Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 03/18/2024 11:56:21 AM

3/15/24 Friday

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IDF Kills at Least 20 Palestinians Waiting for Aid, Says Gaza Health Ministry

The incident occurred just hours after eight people were killed in an airstrike on an aid distribution center at the al-Nuseirat camp in central Gaza, Palestinian health officials said. Israel's military has denied responsibility for the attack.

According to Gaza's health ministry, at least 20 people were killed by Israeli forces while waiting to receive aid on Thursday. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have called the reports "erroneous" and claimed that the Palestinians opened fire on their own people, adding that some civilians were run over by aid trucks. The attack left more than 150 people injured and came just hours after eight people were killed in an airstrike at the al-Nuseirat camp in central Gaza.

"An intensive preliminary review conducted overnight by the IDF found that the IDF did not open fire at the aid convoy," the IDF said in a statement.

But the Ministry of Health wrote on social media that what happened at the "Kuwaiti roundabout points to hidden intentions of the occupation to commit a new, horrible massacre."

Gaza officials said the attack occurred at the Kuwait roundabout where a crowd had gathered to receive aid. Three people who spoke to a Washington, DC journal said they saw an Israeli helicopter and drones randomly firing on Palestinians who had gathered to receive aid. The witnesses also said they saw armed Palestinian officers as well, but added that they were some distance away. They said the officers had fired their weapons into the air to control the crowds.

A journalist from Agence France-Presse also said they had been on the ground during the incident on Thursday and had seen several bodies and people who had been shot, according to a report.

Some aid agencies have tried to create less predictable paths for their routes to reduce the number of people who might gather for aid. But the quality of those roads creates a problem, says one individual who works for a nonprofit.

"The problem is there are very few routes to take and all are very difficult to travel on – there have been tanks driving up and down them for months and they are basically just strips of rubble now – so people can predict where the trucks are going to be," said an NGO official in Gaza.

Land access to Gaza—which is now facing a famine—via Jordan, Israel, and Egypt remains limited. Countries sending emergency aid to Palestine have had to diversify their routes as a result. While Israel has denied limiting aid to Gaza, the United Nations (UN) and other relief officials have said that without a cease-fire, their ability to deliver humanitarian aid remains limited.

On Friday, Israel's war cabinet met to evaluate a new cease-fire proposal by Hamas, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said Hamas' demands were "unreasonable" but added that Israel would send a delegation to Qatar to discuss their position.

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Qatar, Egypt, and the US are hoping to reach a cease-fire deal between Israel and Hamas before Ramadan, a Muslim holy month, which began on Monday. Netanyahu recently said that his war cabinet had approved a ground invasion plan for Gaza's southern Rafah city.
Thus far, at least 31,490 Palestinians have been killed and 73,439 injured in Israeli attacks on Gaza since the war first began. The US has made nearly $600 million worth of arms sales to Israel with an additional amount of sales that went undisclosed. For weeks, humanitarian officials have been warning of an oncoming famine in Gaza as a result of the conflict, according to a report from the UN.

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Germany Supports Tapping Frozen Russian Assets for Ukrainian Arms - Scholz

The West has been orchestrating a way to supply Ukraine with arms by using money from frozen Russian central bank assets for more than a year. Meanwhile, Moscow has maintained that any theft of their frozen assets will trigger a symmetrical response.
On Friday, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that European countries would use the windfall profits from nearly $300 billion in frozen Russian assets to enable their weapon purchases for Ukraine, according to a recent report from a New York City journal.
Scholz spoke to reporters alongside French President Emmanual Macron and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk. Scholz's announcement on Friday comes after the US and the UK have put repeated pressure on some EU countries to agree to using the stolen assets as a way to fund Ukraine.
While this is the first time that Berlin has voiced support for the idea, about a week prior UK foreign secretary David Cameron said the UK was prepared to loan Ukraine all frozen Russian central bank assets in the state based on the believe that Ukraine would pay those loans back with Russian "reparations" following the end of the war.
But Germany, France and Italy still oppose completely confiscating the assets, because they believe it will weaken international confidence in the euro, and they have legal concerns about the validity of such an act. But even though the assets are frozen, they have matured and been reinvested, generating profits that EU officials say could reach 15 billion euros ($16 billion) over the next four years, the report claims.
The EU has agreed to order financial institutions to separate the profits from the Russian assets into a different account. But EU officials will not make a second proposal to transfer the money to EU or national coffers until the bloc has enough support from other states. The proposal is expected to come as soon as next week, the report adds.
Of the roughly $282 billion in Russian assets immobilized in Japan and the West, around $207 billion (€191 billion) are held at Euroclear, a clearinghouse based in Belgium.
Russia has maintained that they will take retaliatory measures in response to any theft of their assets. Euroclear is already facing 50 and 100 lawsuits in Russian courts over the frozen assets. Finance Minister Anton Siluanov told Sputnik in late February that any theft of frozen assets will trigger a symmetrical response.

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US Measles Cases Total More in New Year So Far Than All of 2023

Health authorities say a majority of the cases thus far have been linked to unvaccinated Americans returning to the US with the virus after traveling abroad.

At least 17 states in the US have reported cases of measles as of Thursday, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). At the same time, health officials worldwide are grappling with outbreaks of the highly contagious virus. The rise in cases has been blamed on missed vaccinations as a result of various reasons, including school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The US states of Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, New York City, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Washington have contributed to the total 58 cases.

Illinois has reported the most measles cases with 12 infections in Chicago. Of those, at least 10 were residents at a migrant shelter. But some US cases have not been linked to international travel.

Two suspected cases were reported on Friday, bringing the total for the year 2024 alone equal to or higher than all of 2023. But the number has not reached that of 2019, during which 1,274 individual cases of measles were confirmed in 31 states—the greatest number of cases reported in the US since 1992.

With spring break travel in the US just a month away, health officials in the US are asking Americans to check if they are up to date on their measles vaccinations. The CDC also advised those who are not vaccinated to get their shot at least six weeks before traveling. Meanwhile, babies are recommended to get vaccinated for measles before international travel as early as six months old.

A report claims that the CDC launched investigations of measles exposures through February 20 in arriving international flights that came from Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkiye. Other outbreaks this year have also been linked to travel in Europe.

