special Prosecutor Nathan Wade and claiming financial impropriety and lavish vacations funded by taxpayer money.

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SpaceX Says Will Aim to Increase Rate of Starship Test Flights Through The Year

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - SpaceX will seek to increase the rate it conducts test flights of its fully integrated Starship rocket through the rest of this year, the company said in a statement.

"While our team reviews the data collected from this flight, Starship, and Super Heavy vehicles are preparing for upcoming flights as we seek to increase our launch cadence throughout the year," the company said on Thursday.

Earlier on Thursday, SpaceX conducted its third test flight of the Starship Super Heavy rocket, which reached orbit for the first time before burning up during its re-entry attempt for a scheduled splashdown in the Indian Ocean.

After hot-stage separation, the Super Heavy booster, which is designed to be reusable, successfully conducted a flip maneuver and boostback burn to return to earth but self-destructed some 462 meters above the Gulf of Mexico.

The third test flight lasted about 50 minutes, according to SpaceX.

The Starship is the centerpiece of SpaceX's 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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US Lawmakers Demand Treasury's Yellen Push for Leadership Change in IMF - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Republican lawmakers in a letter to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen are demanding that she push for a replacement of International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva over concerns with her ethics.

"As the term of Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva ends, we urge you to identify new leadership that will enable the Fund to pursue its mission with integrity and with the full confidence of Congress," the letter said on Thursday. "As you are aware, Ms. Georgieva's tenure at both the World Bank and IMF has been plagued by ethical lapses. These management failures, which are outlined below, cast doubt on her leadership qualities and ability to head the Fund."

US House Financial Services Committee Chairman Patrick McHenry and his Republican colleagues French Hill and Blaine Luetkemeyer made the plea to Yellen in the letter.

The lawmakers said the IMF, under Georgieva's leadership, has failed to hold China accountable to international norms on issues related to debt transparency and exchange rate management.

Moreover, the letter highlights that a 2021 investigation by law firm WilmerHale implicated Georgieva in a data rigging scandal involving the World Bank's Doing Business Report.

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Austin to Travel Abroad for 1st Time Since Cancer Diagnosis to Ukraine Meeting - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will travel abroad next week for the first time since his cancer diagnosis in December to attend the Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting in Germany, Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said during a press briefing.

"The Secretary and the [Joint Chiefs of Staff] Chairman will join ministers of defense and senior military officials from nearly 50 nations around the world to discuss the ongoing war in Ukraine and reiterate that the United States and this coalition continue to stand with the people of Ukraine, and that we will not let Ukraine fail in its war to defend themselves against Russian aggression," Singh said on Thursday.

Singh said Austin and other defense officials will depart on Monday and attend the meeting the following day at the Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

Austin will go to the Walter Reed hospital on Friday for a follow-up appointment with doctors, Singh added.

Austin was initially hospitalized on January 1 for complications following a December surgical procedure to treat cancer. The Defense Department failed then to communicate Austin's

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hospitalization to the White House for several days, prompting a Pentagon Inspector General probe and bipartisan calls for him to resign.

In February, doctors at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center said that Austin had been admitted to the critical care unit for supportive care and close monitoring in connection with an infection. Austin was released from the hospital on Tuesday and is currently performing his duties remotely from home.

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TikTok Rarely Used For Extremist Purposes, But Some Content Becomes Viral – UK Official

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) – Most people in the world do not use TikTok for extremist purposes, but some content, originally published there, becomes viral, Robin Simcox, Commissioner for Countering Extremism at the United Kingdom Home Office, said on Thursday.

"Quite obviously, TikTok is not used by most people for extremism purposes," Simcox said during a conversation at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

He pointed out that there are almost 200 million monthly active TikTok users in the US and about 17 million in the UK.

Simcox warned that some extremist materials became viral after they were originally posted on TikTok. He stressed that this situation is not new, but social media platforms help distribute them.

"Clearly, however, social media put rocket boosters on their dissemination," he added.

On Wednesday, the US House of Representatives passed legislation that requires TikTok to cut ties with its parent China-based company ByteDance within 180 days or face a ban in the US, amid concerns about user privacy and foreign influence ahead of the US presidential election in November.

TikTok, which is owned by the China-based company ByteDance, has denied that its application poses a security threat to US users. The United States, European Union, and Canada recently banned their government employees from using TikTok on official electronic devices.

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Trump Directed CIA to Turn Public Opinion Against Government in China - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump directed the CIA during his presidency to engage in efforts to turn public opinion in China against the country's government and political leadership, Reuters reported, citing three former US officials.

The plan which reportedly involved a small team of CIA operatives creating fake internet identities to disseminate negative narratives about the Chinese government and its president, Xi

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Jinping, happened two years into Trump's term as president. The CIA team also leaked disparaging intelligence to foreign news organizations.

The CIA intended to stoke paranoia among Chinese leaders and force the government to spend resources on securing China's internet system, the report said, adding that it is unclear what impact the CIA influence operations had or whether the campaign continued under US President Joe Biden.

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Chinese Embassy on Report US Special Forces in Taiwan Says Firmly Opposes Military Contact

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The Chinese Embassy, in light of reports that US special forces are in Taiwan, told Sputnik that Beijing firmly opposes US military contact with the island.

Earlier on Thursday, Taiwan Defense Chief Qiu Guozheng said that US Army special forces troops are stationed on the island and are training the Taiwanese military.

"China firmly opposes US' military contact with Taiwan and its attempts to arm the island," Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu said on Thursday. "We urge the US to...stop enhancing military contact with the Taiwan region or arming it by any means or under whatever pretext, stop creating factors that could heighten tensions in the Taiwan Strait."

A US Defense Department spokesperson declined to comment on reports that US special forces troops are training Taiwan's armed forces but noted that the United States provides Taipei security assistance to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability.

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Latvia PM Says No to Diplomatic Talks With Russia Per Pope Francis' Call for Ukraine Peace

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Diplomatic talks with Russia are impossible, Latvian Prime Minister Evika Silina said on Thursday in response to Pope Francis' recent call for Ukraine to start peace negotiations with Russia.

"I think that Russia understands the language of power and we have to speak with Russia out of the sense, out of the position and platform of power, and there cannot be very polite diplomatic negotiations going on because Russia will use that as a weakness," Silina said in an interview with Fox News. "That's why its very important for us to be united, coming out of NATO with united decisions and we have to speak as powerful democratic nations. I understand that the Pope always wants peace but there could be peace only when Ukraine wins this war."

In an interview with Swiss broadcaster RSI, partially released on March 9, the Pope expressed his belief that the losing side should find the courage to raise the white flag and enter into negotiations. The Pope's remarks were interpreted by many as a call for Ukraine to surrender.

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However, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said his country would never raise any other flag other than the national one.

Pope Francis has on many occasions expressed his readiness to promote peace between Russia and Ukraine and to assist in the efforts to end the ongoing conflict. In May 2023, the Vatican formed a peacekeeping mission on Ukraine, headed by Cardinal Matteo Zuppi. In June, Zuppi traveled to Ukraine and Russia, where he met with senior officials and discussed Vatican's humanitarian efforts.

Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Russian and Ukrainian delegations have engaged in several rounds of peace talks since then, but the negotiations ultimately reached an impasse.

In October 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a decree stating that Kiev could not hold peace talks as long as Russian President Vladimir Putin remained in office. Russia has continuously said it was open to peace negotiations as long as Ukraine recognizes the territorial gains Russian forces have made since the launch of the special military operation.