In 2019 the cases worldwide reached nearly 900,000, and global measles deaths climbed nearly 50% since 2016, killing roughly 207,500 people in 2019 alone, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Measles, which can be prevented with vaccination, was once a common childhood infection caused by a virus, according to Mayo Clinic. The disease is also called rubeola, and can be serious and most of the fatalities it makes up are in children. It causes a red, blotchy rash that usually appears first on the face and behind the ears, before spreading across the whole body. Signs usually appear around 10 to 14 days after exposure and include a fever, dry cough, runny nose, sore throat, conjunctivitis, white spots with bluish centers inside the mouth or cheek.

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South Korean Scientists Create Lab-Grown Beef as Sustainable Source of Protein

It's one small step for this lab, and one giant leap for protein.

Researchers in South Korea have successfully infused raw grains of rice with beef cells to create what they believe is a sustainable, affordable and environmentally friendly source of protein. This "beef rice" is the first product of its kind, says Professor Jinkee Hong of Yonsei University in Seoul, who led the research published in the journal Matter this month.

This protein rich grain, which looks like fluffy pink rice, was first coated in fish gelatin allowing the beef muscle and beef fat cells to attach to the grain. Then, the researchers inserted cow muscle and fat stem cells into the rice grain which was left to culture in a petri dish for nine to 11 days.

Rice grains are porous and have an organized structure which means they can provide a solid scaffold to house animal-derived cells. Rice grains, which have a low incidence of allergy, have molecules that can help nourish and prompt the growth of these new cells, making it an ideal source for this meat-alternative meal.

"Imagine obtaining all the nutrients we need from cell-cultured protein rice," primary author Sohyeon Park said on Wednesday. "Rice already has a high nutrient level, but adding cells from livestock can further boost it."

"We usually obtain the protein we need from livestock, but livestock production consumes a lot of resources and water and releases a lot of greenhouse gas," says Park.

For every 110 grams of protein produced, beef rice is estimated to release less than 6.27 kilograms (KG) of CO2, while beef releases nearly 50 kg. The cost is also significantly different: the beef rice could cost about $2.23 per kg, while beef costs around $14.88 kg. And according to UN data, livestock farming is responsible for 6.2 billion metric tons of CO2 entering the atmosphere each year.

The researchers found that their rice has 8% more protein and 7% more fat than regular rice. The rice was also firmer and brittler, and carried a "beef and almond-related" odor.

"When cooked, the rice retains its traditional appearance but carries a unique blend of aromas, including a slight nuttiness and umami which are characteristic of meat," said Hong. "While it does not exactly replicate the taste of beef, it offers a pleasant and novel flavor experience."

"We tried it with various accompaniments and it pairs well with a range of dishes," he added.

While the beef rice has a low food safety risk and is relatively easy to process, the researchers want to find a way to increase the nutritional value in the rice before it can be brought to the market.

"I didn't expect the cells to grow so well in the rice," says Park. "Now I see a world of possibilities for this grain-based hybrid food. It could one day serve as food relief for famine, military ration, or even space food."

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US Energy Industry Leaking Methane Responsible for $9.3 Billion Worth of Climate Damage

Over the course of just two decades, methane traps about 80 times more heat than carbon dioxide (CO2) but lasts in the atmosphere for about a decade instead of hundreds of years like CO2, the US EPA says.

A recent study found that about 3% of US gas produced is wasted and released into the air, compared to the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) figures of just 1%. That leakage is also responsible for causing $9.3 billion in yearly climate damage, the study calculated, and amounts to 6.2 million tons per hour in leaks during the day alone.

According to the study's lead author, the escaped emissions were produced throughout oil and gas production and delivery systems, beginning with gas flaring. Gas flaring is a term for burning off the gas which comes out of the ground while drilling for oil. The World Bank estimated that in 2021 enough gas flaring would have been enough to power the whole of sub-Saharan Africa.

But there were also substantial leaks throughout the rest of the system, including tanks, compressors and pipelines, the lead author added.

The issue is also happening across the world. In 2023, large methane emissions events around the world grew 50% compared to the previous year—all based on satellite detection. And more than 5 million metric tons were found in major fossil fuel leaks according to a Global Methane Tracker 2024 report released on Wednesday by the International Energy Agency.

The report found that overall, world methane emissions rose slightly in 2023 to 120 million metric tons.

"This is really an opportunity to cut emissions quite rapidly with targeted efforts at these highest-emitting sites," said Evan Sherwin, an energy and policy analyst at the US Department of Energy's Lawrence Berkeley National Lab and a lead author of the study which was published in the journal Nature. "If we can get this roughly 1% of sites under control, then we're halfway there because that's about half of the emissions in most cases."

Sherwin said the 3% leak figure they found in their study is the average for just six regions looked at in the US and is not the national average, which still needs to be calculated.

Studies like these are relying more on satellites to measure the amount of methane released rather than trusting numbers provided by company estimates. Earlier this month the Environmental Defense Fund, an environmental organization, launched the MethaneSAT observation satellite into orbit to monitor methane emissions.

According to Sherwin, the biggest leaks were found in the Permian basin of Texas and New Mexico.

"It's a region of rapid growth, primarily driven by oil production," Sherwin said. "So when the drilling happens, both oil and gas comes out, but the main thing that the companies want to sell in most cases was the oil. And there wasn't enough pipeline capacity to take the gas away."

Rob Jackson, a Stanford University climate scientist not involved in the study, says these miscalculations have been occurring for years.

"For more than a decade, we've been showing that the industry emits far more methane than they or government agencies admit," Jackson said. "This study is capstone evidence. And yet nothing changes."

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Half of US Homes Face Climate Change Threat, Affecting Insurance and Market Value - Study

Last year it was reported that millions of American homeowners faced skyrocketing home insurance rates with some insurers even withdrawing coverage altogether, as more homes face climate change threats like wildfires and floods.

A recent study has found that nearly half (44.8%) of all US homes are threatened by extreme weather conditions brought on by the impacts of climate change. Roughly $22 trillion worth of residential properties are at risk of “severe or extreme damage” from flooding, high winds, wildfires, heat or poor air quality, according to a report from Realtor.com.

Such impacts will have an effect on home prices, will drive up insurance costs and even destabilize the broader housing market.

"These natural disasters can destroy homes and communities," Realtor.com said in its report. "Even properties that aren't directly affected by climate risks are being affected by higher insurance premiums—threatening potential sales and making homeownership increasingly more expensive."