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Biden Says US Armed Forces to Stay in Haiti 'Long as Security Situation Demands'

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said in a statement that the United States Armed Forces personnel will remain in Haiti for as long as the security environment requires.

"The United States Armed Forces personnel are anticipated to remain in Haiti for as long as the security environment requires," President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

Biden added that he had directed the action in line with his responsibilities to protect United States diplomatic missions abroad and to advance the country's national security and foreign policy interests.

On Wednesday, the US deployed a special team of Marines to boost security at the US embassy in Haiti amid the ongoing crisis. The embassy remains open, and diplomats continue limited operations focused on assisting US citizens and supporting Haitian-led efforts to secure a peaceful transition of power.

On Tuesday, Guyanese President Irfaan Ali said Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry would step down amid an outbreak of gang violence and that power in Haiti would be temporarily held by a transitional council.

On February 29, gang violence erupted in the downtown area of the capital Port-au-Prince while Henry was visiting Kenya. Henry visited to seek an agreement to deploy foreign forces in Haiti to fight organized crime.

The gangs said their goal was to prevent Henry from returning to Haiti, and they stormed Haiti's largest prison and freed an unconfirmed number of inmates. The Haitian government declared a state of emergency in the capital region.

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US Court Denies Trump's Attempt to Dismiss Classified Documents Case Charges - Filing

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The US District Court for the Southern District of Florida denied a request by former US President Donald Trump to dismiss criminal charges in a case involving his alleged mishandling of classified materials.

"Upon careful review of the Motion, related filings, and the arguments raised during the hearing, Defendant's Motion is denied without prejudice," District Judge Aileen Cannon said in an order filed Thursday.

Earlier in the day, Trump attended a hearing for the case in Florida.

Efforts to resolve the classified documents case come amid other ongoing legal cases involving Trump and ahead of the 2024 US presidential election, in which Trump is the leading Republican candidate.

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European Countries Have to Defend Themselves, Not Just Rely on US - Latvian Prime Minister

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - European nations have to defend themselves and not just rely on the United States for protection, Latvian Prime Minister Evika Silina said.

"I believe that each European country has understood that the situation in our geopolitical territory has changed and we have to do more in our military to strengthen our military capabilities," Silina said on Thursday. "We, as Europeans, we have to defend ourselves, we cannot just rely on United States, and that has been on our table for months already that we will do more."

Silina made the statement when asked to comment on former President Donald Trump's remarks about NATO on February 10. Trump said then that a leader of an unspecified NATO member state asked him whether the United States would protect it and other states in the event of a possible Russian attack if they did not meet their defense spending obligations. Trump responded that the United States would not protect them and moreover, he would encourage Russia to "do whatever the hell they want." Trump reiterated that NATO member states "got to pay."

Silina also said that there is no easy way to have military equipment without the United States and intentional allies and that is why it is important for the allied countries to stick together.

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US Navy Pushes Start of Next-Generation Submarine Construction by Decade – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) – The US Navy has again delayed the construction start of a next-generation attack submarine by nearly a decade amid budget cuts and a need to fund near-term operations, Defense News reported, citing a Navy spokesperson.

The new design of the undersea ship, which should replace the Virginia-class submarines, will begin production no earlier than in the “early 2040s,” the report said on Thursday.

This delay is the second postponement over the past years. Previously, the service had already pushed the deadline from 2031 to 2035, according to the report.

The US Navy has requested $586.9 million to design and develop the next-generation successor of the Virginia-class submarines in FY2025, an increase of more than $40 million from FY2024. The Navy estimates the SSN(X)’s average unit procurement cost to be $6.7 billion to $7 billion, according to the Congressional Research Service.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) –

MIDDLE EAST

* Palestinian movement Hamas has not yet provided an actual response to a proposal on the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and is not interested to see progress in negotiations, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Thursday.

* The White House said on Thursday that it is not seeing enough effort from Israel to increase the flow of aid into the Gaza Strip despite the opening of the new so-called "96 Gate" crossing.

EARTHQUAKE IN JAPAN

* Japan’s Nuclear Regulation Authority has not found any anomalies at nuclear power plants after an earthquake hit the country on Thursday, the NHK broadcaster reported.

* TEPCO, the operator of Japan’s Fukushima-1 nuclear power plant, suspended the release of treated water into the ocean after an earthquake hit the country, the Kyodo news agency reported.

* The firefighting service in Japan’s Fukushima Prefecture has not received any information about damage after an earthquake hit the country on Thursday, the NHK broadcaster reported.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Swiss-initiated process aimed at resolving the Ukraine conflict will, hopefully, eventually allow the involvement of Russia, Swiss Foreign Ministry Communications Head Nicolas Bideau told Ria Novosti.

* The German parliament, Bundestag, has once again rejected the draft resolution put forward by the CDU/CSU opposition alliance that demands the German government begin supplying long-range Taurus cruise missiles to Ukraine, the chairman said.

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* NATO allies are not providing Ukraine with enough ammunition, which has consequences on the battlefield, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.
* NATO has provided "critical weapons" to Ukraine for attacking Russian vessels in the Black Sea, Stoltenberg said.
* Ukraine has lost up to 410 soldiers in the Avdiivka direction, also known as Avdeyevka, over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* The West's aim is to hold a meeting on Ukraine in Switzerland without Russia's presence and give Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's so-called peace formula a final form, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has said.

UKRAINIAN ATTACK ON ZNPP

* The Permanent Mission of Russia to the International Organizations in Vienna has informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and it's member states about a Ukrainian attack on a critical infrastructure facility of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (ZNPP), Russian envoy in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov told Sputnik on Thursday.
* The United Nations is concerned about the situation around the ZNPP and urges all sides to guarantee its safety, UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday after Ukrainian forces attacked the facility.

RUSSIAN ECONOMY

* Russia's current surplus of balance of payments increased by 73.3% in February, reaching $5.2 billion, compared to $3 billion a year earlier, the Russian Central Bank's estimate showed on Tuesday.
* Russia's GDP needs to be increased by 20% by 2030 to make the country the world's fourth-largest economy, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Belousov said.

SPACEX TEST

* SpaceX launched its third test flight of its Starship rocket on Thursday from its Boca Chica site in Texas, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Thursday.
* SpaceX confirmed it lost the Starship spacecraft as it attempted a re-entry for a splashdown in the Indian Ocean after successfully reaching orbit for the first time, a company broadcaster said.

IEA OIL FORECAST

* The International Energy Agency (IEA) has upgraded its forecast for the global oil demand growth in 2024 by 190,000 barrels per day to 1.3 million barrels per day and expects it at the level of 103.18 million barrels per day, according to its fresh report released on Thursday.
* The IEA has downgraded its forecast for the global oil production in 2024 by 90,000 barrels per day, expecting an increase by 800,000 barrels per day to 102.9 million barrels per day, according to its fresh report
* The IEA believes that Russia's exports of oil and petroleum products in February increased by 20,000 barrels per day to 9.42 million barrels per day, while its revenue increased by 1.4%, according to a fresh IEA report.

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Biden Names Veteran US Eastern Europe Career Diplomat as Moldova Envoy - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has selected Kelly Adams Smith, a veteran Department of State diplomat whose career has focused on Eastern European nations in NATO, as the next US ambassador to Moldova, the White House announced in a press release on Thursday.

"Kelly Adams-Smith, Nominee for Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Republic of Moldova," the release said.