This report follows one from last year in which an analysis from the non-profit First Street Foundation found that a growing risk of wildfire makes some real estate property in California essentially “uninsurable”. The analysis also found some US states that are more inland such as Kentucky, South Dakota and West Virginia are facing higher insurance costs due to an increase in extreme weather damage caused by climate change.

"You're talking about getting a letter in the mail that says somewhere between 60%, and as high as mid-80%, increases for policies," Matthew Eby, the CEO of First Street, said last year. "That is crippling. Absolutely crippling. And so those homes are not, from an investment scenario, something that you would invest in."

The report from Realtor used data from First Street to estimate the number of homes facing potential climate damage, and focused its study on the 100 largest cities.

Therefore, the report also found: 55% of homes, worth $3 trillion, face a severe or extreme risk from wildfires with more than a third (39%) of these properties in California. Nearly 7% of homes, worth $3.4 trillion are at a high risk of flooding and New Orleans holds the largest share of these homes. At least 9% of homes, worth $6.6 billion, face severe or extreme risks because of declining air quality.

The report also found that over the next 30 years, 18% of homes will be at risk of damage from hurricane-strength winds, and that homeowners in 19 states and Washington, DC are now being asked to carry additional hurricane-related policies.

A report from this past December released by First Street Foundation also found that about 3.2 million Americans moved due to an increasing risk of flooding. But at the same time, some of those areas also saw an increase in migration in the past two decades.

The insurance industry has previously said that the frequency and severity of claims are on the rise, and it is making those companies more aware of where they would prefer to offer coverage and will increase insurance premiums.

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If an insurance company decides to drop a property, that home's value could decline by 19% to 40%.

"The changes that we're already seeing over these past two decades are already beginning to impact almost every major sector of our society," Jay Banner, a climate scientist and director of the Environmental Science Institute at the University of Texas at Austin, said Wednesday.

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Record Ocean Heat Over the Last Year Worries Scientists as They Seek Answers

If ocean temperatures continue to surge the planet will see the continuation of events experienced in 2023 such as: coral bleaching, more intense and fast-developing hurricanes, an increase in coastal temperatures and heavy rainstorms.

A recent report found that everyday for the last 12 months the world's sea surface temperatures have broken records. Today, the average sea surface temperatures are about 1.25 degrees Fahrenheit higher than they were from 1982 to 2011, according to the University of Maine's Climate Reanalyzer.

Temperatures reached nearly 21 degrees Celsius in mid-March of last year. On Sunday, that record was broken once again when temperatures climbed to 21.2 degrees Celsius. At the same time in 1985, temperatures rested at 20.1 degrees Celsius. Water is more able to absorb and store heat than air does. However, scientists had not predicted that the seas would warm this much in such a short period of time.

Europe's Copernicus satellite monitoring programme also found that sea surface temperatures in February were hotter than any month in history and broke records set last August.

"I pray we're having a once-in-a-lifetime year of hot sea surface temperatures, but I do fear there may be something else going on that is causing a long-term change in sea surface temperatures we hadn't predicted," said John Abraham, a professor at the University of St. Thomas who studies ocean temperatures. "All bets are off now, this is something that is so unusual, it's challenging our past expectations."

Our planet's waters are also responsible for moderating and absorbing more than 90% of human-caused global warming. In 2023 the world's oceans absorbed more heat than in any other year since records began.

While human-caused climate change is responsible in part for this warming event, it isn't the only factor, researchers say. Climate models have predicted a steady rise in sea surface temperatures, but none that have seen a rise this sharp. Natural climate patterns like El Niño and La Niña have also had an effect on ocean surface temperatures.

El Niño is reaching its end, though, so researchers have hypothesized other factors that could be affecting these rising temperatures. Celeste Saulo, the World Meteorological Organization's secretary general said that El Niño contributed to making 2023 the warmest year on record, though the primary cause was emissions from fossil fuels.

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"What we see now driving high temperatures is something in addition to El Niño and can't be explained by the arguments being given six months ago or 12 months ago," Abraham said. "Sea surface temperatures are higher elsewhere and very far from El Niño locations."
The National Weather Service's Climate Prediction center has also said that there is a 62% change of La Niña developing in late spring. La Niña typically suppresses hurricane activity in the central and eastern Pacific basins, and enhances it in the Atlantic basin, the service explains.
Brain McNoldy, a senior research associate at the University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine, Atmospheric, and Earth Science, said that the weakening of trade winds in the North Atlantic could also play a role in the heat. These trade winds are responsible for blowing dust from Africa's Sahara Desert toward North America and that dust can help absorb the sun's energy over the Atlantic Ocean, saving it from the intense heat.
"We're kind of all just observing something strange happening," said McNoldy. "At some point, someone will come up with an answer, but I haven't seen that answer yet."

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'Dove to Hawk': What Influenced Macron to Change Stance on Ukraine - Report

Recently, the French president alarmed Europe when he announced that ground operations in Ukraine might be required "at some point", just days after he met with German and Polish leaders.
On Saturday, a UK news website published a report on French President Emmanual Macron's changed stance regarding Russia and Kiev. The shift has been a sharp one for Macron, who just two years ago said the West should not "humiliate" Moscow, and should instead try and stay open to finding a diplomatic solution.
"We must not humiliate Russia so that the day when the fighting stops we can build an exit ramp through diplomatic means," Macron said in an interview in June of 2022.
But the 46-year-old president has changed his tune drastically since then. Macron, who has always had a "fondness for disruptive grandstanding" the report writes, is now faced with an awkward struggle for power with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz who has maintained a more reserved stance compared to his French counterpart.
On Friday, Germany, France and Poland swore to provide more weapons for Ukraine in a shakily gathered summit of the "Weimar Triangle". But just a day later, the French president said he will ask Russia to observe a cease-fire in Ukraine during this summer's Olympic Games in Paris as a "message of peace".
The report spoke to "numerous sources" in the Elysee and the Bundestag regarding Macron's change from "dove to hawk". The insiders revealed that Macron is desperate to be viewed as a dominant power both domestically and internationally.
For instance, Germany has said repeatedly that France is not supplying enough weapons to Ukraine. In response, Macron gestured toward Germany's paltry offer of helmets to Kiev two years ago, and told Scholz to donate Germany's Taurus missiles to Ukraine after France