Adams-Smith, a career member of the Senior Foreign Service is currently Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Mission to the European Union and was previously Senior Coordinator for National Security Affairs in the Office of the Vice President. She has also served as Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Prague and on diplomatic assignments in Bulgaria, Estonia, and Moscow, the White House said.

Biden has also nominated Jeremey Neitzke as the next US Ambassador to Lesotho, Peter Lord as ambassador to Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, and Jennifer Lynn Homendy to chair the National Transportation Safety Board, the release said.

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Oil Hits Near 4-Month High After Forecast Of Tighter Supply

NEW YORK, March 14 (Sputnik) - Crude prices rallied to above $85 per barrel, their loftiest since November, as the world's leading oil consumer group forecast higher demand for 2024, adding to an already tight supply picture after output cuts announced by producer alliance OPEC+.

London-traded Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil, settled Thursday's trading at $84.41 per barrel, up $1.39, or 1.7% on the day. The session high was $85.22, a level not seen since November 6, when Brent hit an intraday peak of $86.46. In just two days, the global crude benchmark has risen almost 4.5%, after accounting for Wednesday's gain of 1.7%.

West Texas Intermediate, the benchmark for US crude, settled up $1.54, or 1.9%, at $81.26. The so-called WTI hit a session high of $81.62, its best since the November 6 peak of $82.24. WTI's two-day gain came to 4.7% after accounting for Wednesday's gain of 2.8%.

The latest run-up in oil came after the Paris-based International Energy Agency raised its 2024 demand growth forecast by 110,000 barrels per day to 103.4 million.

"The IEA's monthly report … helped contribute to the momentum," analyst Greg Michalowski said on the ForexLive forum.

Crude prices have also benefited from production cuts announced by OPEC+ for the second quarter. OPEC+ — an alliance grouping the 13-member Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries with 10 oil producing countries steered by Russia — intends to create a daily deficit of 2.2 million barrels per day in the global oil market until the end of June.

Adding to that bullish picture was data on Wednesday showing the first weekly drop in seven

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weeks in US crude inventories, after a build of more than 28 million barrels from late January.

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Pentagon Refutes Reports of US Military Personnel Operating Mobile Patriots in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) – US military personnel is allegedly not operating mobile modifications of US-made Patriot missile systems supplied to Ukraine, a Pentagon spokesperson said on Thursday.

"There are no U.S. personnel in Ukraine operating Patriots (or any other equipment); as you may recall, Ukraine sent servicemembers to the U.S. last year to conduct training on the Patriot system," the spokesperson told Sputnik in a statement.

Earlier in the day, Russian military expert Alexei Leonkov said that only American combat crews could operate a new version of the Patriot anti-aircraft missile system with launchers, radars, and command posts integrated into a vehicle chassis.

Over the past two weeks, Russia has been able to destroy as many as four precious US-made Patriot systems on the battlefield in Ukraine, according to the country's Ministry of Defense.

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US Court Denies Motion by Ex-Trump Adviser Navarro to Avert Prison Sentence - Filing

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia said on Thursday that Peter Navarro, a White House advisor under former US President Donald Trump, must report to federal prison by March 19.

Earlier this year, a US court sentenced Navarro to four months in prison for not complying with a congressional subpoena issued by the so-called January 6 committee. The appeals court filed an order on Thursday denying a motion for release pending appeal.

"Appellant has not shown that his appeal presents substantial questions of law or fact likely to result in reversal, a new trial, a sentence that does not include a term of imprisonment, or a reduced sentence of imprisonment that is less than the amount of time already served plus the expected duration of the appeal process," the order said.

Navarro's lawyer reportedly said in a court document earlier this week that Navarro was ordered to report to the custody of the US Bureau of Prisons, Federal Correctional Institution Miami on or before 2:00 p.m. EDT on March 19.

Navarro has said that he had an "honest belief" that Trump invoked executive privilege, which he contends justified his decision not to comply with the congressional subpoena.

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Canadian Tory Leader Urges Liberal, New Democrat Lawmakers to Vote Against Carbon Tax Hike

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre on Thursday urged lawmakers from the governing Liberals and their New Democratic coalition allies to side with them in a vote to halt the planned carbon tax hike on April 1st.

In 2019, the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau introduced a carbon tax aiming to charge fossil fuel distributors for fuel consumed across Canada and tax large industrial companies as major carbon emitters. However, the fiscal measure also affects ordinary citizens who pay more at the pump and have higher energy bills depending on the fuel used to power home-heating.

Both fuel distributors and industrial emitters currently pay C$65 (US$47) per ton of carbon, an amount that is set to grow by yearly increments of C$15 (US$11) until it reaches C$170 (US$126) by 2030. The charge will surge to C$80 (US$59) starting April 1st, despite the opposition by 69% of Canadians as per a Leger poll earlier in March.

"I write to you asking you to listen to your constituents and support our efforts to stop the carbon tax increase. Next week, Conservatives will force votes to stop the hike. For the sake of all Canadians, join us," Poilievre said in a letter via X.

On Tuesday, the prime ministers of Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island issued letters addressed to Trudeau in which they urged him to either halt the planned hike or to scrap the carbon tax altogether. The calls were echoed by the premiers of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario.

Some of the premiers criticized Trudeau for making life increasingly more unaffordable for ordinary Canadians while others called on him to listen to pleas of the people who are being hurt by continued increases in the costs of living.

On Wednesday, Trudeau reacted to the statements made by the various Canadian premiers, arguing that his job was not to be popular but to do the "right thing" for Canada now, and for Canadians in the future.

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Austin, Latvian Defense Minister Discuss NATO Unity, Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Latvian counterpart Andris Spruds discussed the situation in Ukraine and the efforts to maintain NATO unity, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"The two leaders exchanged views on several regional and bilateral defense issues, including the importance of alliance unity and continuing to counter Russian aggression in Ukraine,"

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Ryder said in a statement after the two defense officials met at the Defense Department.
Austin and Spruds discussed NATO's credible deterrence and defense capabilities as well as the need to expand defense production in order to continue supporting Ukraine, replenish munitions and equipment stocks, Ryder said.
Spruds highlighted Latvia's commitment to further boost defense spending to 3% of GDP by 2027, Ryder said.
The two also also affirmed their countries' commitment to continuing to work closely together in the lead-up to the 75th anniversary of NATO during the upcoming summit in Washington in July, Ryder added.

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State Dept. Says US Renewed Waiver That Allows Iraq to Buy Electricity From Iran

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday that the United States renewed a sanctions waiver that allows Iraq to buy electricity from Iran.
"Yes, we did issue this waiver, and I would emphasize that these are waivers that have been regularly issued to Iraq going back to 2018," Miller said during a press briefing.
Miller explained that under the waiver, Iraq does not directly pay Iran for the electricity it imports, but rather deposits money into restricted accounts that can only be used by Iran for humanitarian goods.

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Pentagon Says Ukraine Would Have Difficulty Repaying Loans to US for Aid

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - Ukraine would have difficulty repaying any loans to the United States for assistance, Defense Department Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.
"A nation like Ukraine, that's going through a war, I think it's going to be be very hard, obviously, for a country like that to repay these loans, but that's something that would have to, obviously, be worked out with not just the Department of Defense, but the State Department and with the White House," Singh said during a press briefing, when asked about the proposal.
Earlier on Thursday, US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul said he discussed the possibility of aiding Ukraine through loans with other lawmakers, adding that such an idea could prove popular.

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

Austin to Visit Walter Reed Hospital for Follow-Up Appointment With Doctors – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will go to the Walter Reed hospital on Friday for a follow-up appointment with doctors, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"Secretary [Lloyd] Austin will go to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center tomorrow afternoon for a scheduled routine follow-up appointment with his doctors," Singh said during a press briefing.

Austin continues to properly recover from his medical procedure to treat cancer earlier this year, Singh said, adding that such follow-ups will continue to be observed from time to time.

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

In February, doctors at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center said that Austin had been admitted to the critical care unit for supportive care and close monitoring in connection with a urinary tract infection. He was released from the hospital on Tuesday and is currently performing his duties remotely from home.

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Pentagon Says Nothing to Say On ATACMS Being Included in Latest Military Aid for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon said on Thursday that they have nothing to say about whether ATACMS will be included in the latest US military aid package for Ukraine.

"We have nothing to say on the matter at this time," Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said during a press briefing.

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US House Foreign Affairs Panel Chair Says Ukraine Loan Proposal Could Prove Popular

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - A proposal to aid Ukraine through a loan program could prove popular among lawmakers in the United States, US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul said on Thursday.

"I've had discussions, like with [US Senator Lindsey Graham], about a loan program for direct government assistance, which I think would be a very popular idea," McCaul said during a press conference.

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The US House of Representatives could write a better Ukraine aid bill than that which the US Senate passed last month. However, Ukraine is in “dire” need of assistance, McCaul said.

McCaul also highlighted proposals to utilize frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine and to provide Ukraine with Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS).

The West is estimated to hold some $300 billion in Russian central bank assets and has been discussing ways to legally tap the frozen funds. Russia has said that such acts would be illegal in addition to ruining the West's already shaken image as a safe haven for global investors.

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Haiti’s Humanitarian, Security Situations ‘Extraordinarily Challenging’ - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The humanitarian and security situations stemming from the ongoing crises affecting Haiti are "extraordinarily challenging," but Canada remains deeply involved in establishing a transition council to address the political crisis.

"Canada is deeply and actively involved in this process [transition] because we need to build a political consensus. It is not easy. The humanitarian and security catastrophe that's going on in Haiti right now is extraordinarily challenging," Trudeau told reporters.

Trudeau said that throughout the past year he has been personally and actively involved with Haitian communities and leaders from the "democratic" spectrum of the country to reach a consensus allowing for a reduction of violence and a return to democracy.

Trudeau also noted that he had held several conversations with his counterparts in the Caribbean, including outgoing Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry, to work toward putting together a transition council.

On February 29, gang violence erupted in the downtown area of the capital Port-au-Prince while Prime Minister Ariel Henry was visiting Kenya to seek an agreement for the deployment of foreign forces in Haiti to fight organized crime. The gangs said their goal was to prevent the prime minister from returning to Haiti. They stormed Haiti's largest prison and freed an unconfirmed number of inmates. The Haitian government declared a state of emergency in the capital region.

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 deteriorated due to a multitude of natural disasters.

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International Probes Into Nord Stream Attacks Not Transparent - Russian Deputy Envoy to UN

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UNITED NATIONS, March 14 (Sputnik) - The investigations conducted by Sweden, Denmark and Germany into the 2022 attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines were devoid of transparency, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday.

"There was absolutely no transparency for Russia. And they rejected absolutely any attempts to establish bilateral cooperation with Russia, though Russia is undoubtedly the affected state in this situation," Polaynskiy told journalists outside the UN Security Council.

Polyanskiy noted that any attempt by Russia to urge the UN Security Council to act was declined by the United States and its allies.

The Russian gas export pipelines running under the Baltic Sea to Germany have been idle since the explosions. Denmark and Sweden, in whose waters the blasts occurred, said in February they would drop the investigation into the attacks despite conceding that sabotage was the cause of the pipelines' breakdown.

Russia decried the bombings as an act of terrorism. Dmitry Peskov, spokesman for the Russian President Vladimir Putin, said the probe into the attacks had likely led Denmark to its close allies.

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US Does Not Share Schumer's Call for New Elections in Israel - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The United States does not share US Senator Chuck Schumer's call for new elections in Israel, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, Schumer called for new elections in Israel and said that Netahnyahu's government no longer fits Israel's needs. The United States must bolster its efforts to work actively for peace if Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu remains in power after the conflict, Schumer added.

"It is not a position that we have taken ... I'm not going to offer any type of assessment, he [Netanyahu] is the elected prime minister of Israel," Miller said regarding Schumer's comment.

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US Not 'Actively Planning' Evacuations Of American Citizens In Haiti - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The United States has no ongoing evacuation strategies for American citizens in Haiti, Spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

"We [the US] are not actively planning for any evacuation," Miller said during a press briefing when asked if the US has any information on the American citizens and if there's any plans to evacuate or otherwise help those who are on the ground in Haiti.

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US House Foreign Affairs Panel Chair Says Schumer Should Apologize for Netanyahu Comments

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul said on Thursday that Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer should apologize for his comments regarding Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's political future.

Earlier on Thursday, Schumer called for new elections in Israel and said that Netanyahu's government no longer fits Israel's needs. Schumer also referred to Netanyahu as an obstacle to peace between Israel and Palestine.

"I believe that he should apologize," McCaul said during a press conference, in reference to Schumer's remarks. "It's not our role to question democracies and elections. We have our own politics. It's our role to support them against terrorist organizations like Hamas, Hezbollah and ultimately Iran."

McCaul called Schumer's remarks "out of line" and inappropriate.

On October 7, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, in which more than 1,200 people were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel responded with its own military operation in the Gaza Strip, including airstrikes, a ground incursion, and a blockade of the Palestinian enclave.

More than 31,000 people in the Gaza Strip have died as a result of the fighting, according to local authorities.

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Trudeau Says 'Cannot Comment' on Canada's National Security Review of TikTok

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday that he "can't comment" on reports that his government launched a national security review of the TikTok app six months ago.

The Canadian Premier made the remarks amid media reports that his government had launched a previously undisclosed national security review of TikTok back in September 2023.

"I can't comment on national security reviews," Trudeau told reporters.

The Prime Minister further added that as the United States government is currently debating whether or not to ban the use of TikTok in the country, Canada would be watching how the process unfolds.

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In February 2023, Ottawa announced that it was banning the use of TikTok from all devices issued by the federal government, including laptops and cellphones, arguing that the app represented an unacceptable level of risk to privacy and security.

On Wednesday, the US House of Representatives passed legislation that requires TikTok to cut ties with its parent China-based company ByteDance within 180 days or face a ban in the US, amid concerns about user privacy and foreign influence ahead of the US presidential election in November.

TikTok, which is owned by the China-based company ByteDance, has denied that its application poses a security threat to US users. The United States, European Union, and Canada recently banned their government employees from using TikTok on official electronic devices.

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Russia Reserves Right to Renew Efforts at UNSC on Probe Into Nord Stream Sabotage - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 14 (Sputnik) - Russia reserves the right to renew efforts at the UN Security Council regarding the international investigation into the Nord Stream pipelines' sabotage and wants to come up with proposals, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday.

"We also act on the premise that members of the Security Council will work in good faith and are interested in bringing those who blew up Nord Stream to justice. Therefore, we reserve the right to renew the efforts to bring about an international investigation of the Nord Stream sabotage and to come forward with relevant proposals," Polaynskiy told journalists outside of the UN Security Council.