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donated their long-range Scalp missiles. Then on Wednesday, Scholz noted that Germany has sent €7 billion in aid to Ukraine this year, compared to France's €3 billion.
But Berlin has responded by pointing out that they do not have nuclear weapons like France does, and fears retaliation from Russia.
Still, there are an estimated 20 nuclear weapons stationed at Büchel Air Base in Germany, despite Germany not really "owning" the nuclear weapons. German warplanes are also equipped to launch the US nuclear weapons that are stationed there. However, the use of those weapons are controlled by the US.
Germany has reportedly considered breaking free from US nuclear dependence, should former President Donald Trump win this year's US presidential election.
And according to Saturday's report, Germany is now spearheading a European anti-missile shield project using US and Israeli technology, but France has refused to join the project even though Macron is committed to the idea of building the EU's "strategic autonomy" independent of the US.
And in a way, Macron sees such an act as overstepping his role as the "strategic leader" in Europe, while Germany's role was to be an "economic leader".
"The frontiers are now blurred and there are attempts to intrude into each other's domain," said the source. And as a result, Macron is now using grandstanding gestures—such as the rogue suggestion to put boots on the ground of Kiev—as a way to reclaim his role as a strategic leader in Europe.
The sources add that Macron reportedly gave Scholz a warning two days before he made the inflammatory remark, but that did not prevent Scholz from feigning shock at the suggestion. The German chancellor, and other Western leaders, rejected the reckless comment.
"He has a taste for transgression," said a French source close to the president. "There's a price to pay for spelling out his vision, but he always hopes that the others will end up following him and that history will end up proving him right."
At the same time, Macron is also trying to push back his political competitors at home; Marine Le Pen's National Rally is on course to utterly defeat Macron's centrists in the European Parliament election in June. It is unclear what Le Pen's current views of Russian President Vladimir Putin are today, but in the past it has been reported that she has long been an admirer and defender of the Russian president.

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Iceland's Volcano Erupts With Little Warning

Researchers are saying this weekend's eruption is the most powerful to have occurred thus far.
On Saturday, Iceland's Blue Lagoon and the nearby town of Grindavik were evacuated following a volcanic eruption in Reykjanes Peninsula. Authorities are saying the eruption is the most powerful of seven that have occurred on Reykjanes Peninsula since 2021, including four since December.

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The Iceland Meteorological Office (IMO) said the eruption began with little notice. The first warning to Iceland's Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management on an oncoming eruption was received at 7:43 PM local time, according to a report, and the beginning of the eruption was confirmed by web cameras about 40 minutes later, just before 8:30 PM local time.

The eruption occurred just a few miles north-east of Grindavik, and about 30 miles south-west of Reykjavik, Iceland's capital. But the town's 3,800 inhabitants had already been evacuated in December after the first eruption, and barely 100 had returned since.

The eruption has threatened local infrastructure and prompted authorities to declare a state of emergency. Scientists have been warning for weeks that the volcano would likely erupt again after reports found magma beginning to pool underground.

The eruption sent fountains of lava shooting into the air and prompted the evacuation of the Blue Lagoon—a geothermal spa that is one of Iceland's most popular tourist and travel destinations—and Grindavik. The eruption, which came from a nearly two-mile-long crevice, also occurred near the Svartsengi Power Plant.

Hjordis Gudmundsdottir, a spokeswoman for the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management, told reporters on Sunday morning that the eruption posed a risk to two pipes that carry hot water from the geothermal power plant to homes on the peninsula.

Defensive barriers that were built around the fishing town of Grindavik have reportedly held their place before the lava, and were helping to redirect lava flow away from other key infrastructure.

Blue Lagoon officials said the eruption site is a "safe distance" from the popular tourist spot, but added that it will remain closed through Tuesday, at the very least.

"We will continue to closely follow the guidelines and recommendations of the authorities, working collaboratively with them to monitor the progression of events," Blue Lagoon said on its website. "This commitment aligns with our unwavering dedication to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of our valued guests and staff."

Luckily, the lava has not moved very much since Sunday morning, and was last reported to be about 200 meters from the peninsula's power plant pipes. The plant was also evacuated and dykes were built around it to protect it. Scientists added that seismic activity had decreased since the eruption began.

But meteorologists are also concerned that if the lava continues to flow southward, it could make contact with the North Atlantic Ocean. The contact between the lava—which is alkaline—and water could create small explosions and dangerous gasses like chlorine fumes.

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SCOTUS to Weigh Free Speech Case Regarding Social Media 'Misinformation'

The SCOTUS is expected to reach a decision in both cases by the end of June.

On Monday, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) will decide whether or not the government disobeyed the constitutional right to free speech when they pressured social media platforms to take down content they labeled as misinformation. The case stems primarily from

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the Biden administration's efforts to remove misinformation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the US 2020 presidential election, according to a recent report.

SCOTUS is essentially tasked with deciding if the First Amendment has limits regarding what is written online and on social media platforms.

"The key free speech issue is how far can the government go in verbally arm-twisting private speech intermediaries to remove speech before that constitutes a First Amendment violation or state action," said Clay Calvert, a law professor at the University of Florida.

SCOTUS will be looking at two cases regarding free speech rights. In Murthy v. Missouri, the social media case, a suit was brought by five social media users and the Republican attorney generals of Missouri and Louisiana.

"By silencing speakers and entire viewpoints across social-media platforms, defendants systematically injure plaintiffs' ability to participate in free online discourse," state officials from Louisiana and Missouri wrote.

In their complaint, the plaintiffs claim that they were censored on social media regarding several topics including: a story about Hunter Biden's laptop before the 2020 election; the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic; the efficiency of measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19; and the integrity of the US 2020 election.

A federal district judge in Louisiana found that seven groups of Biden administration officials violated the First Amendment because they "coerced" or "significantly encouraged" changing social media platforms' content-moderation decisions.

The Biden administration argued that the social media users and states lack legal standing in their case, but said officials must be free "to inform, to persuade, and to criticize", according to filings.

"The court imposed unprecedented limits on the ability of the president's closest aides to speak about matters of public concern, on the FBI's ability to address threats to the nation's security, and on CDC's ability to relay public-health information," Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar, who represents the government before SCOTUS, said.

SCOTUS will also hear an appeal from the National Rifle Association (NRA) over comments made by Maria Vullo, a former New York State official, after she urged insurance companies and banks to abandon their relationship with gun-promoting groups after a school shooting in Parkland, Florida. The group says that Vullo, who served as the former New York State Department of Financial Services superintendent, violated the group's First Amendment rights. Vullo reportedly sent out "guidance letters" to businesses and in a press statement called on banks and insurance companies operating in New York to consider the "reputational risks" in doing business with the NRA or other gun groups.

"In both cases, the government doesn't actually have the power to regulate speech or to decide whether the NRA can access banking institutions or not," said Will Duffield, a policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, adding that "the government is seemingly gaining, gathering, usurping new powers by leaning on these intermediaries in order to do things that it isn't authorized to do itself."

David Greene, the civil liberties director at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, said US officials will not lose their ability to combat misinformation or disinformation, but adds that they do have a responsibility to not appear as coercive or forceful.

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"There are two main issues, and that is what do courts look at to determine whether and at what point a government crosses the line from voicing its opinion about how a social media platform should treat a specific post to unconstitutionally coercing the censorship, the negative moderation of that post," he said.
"There's no disagreement that there is a point at which it becomes unconstitutional, but what the parties disagree on is what is that line and what is the appropriate analysis for setting that line, what factors to consider?
On Friday, SCOTUS decided that government officials can sometimes be sued under the Constitution's First Amendment for blocking critics on social media.

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Democrats Signal Disagreement With Netanyahu, But Will Change Follow?

Observers see recent statements by Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer as a signal of US President Joe Biden's frustration with the Israeli prime minister.
US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) signaled a change in tone towards Israel on Thursday, suggesting the Biden administration is prepared to challenge the country's longtime Prime Minister who it sees as a major political liability.
"The fourth major obstacle to peace is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has all too frequently bowed to the demands of extremists like ministers [Bezalel] Smotrich and [Itamar] Ben-Gvir and the settlers in the West Bank," said Schumer, the highest-ranking Jewish elected official in the United States.
"If Prime Minister Netanyahu's current coalition remains in power after the war begins to wind down and continues to pursue dangerous and inflammatory policies that test existing US standards for assistance, then the United States will have no choice but to play a more active role in shaping Israeli policy by using our leverage to change the present course," he added.
The uncharacteristically blunt message demonstrates the White House is willing to wade into the domestic politics of an ally it provides with billions of dollars of aid per year, said Michael Maloof, a former senior security policy analyst in the US Office of the Secretary of Defense. The author weighed in on Schumer's comments on Friday on Sputnik's Fault Lines program.
"I think it's a sign that policy is definitely changing not only for this administration, but also of the flavor of dislike of what is going on over there in the United States Congress," said Maloof, who served in the US Department of Defense for almost 30 years. "If Schumer comes out – being Jewish, as he says, and a major supporter of Israel – if he's laying that gauntlet down, I think that is a signal."
Maloof also noted the significance of Biden's recent White House meeting with Israeli politician Benny Gantz. Although Gantz is currently a member of Netanyahu's emergency war cabinet, the retired army general has challenged the Prime Minister's Likud Party in previous elections and is seen as a likely political opponent the next time Israelis go to the polls.
"That was a signal, the fact that the administration would allow that, and it was a total disregard of what Netanyahu wanted," said the retired defense department analyst. "I think that that's a

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very serious signal as well… the fact that this administration accepted Gantz was a further signal of, and an indication of concerns about policy direction."

However, Maloof speculated that the primary difference between Gantz and Netanyahu is one of tone. Observers believe Gantz would pursue a similarly bellicose policy with regard to Palestinians in Gaza and Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon. But Gantz would engage more cooperatively with the Biden administration, Maloof believes – a crucial concern as the US president bleeds support from younger voters and Arab Americans while campaigning for reelection this fall.

"They want someone who – he's probably not all that much different – but a little more moderate in tone and isn't so hateful toward the Palestinians, it seems, as Netanyahu," he said, noting that American voters are "disturbed" by the "ethnic cleansing" occurring in the besieged Gaza Strip. Over 30,000 Palestinians have been killed amidst Israel's military operation in Gaza, with some 70% estimated to be women and children.

Human rights groups have warned of widespread famine in the enclave as reports emerge of young children dying of starvation as Israel enforces a tight blockade.

"The Biden administration seems to be at a crossroads," noted Maloof, although he said the US president would need to be willing to consider withholding military aid to Israel to succeed in changing the country's policy.

"If he [Schumer] can be successful in cutting off the funding, that's going to be the key from the congressional standpoint, [and] then the administration doesn't have to take the hit for it," he said. "But something's got to be done and, as we approach the elections even closer, I think that's why you're seeing Schumer speaking out now."

"We see overkill in a dramatic way, in the way that they have absolutely leveled and carpet-bombed Gaza," concluded the analyst.

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Effort to Ban TikTok Shows Bipartisan Fear of China, Influence of Zionist Lobby?

Legislation against the social media app gives lie to US mantras of free expression and free competition, according to one analyst.

The last several years have seen increasing debate throughout the Western world over the role of social media.

The controversy arguably began in earnest in 2016, when the twin earthquakes of Brexit and the election of US President Donald Trump shocked the political establishment. Debates over alleged foreign interference online eventually gave way to similar discourse about purported disinformation surrounding the Covid-19 vaccine.

The Western ruling class has utilized such controversies to attempt to reify establishment control over political narratives in an age of mass communication. Now Washington's move to ban or force the sale of the video sharing app TikTok demonstrates the fragility of modern US imperialism, according to author and historian Gerald Horne. Horne, a professor of history at the

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University of Houston in Texas, broke down the recent development during a discussion on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program on Friday.

"This crisis involving TikTok illuminates and illustrates a number of troubling trends for US imperialism," said the researcher. "Number one, it reflects the hysteria about the People's Republic of China and its growing role in the political economy of planet Earth." Horne noted China's leading role in the production of solar panels and electric vehicles as companies like BYD increasingly dominate global EV sales.

"This is a reflection [of] the fact that China developed more engineers than the United States by several orders of magnitude," he claimed. "It also represents the fact that the United States is finding it difficult to compete with China. And so, therefore, it's going to basically try to kneecap China."

Political efforts to take action against TikTok have proven particularly controversial given the emphasis placed on freedom of expression in the United States. The First Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees freedom of speech, a right cherished by millions of Americans.

"Our audience should recognize that those mantras are only relevant when US imperialism is in the driver seat, unchallenged," said Horne. "It reflects a kind of hysteria, and it also reflects how the so-called Anglo-American axis sees capitalism and imperialism as a one-way street. That is to say, it's for them and their corporate comrades to dominate. But with regard to the street running in the other direction, not so much."