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Pentagon Says Has No Comment on Reports About US Special Forces in Taiwan

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - A US Defense Department spokesperson on Thursday declined to comment on reports that US special forces troops are training Taiwan's armed forces, but noted that the United States provides Taipei security assistance to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability.

Earlier on Thursday, Taiwan Defense Chief Qiu Guozheng said that US Army special forces troops are stationed on the island and are training the Taiwanese military.

"We don't have a comment on specific operations, engagements, or training, but I would highlight that our support for, and defense relationship with Taiwan remains aligned against the current threat posed by the People's Republic of China," the Defense department spokesperson told Sputnik.

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The United States makes available to Taiwan defense equipment and services it deems necessary to enable it to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability, the spokesperson added.
Taiwan has been governed independently of mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province, while Taiwan - a territory with its own elected government - maintains that it is an autonomous country but stops short of declaring independence. Beijing opposes any official contacts of foreign states with Taipei and considers Chinese sovereignty over the island indisputable.

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White House Says No Indication Houthis Have Access to Hypersonic Weapons

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) – The White House said Thursday that there is "absolutely no indication" that the Houthis have access to a hypersonic weapon.
"Those reports are inaccurate. There's absolutely no indication that the Houthis have access to a hypersonic weapon," John Kirby, White House national security communications adviser, said at a press briefing.
Earlier on Thursday, a military official close to the group told Sputnik that the Houthis have tested a new hypersonic missile.
According to the report, the Houthis conducted a successful test of a missile that can travel at up to eight times the speed of sound and run on solid fuel. They plan to begin using such missiles for their attacks on ships transiting in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and Israel itself, as part of their campaign responding to Israel's war on Gaza.

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Biden Admin. Not Commenting on Reports US House Will Offer Alternative Ukraine Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby on Thursday declined to comment on the reports that the US House Republicans will soon offer an alternative Ukraine aid bill.
"I'm not gonna get ahead of the legislative process that hasn't executed yet," Kirby told reporters. "We believe that the supplemental passed by the Senate will answer very well our strong desire to continue to support Ukraine, will answer well Ukrainian defense needs as well as Israeli defense needs and other concerns of national security around the world."
Kirby urged US House Speaker Mike Johnson to take up the $95 billion foreign aid bill and put it on the floor for a vote.
Media reported earlier that Johnson notified US senators this week that the House of Representatives will soon send its version of an Ukraine aid bill crafted by Republicans.
Last month, Senate Republicans rejected a $118 billion national security supplemental package

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that includes $60 billion for Ukraine, $14 billion for Israel as well as for border policy reforms. Republicans claim the border security reforms in the bill would not do enough to resolve the border crisis facing the United States.

The Senate ended up sending a $95 billion foreign aid bill to the House of Representatives, which 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.

Media reported that House Republicans are in the early stages of work on an alternate foreign aid bill that they hope will be ready by April.

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UN Positively Encouraged by Progress From Warring Parties in Yemen on Mediation - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 14 (Sputnik) - The United Nations mediation process of a peace settlement in Yemen has received positive feedback from the parties to move forward, UN Special Envoy on Yemen Hans Grundberg said on Thursday.

"An encouraging factor is that I have received signals from both sides that they want to move forward on the progress when it comes to the mediation efforts that we've done," Grundberg said in a press briefing.

Grundberg also said that the strategic direction of his work is not changing despite the escalation of the situation in the region.

Earlier on Thursday, Yemen's Ansar Allah movement, also known as the Houthis, carried out a test flight of a hypersonic missile with high destructive capability and is preparing to add these missiles to its military arsenal, a military source close to the movement has told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, the Financial Times reported that the United States had secret talks with Iran in January to press Tehran to use its leverage to convince Yemen's Houthi movement to stop their attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea.

The report said the two sides also addressed concerns over Iran's nuclear program during the meeting, which was purportedly held in Oman.

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White House Says Israel Not Making Enough Effort to Increase Gaza Aid

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The White House said on Thursday that it is not seeing enough effort from Israel to increase the flow of aid into the Gaza Strip despite the opening of the new so-called "96 Gate" crossing.

"We would call it minimal amounts of aid getting through the 96 Gate so far." White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said during a press briefing. "At other crossings, there has been some improvement; [it's] too early to tell if … the Israelis are

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committed to improving the flow assistance. But again, just in the aggregate, not enough is getting in."

When asked why no aid had entered 96 Gate overnight, Kirby said, "We're seeing … not as much effort being applied by the Israeli side to increase their flow."

At least 31,341 Palestinians have been officially confirmed killed and 73,134 injured in Israel's military operations in Gaza. Given Israel's blockade of food, water, medicine, fuel and other essential supplies in the Palestinian enclave, the World Food Program has estimated than half a million Palestinians are at risk of famine.

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White House Has Not Seen Israel's 'Humanitarian Islands' Rafah Plan – Kirby

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) – The White House said Thursday that it has not seen Israel's reported plan to move Palestinian civilians to "humanitarian islands" in Gaza ahead of its ground offensive in Rafah.

"We haven't seen those plans. I've seen press reporting, but we can't confirm that that is in fact the plan that they have," John Kirby, White House national security communications adviser, said at a press briefing.

Kirby reiterated that the White House's position had not changed and it did "not want to see large-scale operations in Rafah unless there [was] a credible, legitimate, executable plan to provide for the safety and security" of civilians.

Israeli Defense Forces spokesperson Daniel Hagari had said Israel had plans to push the more than one million displaced Palestinians seeking refuge in Rafah toward "humanitarian islands" in the center of Gaza in advance of its ground offensive in the southernmost city.

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Global Economy May Lose Up to $7.4 Trillion Due to Fragmentation - IMF Chief

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - Trade fragmentation may lead to up to $7.4 trillion in loses for the global economy, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday.

"IMF research shows that trade fragmentation alone could cause a global output loss of up to $7.4 trillion over the longer term," Georgieva said in an address in Cambridge in the United Kingdom.

This is an equivalent of the combined GDP of France and Germany, Georgieva said

"We see trust diminishing among nations too, with geopolitical tensions on the rise. If that trend were to continue, the world economy could 'fragment' into rival blocs," Georgieva said.

The IMF chief pointed out that many nations are now reversing the cuts to military spending

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made after the end of the Cold War.
"The 'peace dividend' is gone and the 'long peace' may be at risk," Georgieva said.
Such development is taking place at a time when the world needs cooperation more than ever, Georgieva also said.
Establishing and deepening partnerships gains in importance when tackling issues that are borderless and cannot be resolved by any country alone, Georgieva added.

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Global Economy May Grow 3-13 Times in Next 100 Years - Georgieva

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The global economy may grow from 3 to 13 times in the next 100 years, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday.
"In what we might call the 'low ambition scenario', global GDP would be about three times larger and global living standards twice as high as today. In the 'high ambition scenario', global GDP would be 13 times larger, and living standards would be nine times higher," Georgieva said in an address in Cambridge in the United Kingdom.
Georgieva explained that the first scenario is based on the lower-growth experience of living standards in the 100 years before 1920, while the other is based on the much higher average growth rates from 1920 until now.
"I believe that our grandchildren will enjoy the better of the two," Georgieva said.
The IMF chief pointed out that high economic inequality is the most serious wrong of the last century and urged the international community to correct it.
"IMF research shows that lower income inequality can be associated with higher and more durable growth," Georgieva said.
Georgieva also emphasized the necessity of fostering a fairer global economy and urged sending capital to where it is needed the most and where it will make the biggest positive impact.