The author claimed the approach is ultimately unsustainable and prevents US companies from effectively competing with China. For years Elon Musk's Tesla, Inc. has promised the automaker will eventually release a low-cost mass market electric vehicle. But the cheap EV has remained elusive as US legislation shields Musk and other automakers from competition in the form of China's cheap cars.

Discussion then turned to the foreign policy implications of the US' proposed TikTok legislation. Talk of banning TikTok emerged previously in 2020, when former President Trump sought to force the sale of the Chinese-owned app. The controversy resulted in significant concessions, including promises by parent company ByteDance to store user data in the United States and submit its algorithm and moderation practices to regular screening by the US technology company Oracle.

Hamas' October 7 attack and Israel's response have since reshuffled the United States' foreign policy prerogatives. In recent days a recording of the pro-Israel Anti-Defamation League's director Jonathan Greenblatt reemerged in which the CEO lamented TikTok's alleged influence in turning young Americans against Israel. Observers have speculated about the role of the Zionist lobby in pushing for the app to be banned.

Horne acknowledged the connection but claimed the controversy signals something much broader.

"By seeking to crack down on TikTok, Washington is looking at future confrontations with China, future confrontations with regard to who is in ultimate control of the means of communication," said the professor. "But what Washington should recognize is that, once again, they're setting an ominous precedent because if TikTok can be driven out of the US market, why can't Tesla be driven out of the Chinese market? And, of course, I could go down the list in terms of Starbucks, Microsoft and Apple and all the rest that are heavily dependent upon the Chinese market."

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“Obviously it seems that Washington feels that it has enough military muscle to impose a double standard, even on the world's second-largest economy,” Horne observed. “I dare say that that is euphemistically a misplaced optimism.”
Horne concluded that recent developments demonstrate “the deteriorating position of US imperialism,” which is especially threatened as the country’s ally Israel is discredited on the world stage.
“This will cause a severe adjustment for US imperialism, which has relied upon this unsinkable aircraft carrier in West Asia to carry out its diabolical schemes,” he claimed.

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Next Proxy War: US Positions Special Forces One Mile from Chinese Mainland

The United States is stoking tensions with China over Taiwan, which is internationally-recognized as a province of the People’s Republic of China.
With this fall’s presidential election fast approaching, President Joe Biden is presiding over two major US-backed wars.
In the Donbass, the United States supports Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in an increasingly quixotic proxy conflict against one of the world’s foremost military powers. In occupied Gaza, the US provides limitless military aid as Israel engages in an operation against mostly unarmed Palestinians that has been deemed plausibly genocidal by the International Court of Justice.
One might assume that two unpopular wars are enough for any president. Not so, say analysts Steve Poikonen and Jim Kavanagh, who joined Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program on Friday to discuss Biden’s recent act of saber rattling thousands of miles away from the United States.
“‘Taiwan confirms presence of US special forces,’” said host Garland Nixon, reading the headline of a story reported by RT. “‘US special forces are stationed on some of Taiwan's outlying islands.' Well, one of the groups of islands is called the Kinmen Islands – they're a little over a mile from the Chinese [mainland] shore – as the US runs right up to Russia's border, as there's a disaster in the Middle East.”
“These lunatics in the Biden administration are doubling down, tripling down,” he claimed. “If there isn't enough trouble, they're coming right up to China's border and looking for trouble.”
“Taiwan is a province of the People's Republic of China,” noted Kavanagh, who maintains a substack site at thepolemicist.net. “That is the stance of the international [community], of the UN, it's the stance – the official stance – of the United States government… This is as if China put a permanent presence of Chinese special forces troops on Long Island. I mean, this is crazy.”
“If they don't think the Chinese are going to be PO'd about this, I mean, anybody would be,” he added. “They are de-facto trying to create, posit and position Taiwan as an independent country, and that is against the entire one-China policy that's supposed to have been in place since 1972 when Nixon went to China.”

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Former President Richard Nixon's engagement with the People's Republic of China brought an end to decades of US-led embargo on the country. Gradually, other countries warmed to the Communist-led government as well as international organizations recognized the PRC instead of breakaway leadership in Taiwan. China emerged as a major economic power as Western countries moved manufacturing there to take advantage of cheap labor costs.

But emerging Chinese influence – the Asian country now leads the world in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) – has startled the United States. US relations with China have deteriorated in the years since former US President Barack Obama announced a "pivot to Asia" in an attempt to out-compete Beijing. More recently, observers worry war will break out as the United States seeks to guard its global hegemonic status.

"This is putting the American people on a trajectory towards war with China, and they [the Biden administration] seem to want it," warned Kavanagh. "What are they going to get from it? Really, think for 10 seconds about it. It's going to be a disaster for everybody."

Meanwhile, Poikonen noted recent reports that a US Army restructuringwill re-position America's armed forces to fight a large-scale conflict in the Eastern Hemisphere. The effort will create at least three new task forces dedicated to combat in the Pacific region.

News of the restructuring follows a $75 million US weapons package for authorities in Taiwan that will allow the island's armed forces to integrate with foreign military technology.

"The level of delusion that you have to be operating under or the misplaced loyalty you're putting into your drone programs and things of that nature – it is counterintuitive to anything other than a nationwide suicide mission," said Poikonen.

"We've known that there are US soldiers in Taiwan since they talked about sending training officers," he added. "That's what they originally said about Vietnam. 'Oh, we're just sending some guys over to do a little bit of training. It's okay, they're going to be in a supervisory role, or an advisory capacity.' That's how all of these conflicts usually start."

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GOP Blasts Biden Spending on Climate Change at Border Amid Record Illegal Immigration

Efforts to pass federal immigration reform remain stalled as Republicans reject compromise legislation negotiated in the Senate.

A Biden administration effort to modernize US ports of entry is drawing criticism from Republicans who argue the money would be better spent on stemming undocumented immigration at the country's southern border.

The plan was announced on Thursday on the website of the US federal government's General Services Administration. $1 billion in funds allocated through the 2022 passage of the Inflation Reduction act will be spent to retrofit facilities at land crossings on the US border with Mexico and Canada. Among the measures taken are the conversion of buildings to run on clean power sources and efforts to improve energy efficiency.

But Republican lawmakers criticized the announcement, calling it "a slap in the face to Americans" as illegal border crossings surge to unprecedented levels.

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"As usual, the Biden administration is refusing to address a problem of their own making," said Bruce Westerman (R-AR), the chair of the House Natural Resources Committee. "Instead, they're touting a billion-dollar investment in green technology at the border while Biden's border crisis continues to wreak havoc on local communities and federal lands."