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White House Says Working with Capitol Hill to Quickly Confirm Haiti Ambassador

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) – The White House said Thursday it is working with Capitol Hill to have Dennis B. Hankins confirmed as US ambassador to Haiti as soon as possible.
"We certainly urge a swift confirmation of Mr. Hankins as our ambassador to Haiti. This is a critical time to make sure that we have an ambassador in place and we certainly urgently need him in place. And again, we're working with our partners on Capitol Hill to get him confirmed as soon as possible," John Kirby, White House national security communications adviser, said at a

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press briefing.
The Senate vote on Hankins' nomination is currently underway, and enough Senators have voted to assure his confirmation.
Hankins was nominated by US President Biden last May. He previously served as ambassador to Mali and Guinea.

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White House Says Not Seeing Heavy Flow of Haitian Migrants Fleeing Crisis

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is not seeing a heavy flow of migrants fleeing the violent crisis in Haiti, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Thursday.
"We're not seeing a heavy flow of Haitian migrants, certainly by sea, by any means right now," Kirby told reporters.
Kirby said US federal agencies have contingency plans in place to address a mass migration event from Haiti given that the crisis in that country continues to worsen.
Earlier this week, US Southern Command head Laura Richardson said the US Navy is prepared to send vessels near the coast of Florida to possibly deal with a wave of migrants from Haiti.
On February 29, gang violence erupted in the downtown area of the capital Port-au-Prince while Prime Minister Ariel Henry was visiting Kenya to seek an agreement for the deployment of foreign forces in Haiti to fight organized crime. The gangs said their goal was to prevent the prime minister from returning to Haiti. They stormed Haiti's largest prison and freed an unconfirmed number of inmates. The Haitian government declared a state of emergency in the capital region.
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 deteriorated due to a multitude of natural disasters.

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US Senate Secures Votes to Confirm Dennis Hankins as Ambassador to Haiti

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday secured enough votes to confirm the nomination of Dennis Hankins to serve as the United States' Ambassador to Haiti, amid a security and governmental crisis in the Caribbean country.
Hankins secured the support of a majority of senators in a vote to confirm his nomination.
Hankins is a career member of the Senior Foreign Service, having previously served in

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diplomatic positions in countries including Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Mauritania, Mozambique, Brazil and Saudi Arabia.

Hankins' leadership experience in challenging diplomatic and security environments makes him "well-qualified" to serve as US ambassador to Haiti, the State Department said in a statement supporting his nomination.

Hankins served in Haiti in the early 1990s as Nonimmigrant Visa Chief and Refugee Coordinator. Hankins has experience speaking French, Portuguese and Indonesian, according to the State Department.

On February 29, gang violence erupted in the downtown area of Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, while then-Prime Minister Ariel Henry was on foreign travel, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency in the capital region.

The gangs said that they intend to prevent Henry from returning to Haiti. On Tuesday, Guyanese President Irfaan Ali said Henry would step down from his leadership role and that power would be transferred to a transitional council.

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Canada Reduces Diplomatic Presence in Haiti Amid Severe Security Crisis - Foreign Minister

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - Canada has reduced the size of its diplomatic presence in Haiti and will only maintain so-called essential personnel at its embassy in the capital of Port-au-Prince, Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly said on Thursday.

"We have proceeded to reduce our footprint to essential employees at our embassy in Port-au-Prince," Joly said via X. "This will allow us to maintain our presence in Haiti to support Canadians during this volatile situation, given limited availability of supplies."

Joly said that Canada's Ambassador to Haiti Andre Francois Giroux as well as his consular team would remain in Port-au-Prince, providing assistance to Canadian nationals there and noted that staff temporarily relocated abroad will continue to assist the diplomatic mission.

Canada remains committed to supporting Haiti and its people in the long term, Joly said, adding that Ottawa's current priority is the safety and security of Canadians in that country.

In a separate statement, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) announced that the Embassy in Port-au-Prince remains temporarily closed to the Haitian public, but that Canadians in need of consular assistance would continue to be served.

"We continue to advise Canadians to avoid all travel to Haiti and encourage all Canadians in Haiti to check our Haiti travel advice as often as possible for updates and to sign up with the service Registration of Canadians Abroad," GAC said.

On February 29, gang violence erupted in the downtown area of the capital Port-au-Prince while Prime Minister Ariel Henry was visiting Kenya to seek an agreement for the deployment of foreign forces in Haiti to fight organized crime. The gangs said their goal was to prevent the prime minister from returning to Haiti. They stormed Haiti's largest prison and freed an unconfirmed number of inmates. The Haitian government declared a state of emergency in the capital region.

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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 deteriorated due to a multitude of natural disasters.

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UN After Ukrainian Attack on ZNP Says All Sides Must Guarantee Safety of Nuclear Plant

UNITED NATIONS, March 14 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is concerned about the situation around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and urges all sides to guarantee its safety, UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday after Ukrainian forces attacked the facility.

"We have stated over and again and we are very concerned about the situation around the nuclear power plant, and it is incumbent on everyone to ensure and to guarantee its safety," Dujarric said.

Earlier in the day, the ZNPP's press office said the Ukrainian military shelled critical infrastructure at the plant, with explosives dropping five meters (16.4 feet) away from a fuel storage facility.

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US FAA Says to Oversee Probe Into 'Mishap' During SpaceX's Starship Launch

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) on Thursday said it would oversee an investigation into a "mishap" that occurred during the SpaceX launch of its Starship vehicle.

"A mishap occurred during the SpaceX Starship OFT-3 mission that launched from Boca Chica, Texas, on March 14. The mishap involved both the Super Heavy booster and the Starship vehicle," the FAA said in a statement. "The FAA will be involved in every step of the mishap investigation process and must approve SpaceX's final report, including any corrective actions."

No public injuries or property damage occurred during the mishap, the FAA said.

Earlier on Thursday, SpaceX launched its third test flight of its Starship rocket from its Boca Chica site in Texas, successfully reaching orbit for the first time. SpaceX later confirmed it lost the Starship spacecraft as it attempted a re-entry for a splashdown in the Indian Ocean.

The Starship is the centerpiece of SpaceX's 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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White House Can't Confirm US Had Secret Talks With Iran on Red Sea Attacks, Nuclear Issues

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said he cannot confirm reports claiming the United States and Iran held secret talks about the Houthis' Red Sea attacks and nuclear-related issues.

"I can't confirm the reports that you're referring to," Kirby told reporters. "What I can say just in general is that we have many channels for communicating with Iran and for passing messages to Iran."

Iran's state news agency IRNA earlier reported that an Iranian official denied claims that Tehran had engaged in "secret talks" with Washington.

On Wednesday, the Financial Times reported that the United States had secret talks with Iran in January to press Tehran to use its leverage to convince Yemen's Houthi movement to stop their attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea.

The report said the two sides also addressed concerns over Irans' nuclear program during the meeting, which was purportedly held in Oman.

Omani officials reportedly facilitated the talks by shuttling between the two sides so they did not have to engage directly.

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Russian TU-95 Bombers Detected Close to US-Canada ADIZ First Time in Two Years -NORTHCOM

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – Two Russian TU-95 “Bear” bombers were detected close to the US-Canada Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) for the first time in two years, Air Force Gen. Gregory M. Guillot, commander of US Northern Command and Northern American Aerospace Defense Command said during a congressional hearing on Thursday.