Conservative groups suggested the conservationist focus of the efforts is undermined by the environmental damage caused by migrant caravans, which leave behind trash and waste. "The impacts are health risks to visitors, fouling of wildlife waters, and compromising the aesthetics of [wildlife refuges]," read a report from the US Fish and Wildlife Service entitled "The Impacts of Illegal Immigration on Public Lands."

"In addition to endangering those millions of people by encouraging them to travel at the hands of cartels, these journeys across Central America to the US southern border are devastating to croplands and wildlife habitat along the way," said James Massa, chair of the conservative anti-immigration group NumbersUSA.

Some 302,000 migrants were encountered at the United States' southern border in December, a record number. It briefly appeared a violent confrontation between state and federal security officers might ensue amidst disagreements on border enforcement between the Biden administration and Texas Governor Greg Abbott. Abbott is attempting to move forward on state-level enforcement efforts as federal immigration reform legislation has stalled.

Immigration has emerged as a highly contentious political issue in the United States. Various US industries including hospitality, construction, and agriculture frequently employ large numbers of undocumented immigrants. Business interests' reliance on the demographic as a source of cheap labor led former US President Ronald Reagan to enact an amnesty policy for illegal migrants in 1986.

Former US President George W. Bush also attempted to pass an overhaul of US immigration policy in the 2000s that would've created a temporary "guest worker" program. But many Republicans have become fiercely opposed to undocumented immigration in recent years. High-profile cases, such as the suspected killing of a nursing student in Georgia by an undocumented Venezuelan migrant, have created fodder for conservative lawmakers and media personalities alleging the dangers of uncontrolled immigration.

Studies have found undocumented immigrants in the US commit crimes at lower rates than the general population. But the strain on social services caused by large numbers of migrants has caused even some Democrats, such as New York City Mayor Eric Adams, to press for legislative reform.

Critics blame US foreign and economic policy for what's often characterized as a "crisis" at the country's southern border. Undocumented immigration from Mexico surged in the 1990s after the passage of the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA). Hundreds of thousands of family farmers there were forced out of business as barriers against cheap product from US agribusiness were lifted.

The neoliberal economic policy was eventually extended to Central America as well with the passage of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in 2004. Immigrants from Central American countries make up the bulk of recent undocumented migration to the United States.

Observers say the United States' decades-long policy of coups and political interference south of the border has broadly destabilized many countries, leading to a surge in crime and drug

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trafficking. Thousands of people were killed or tortured during a Cold War campaign of political subversion throughout Latin America known as Operation Condor.

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On Thin Ice: US Falling Behind Russia in Mobility in Arctic Region

A yawning gap has opened up between Russia and the United States' capability to operate north of the Arctic Circle.

As the United States' armed forces restructure to wage large-scale combat against adversaries like Russia and China, US lawmakers are pressing for renewed attention to an often-overlooked region of the world.

Air Force General Gregory Guillot, who heads up the US armed forces' Northern Command, warned the United States is falling perilously behind Russia in its number of icebreaker ships required to ensure mobility in frozen waters at northern latitudes.

Only one heavy icebreaker ship remains available for the US to use in the Arctic, noted Guillot, while Russia has about 40. Guillot made the revelation at a congressional hearing of the US Committee on Armed Services this week.

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

Focus has shifted to the Arctic as tensions escalate with Russia amid the US-backed Ukraine proxy war. Russia has the longest Arctic coastline of any country in the world, but the United States also shares a significant border with the Arctic Ocean in the state of Alaska.

About 2 million Russian citizens live north of the Arctic Circle, and the country has pursued shipping and fishing in the region for centuries. In recent years Russia has expanded its security presence in the Arctic as climate change has led to a melting of sea ice, exposing the country's northern coastline.

Speculation has emerged the Arctic could represent a major theater of war in future conflicts. But the US would need to significantly expand its fleet of icebreaker ships to compete in the frigid region.

"We need to make sure that we are trying to close a very very significant icebreaker gap," said Alaska Senator Dan Sullivan when the issue came to the attention of US lawmakers last fall. "Even China's icebreaker capacity is on pace to surpass ours in 2025, and they are not even an Arctic nation."

Icebreaker ships are designed with a special reinforced shape and increased power to enable them to pierce through polar sea ice, opening up routes for more traditional vessels. The US' lone heavy icebreaker ship, the Coast Guard's 13,000-ton Polar Star, was commissioned nearly 50 years ago.

The Coast Guard relies on the Polar Star and the USCGC Healy, a medium icebreaker, to open up routes in the Arctic. The Polar Star's sister ship, dubbed the Polar Sea, has been out of commission since 2010 due to the failure of five of its six diesel engines.

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Meanwhile, Russia operates nearly a dozen heavy nuclear-powered icebreaker ships. Russia is so far the only country to operate nuclear-powered icebreakers. The Arktika and Sibir, which both run on nuclear power, are classified as the most powerful icebreaker ships in the world which ensure the safety of navigation in the Russian sector of the Arctic Ocean and along the Northern Sea Route.
The Northern Sea Route falls inside Russia's exclusive economic zone and is set to factor into Russia's economic plans in the future. The Northern Sea Route enables shipments to reach their destination quicker than if they traveled through the Suez Canal Route.
The US Coast Guard has requested increased funds to focus on the Arctic region for over 20 years but Congressional action has been repeatedly delayed.
Although Western countries feared an invasion by the Soviet Union for decades during the Cold War, it was actually the United States that landed troops on Russian soil. The American Expeditionary Force, North Russia, popularly known as the Polar Bear Expedition, sent thousands of US Army soldiers to the northern Russian city of Arkhangelsk to fight the Red Army in 1918. Troops were also sent to Vladivostok as part of the Siberian intervention.
Allied forces remained in Russia to offer support to the White Army until its collapse in 1925.