“Just last week, for the first time in over two years the Russians sent two Bear bombers [TU-95] … through what we call the GIUK gap - Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom - approaching the Canadian and the United States Air Defense Identification Zones. I haven't seen this activity in over two years,” Guillot said.

The TU-95 bombers were tracked without interruption throughout the entire time of their presence in the region thanks to a radar network as well as information sharing between countries within the European Command and NORTHCOM, Guillot added.

The Commander noted that although US and Canadian planes were deployed to intercept the Russian bombers before the arrival, the interception did not occur as the TU-95 changed course before entering the ADIZ.

The Russian Defense Ministry has repeatedly said Russian aircraft fly in strict accordance with

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international rules for the use of airspace over neutral waters.

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JPMorgan Fined $348.2Mln for Inadequate Client Monitoring for Market Misconduct - Fed

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - Wall Street powerhouse JPMorgan Chase & Co. has been fined $348.2 million by the Federal Reserve and another US fiscal agency for its trading program that fell short in monitoring market misconduct among clients, the US central bank announced on Thursday.

The Fed said it issued an enforcement action against JPMorgan and fined the firm approximately $98.2 million on its own for an inadequate surveillance of client trading activities.

"The Board's action requires JPMorgan Chase to review and take corrective action to address the firm's inadequate monitoring practices, which occurred between 2014 and 2023," the Fed said in a statement.

The Fed made the order in coordination with action taken separately by the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC) that resulted in penalties totaling approximately $348.2 million for JPMorgan, the statement said.

The OCC said JPMorgan failed to properly monitor billions of trades across at least 30 global trading venues.

The OCC said it ordered the bank to overhaul and improve its monitoring program and conduct a third-party review, adding that the new trading venues must be cleared under the revamped practice.

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US Senator Menendez Eyeing Independent Reelection Bid Amid Criminal Allegations - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - Democratic US Senator Bob Menendez is contemplating running for reelection in November as an independent amid a fraud and bribery case against him, NBC News reported on Thursday.

Menendez is preparing to gather petitions to run as an independent and discussing his career and record with allies, the report said, citing two sources who spoke with the lawmaker.

The Democratic primary for Menendez's Senate seat, in which several other Democrats have filed to run, will occur on June 4, the report said.

Earlier this week, Menendez pleaded not guilty to new charges filed in a criminal case against him for alleged foreign bribery and fraud. Menendez faces a total of 16 criminal charges, including bribery, wire fraud, acting as a foreign agent and obstruction of justice.

Prosecutors allege that Menendez received bribes in exchange for using his authority to assist the Qatari government and benefit Egypt.

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Moreover, prosecutors accuse Menendez and his wife of engaging in a scheme to return the alleged bribe money under the guise of loan repayment. Menendez used the scheme to knowingly interfere with the investigation into the alleged bribery, according to prosecutors.

In January, Menendez's lawyers sought to dismiss the charges against the lawmaker. However, the judge overseeing the case said on Monday that a May 6 trial date for the case still stands, although an appeals court could still impose a stay.

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Small Drones to Pose Risk to US Military Installations for Foreseeable Future - NORTHCOM

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - Small unmanned aircraft systems (sUAS) will pose a security risk to US military installations and other critical infrastructure for the foreseeable future, US Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

Guillot, who heads the US Northern Command (NORTHCOM) and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), testified before the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

"We continue to see a rapid proliferation of sUAS technology and usage in the homeland, including near our military installations," Guillot said. "By all indications, sUAS will present a safety and security risk to military installations and other critical infrastructure for the foreseeable future."

Guillot noted that there are more than 1,000 sUAS incursions through the US border per month.

"While most of this activity can likely be attributed to hobbyists, sUAS could be exploited by nefarious actors for surveillance, illicit trafficking, or - in a worst case - attacks on domestic critical infrastructure," Guillot said. "Unauthorized sUAS flights over government installations and civilian infrastructure have the potential to disrupt critical services and threaten force protection and mission assurance."

Guillot also said that due to the increasing prevalence of sUAS available for military, commercial and recreational use, NORAD and USNORTHCOM are now facing growing challenges in early detection and threat characterization, as well as in mitigation and interdiction.

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Pentagon Concerned N. Korea ICBM Stockpile Could Approach US Defense Capacity - General

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned that North Korea increasing its stockpile of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) can reach Washington's capacity to protect North America, US Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

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"The DPRK's [North Korea's] closed society and robust security apparatus make it one of our most vexing intelligence challenges and prevent us from confidently assessing the number of ICBMs in its inventory," Guillot said. "Nonetheless, I am concerned that Kim Jong Un's growing ICBM stockpile could approach our capacity to defend North America - a challenge that will only expand in the coming years if Kim Jong Un looks to add multiple reentry vehicles to his missiles and transition his ICBM program from research-and-development to serialized production and deployment."

Guillot, who heads the US Northern Command and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), testified before the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

Guillot said during the testimony that North Korea successfully-tested since 2022 ballistic missiles, including a new and more capable liquid-propellant ICBM and the first solid-propellant ICBM.

"Both systems likely have sufficient boost to deliver a nuclear payload to the entire United States," Guillot added.

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China Urges Israel to Halt Gaza Operation, Stop Collective Punishment of Palestinians

UNITED NATIONS, March 14 (Sputnik) – China urges Israel to cease its military operation in the Gaza Strip and stop its collective punishment of Palestinians, China's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Geng Shuang said on Thursday.

"We once again call on Israel to immediately cease its military operation in Gaza and to stop collective punishment of the Palestinian people," Geng Shuang said during a UN Security Council meeting.

He urged the international community to take immediate actions to establish a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza

The Chinese diplomat also emphasized that the Holy month of Ramadan should be a time of peace.

On October 7, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, in which more than 1,200 people were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel responded with its own military operation in the Gaza Strip, including airstrikes, a ground incursion and blockade of the Palestinian enclave. More than 31,000 people in the Gaza Strip have died as a result of the fighting, according to local authorities.

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US Sanctions Brazilian National Diego Goncalves for Money Laundering - Treasury

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WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The United States has designated Brazil national Diego Macedo Goncalves do Carmo for money laundering related to a large criminal organization, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated Diego Macedo Goncalves do Carmo (Goncalves), a member of Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), a Brazil-based criminal organization sanctioned pursuant to counter narcotics authorities," the statement said.

The Treasury Department characterized the PCC as being a "most notorious" organized crime group in Brazil and one of the largest in Latin America, the statement said.

Goncalves is a key operative responsible for laundering hundreds of millions of dollars for the organization, the statement said.

In November 2022, a Brazilian court sentenced Goncalves along with other individuals to seven years and 11 months in prison on drug trafficking charges, the statement said.

According to the court, Goncalves is responsible for laundering US$240 million for the PCC, the statement added.

As a result of the designation, all of Goncalves' US-based assets must be blocked and all US persons are prohibited from making transactions with him, according to the statement.

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Schumer Says 'Anguished' by Number of Palestinian Civilians Killed by Israel in Gaza Strip

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Thursday that he is anguished by the number of Palestinian civilians killed by Israel as part of its military operation in the Gaza Strip.

"My heart also breaks at the loss of so many civilian lives in Gaza. I'm anguished that the Israeli war campaign has killed so many innocent Palestinians," Schumer said during remarks on the Senate floor.

Israel has a "moral obligation" to do better, Schumer added.

However, Palestinian organization Hamas is also partly responsible for the deaths of Palestinian civilians, Schumer said.

Schumer advocated for a two-state solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's opposition to a two-state solution is a mistake for Israelis, Palestinians, the region and the world, Schumer said.

Schumer said that there are four obstacles to peace: Hamas and Palestinians who support it; radical right-wing Israelis; Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas; and Netanyahu.

Schumer called for new elections in Israel and said that Netahnyahu's government no longer fits Israel's needs. The United States must bolster its efforts to work actively for peace if Netanyahu remains in power after the conflict, Schumer said.

On October 7, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, in which more than 1,200 people were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel responded with its own military operation in the Gaza Strip, including airstrikes, a ground incursion and blockade of the Palestinian enclave.

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More than 31,000 people in the Gaza Strip have died as a result of the fighting, according to local authorities.

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US Plans for Icebreaker Fleet Will Not Allow Overcoming Backlog From Russia - NORTHCOM

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The United States plans to construct an icebreaker fleet will not allow overcoming the significant backlog from Russia, US Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot, said during a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"We do appreciate that the Coast Guard is procuring more icebreakers but even with those will be severely outnumbered and that does limit our freedom of maneuver in that region," Guillot said.

Guillot, who heads the US Northern Command (NORTHCOM) and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), testified before the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

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SpaceX Confirms Lost Starship During Re-entry on Thursday

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND, Texas, March 14 (Sputnik) - SpaceX confirmed it lost the Starship spacecraft as it attempted a re-entry for a splashdown in the Indian Ocean after successfully reaching orbit for the first time, a company broadcaster said on Thursday.

"We are making the call now that we have lost Ship 28 [Starship]," the broadcaster said.

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Iran Committed to Retaliating For Murder of Top General Soleimani - NORTHCOM

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - Iran is committed to retaliating for the assassination of top Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani in a US drone strike in 2020, Air Force Gen. Gregory M. Guillot, commander of US Northern Command and Northern American Aerospace Defense Command said during a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"Iran remains committed to retaliating for the January 2020 death of former IRGC Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, potentially with attacks against current and former senior US officials," Guillot said.

Soleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, was killed

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by a US drone strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020. Washington claimed he was involved in organizing the attack on the US Embassy in Baghdad on December 31, 2019.

In response to the assassination, Iran launched strikes on US bases in Iraq, including the al-Asad Airbase.

The US Justice Department in August 2022 announced that it had uncovered an alleged IRGC plot to assassinate former national security adviser John Bolton and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in retaliation for the killing of Soleimani.

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Russia Threat to Increase When Severodvinsk Submarines Get Armed With Tsirkon - NORTHCOM

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - The threat emanating from Russia will become more acute later in the decade when that country's Severodvinsk-class nuclear-powered guided missile submarines (SSGN) get armed with the Tsirkon (Zirkon) hypersonic missile, US Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

Guillot, who heads the US Northern Command and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), testified before the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

"Russian media indicates that Moscow now plans to field a total of 12 Severodvinsk hulls, split evenly between the Atlantic and Pacific, enabling the Russian Navy to pose a persistent conventional threat to critical infrastructure throughout most of North America," Guillot said. "The threat will only become more acute later in the decade when Severodvinsk SSGNs are armed with the Tsirkon hypersonic missile."

The Tsirkon missile is produced by Russia's leading rocket producer NPO Mashinostroyenia. The missile has a range of 621 miles (1,000 kilometers) and travels up to nine times the speed of sound.

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US General Claims Russia Can Use Non-Nuclear Capabilities to Strike West's Infrastructure

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) - US Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot said in a congressional testimony on Thursday that Russia plans to use its multiple non-nuclear capabilities to hit Western economic and military infrastructure in case of a war with the United States.

"Meanwhile, Russia continues to hone a wide range of non-nuclear capabilities - including cyber weapons and conventionally armed air-, sea- and ground-launched cruise missiles - to provide options below the nuclear threshold," Guillot told the US Senate Armed Services Committee. "Russia plans to use these non-nuclear capabilities to strike Western economic and military infrastructure in an attempt to degrade our political will and compel negotiations to

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terminate an escalating conflict."

Guillot also said that Russia's military deployments near North America in the last several years and public statements coming out of Moscow indicate that Russia will target critical US infrastructure with these weapons in a case of a war with the United States.

Guillot heads the US Northern Command and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).

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US Imposes Sanctions on Israeli Nationals, Companies in West Bank - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury imposed sanctions on three Israeli nationals and two companies in the West Bank on Thursday, according to a notice on its website.

The sanctioned Israeli nationals residing in the West Bank include Zvi Bar Yosef, Neriya Ben Pazi and Moshe Sharvit. The two companies, Moshes Farm and Zvis Farm, are involved in “mixed farming” in the West Bank.

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US Imposes Arms Restrictions on Nicaragua – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) – The US imposed restrictions on Thursday on Nicaragua’s import and export of US-origin defense articles and services over concerns of government repression, the State Department said in a press release.

“The United States is today imposing restrictions on the import and export of US origin defense articles and defense services destined for or originating in Nicaragua,” the release stated.

The State Department amended the International Traffic in Arms Regulations accordingly, citing “brutal repression” by the Ortega-Murillo government against the people of Nicaragua, including recent “sham elections."

It added that it would continue to use diplomatic and economic tools to hold the Ortega-Murillo government accountable.

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SpaceX Launches Third Test Flight of Starship Rocket, Reaches 'Orbital Velocity'

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(Updates with modified lede, details in paras 2-5; background in para 6)

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND, Texas, March 14 (Sputnik), Lenka White - SpaceX launched its third test flight of its Starship rocket on Thursday from its Boca Chica site in Texas, successfully reaching orbit for the first time, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Thursday.

"Starship reached orbital velocity," SpaceX founder Elon Musk said shortly after the launch.

The Starship spacecraft is on its way for a re-entry in the Indian Ocean later in the day.

It's unclear if Starship's Super Heavy booster rocket had a successful water landing in the Gulf of Mexico, but it did not immediately explode after hot-stage separation as in the previous test flight, according to the SpaceX broadcast.

The previous Starship test flight in November was terminated short of reaching orbit.

The Starship is the centerpiece of SpaceX's 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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More Than 80% of American College Students Prefer Restrictive Campus Gun Policies – Poll

WASHINGTON, March 14 (Sputnik) – Eighty-four percent of prospective or current college students in America say that more restrictive campus gun policies would make them more likely to enroll or stay enrolled in a given college, according to a Lumina Foundation-Gallup poll released Thursday.

Even when the results were broken down by age, gender, race or political party identification, the vast majority of respondents across all categories said that a college with “tough restrictions on gun ownership that banned or made it hard for people to have guns on campus” would make them more likely to enroll or stay enrolled in a given college.

The largest gap was recorded in terms of party identification, with 71% of Republicans and 91% of Democrats saying they preferred more restrictive policies.

Additionally, 81% of current or prospective students said that a college’s gun policies were at least somewhat important when deciding where to enroll for their studies. Even when the results were broken down by age, gender, race, or political party identification, at least 77% of respondents across all categories said a college’s gun policies were at least somewhat important.

The prospect of gun violence was also a common concern about a third of current students. Eight percent of current associate or bachelor’s degree students who attend at least half of their courses on campus said they worried “a great deal” about gun violence on their campus, while 25% said they worried “a fair amount.”

The Lumina Foundation-Gallup 2024 State of Higher Education Study was conducted from October 9 to November 16 last year with 14,032 current or prospective college students in the US.

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