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Native American Lawsuit in New York Sheds Light on Dark Aspect of US History

What is the legacy from which the United States draws its certainty in the righteousness of American exceptionalism?
“The doctrine of discovery refers to a principle in public international law under which, when a nation ‘discovers’ land, it directly acquires rights on that land,” according to a definition offered by Cornell Law School’s Legal Information Institute. “This doctrine arose when the European nations discovered non-European lands, and therefore acquired special rights.”
“More broadly, the doctrine of discovery can be described as an international law doctrine giving authorization to explorers to claim terra nullius [‘uninhabited’ land]... in the name of their sovereign when the land was not populated by Christians.”
It’s a theory that’s offensive to most modern ears – suggesting settlers have a right to violently confiscate territory in the name of religion – and it was acknowledged as such last year when the Catholic Church officially repudiated it. But the doctrine of discovery was cited by the United States’ highest legal authority as recently as 2005, when the US Supreme Court ruled against the indigenous Oneida Nation in a majority opinion authored by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.
The Oneida people, the justice claimed, had no special rights in land they had inhabited for thousands of years before descendents of Europeans like Ginsberg crossed the Atlantic.
New York State’s Onondaga Nation had filed a similar lawsuit just days before seeking compensation for territory they claimed their ancestors had been forced to sell against their will.
The Onondaga have since reconsidered their strategy, taking their claim to the supranational Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. US media examined their story this week as the commission is expected to rule on the Onondaga’s claim in the coming months.

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“If we don’t admit that those things have happened, how do we move forward together?” asked Joe Heath, a lawyer for the Onondaga people. “The problem is that all of the land in New York, in the United States, is stolen Indian land.”

Heath’s observation raises a thorny issue. The US, for a time considered the world’s lone superpower after the Cold War drew to a close, has increasingly fashioned itself as a global arbiter and enforcer of morality. Ending genocide, toppling dictators, spreading democracy, and defeating communism are just some of the reasons offered by the United States to justify bloody interventions around the globe.

But academics often dispute the validity of America’s self-perception as an authority on human rights, noting the country is unique among others as an historic settler colonial regime.

“Settler colonialism is a form of colonization where a settler society entirely or partially replaces an indigenous people on their land,” explains the website Visualizing Palestine. Many countries trace their history back centuries or even millenia, recognizing a legacy of many historical inhabitants. Others continue a process of deliberately stamping out native influence, appropriating indigenous lands and killing their inhabitants.

The United States, Australia, Northern Ireland, and Israel are considered some of the most prominent modern-day settler colonial territories.

Some countries have made efforts to rectify the injustices of historical settler colonialism. Europe has abandoned its holdings on the African continent since the mid-twentieth century, and South Africa has restored the rights of its native population since the fall of apartheid. In Bolivia, a cabinet-level Ministry of Decolonization examines how to protect and preserve indigenous art, lifestyles, and culture.

The United States has resisted calls to view its land’s pre-colonial inhabitants as equals. For most of its citizens, American history begins with the arrival of European explorers on the continent in 1492. Indigenous people have little to no influence over the country’s modern-day legal, political, and social systems. Their decimation, fueled by massacres, enslavement, and forced removals, represents one of the most obvious historical examples of genocide according to Raphael Lemkin, the man who coined the term.

Settler colonialism, scholars stress, is a process. It’s not a single act of violence or subjugation, but an ongoing event in which indigenous people are continually suppressed.

“The [New] York people have got almost all of our Country and for a very trifle,” observed Onondaga chiefs in 1794, already recognizing the process they were being subjected to. One can trace the animating principle behind the theft of Onondagan land right up to the present day, with Ginsberg’s opinion demonstrating the United States’ contempt for the rights and legacy of indigenous people.

Now, Onondagan land is reduced to a tract of just 11 square miles. Their historical territory is despoiled by some 24 Superfund sites where the US federal government still works to address large-scale industrial pollution. The contamination is such that the Onondaga can no longer fish in their rivers and streams.

“Defending American exceptionalism should always be above politics,” declared then presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton in 2016. And so it has been. From the legacy of African slavery, Manifest Destiny, Jim Crow and the Monroe Doctrine right up to American exceptionalism and the dictates of foreign policy neoconservatives, the United States has always insisted on enforcing its will on others.

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Should a country with such history be allowed to lecture the world? Should their junior partners in the former European colonial empires be seen as much better? The modern struggle for a multipolar worldpromises to finally answer that question in favor of the oppressed.

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Feeling Strain of War, Israel Considers Conscripting Ultra-Orthodox Population

Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel have long been exempted from military service. That policy may change as Israeli society is increasingly strained by a months-long operation in Gaza.
"With each passing day, it becomes increasingly clear that we will need a new reality in Israel," declared the Israel Democracy Institute in a recent report. "It is time for a new, more just social contract."
The remedy proposed by the think tank was not to extend rights to the five million Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, naturally, but to require military service from the country's ultra-Orthodox population.
Ultra-Orthodox Jews, known in Israel as Haredim, pride themselves on living what they view as a traditional lifestyle. Isolated in tight-knit communities, they follow a strict interpretation of Judaism and dress in a conservative style contemporaneous with the movement's emergence in 19th century Europe. Young haredim often devote themselves to the study of the Torah at special schools known as yeshivas, sometimes foregoing participation in the workforce as they pursue religious education full-time.
Yeshiva students are legally excused from required military service in Israel, an accommodation that dates back to the founding of the country. At that time the ruling only applied to a few hundred military-age men. But the number has ballooned to around 66,000 amid the rapid growth of the religiously conservative community.
The military exemption has emerged as a major source of tension between ultra-Orthodox Jewish Israelis and other sectors of society.
"The army changes everyone," said ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Nechemia Steinberger, explaining the Haredi community's resistance to military service. "The sad truth is Haredim will not be able to sacrifice the change of their children because their ethos for the past 150 years was 'we do not change.' That's their raison d'etre."
"They see the army as a secular place, as part of the Jewish Zionist state that they don't fully identify with," he said.
That division sometimes leads to physical confrontations between the ultra-Orthodox and more secular Israelis as Haradim protest military service, or even public advertising featuring women and vehicle traffic through their neighborhoods on the Sabbath. On Thursday, thousands of Israelis protested Haredis' military exemption at a large rally in Tel Aviv.
The issue is a conundrum for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Israeli courts have ruled the Haredis' military exemption is discriminatory in recent years, ordering conscription from the community. Netanyahu, who counts many conservative and ultra-Orthodox Jews among his political coalition, has hesitated to comply.

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"If they force us to go to the army, we will move abroad," said ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef this week, promising to resist any conscription effort. "We will buy a ticket. We will go there."

But polling shows most Israelis oppose the community's military exemption, and Netanyahu's political opposition has hammered him over the issue. "There are not enough soldiers," said former Prime Minister Yair Lapid at the Thursday rally in Tel Aviv. "And at the same time there are 66,000 young and healthy members of the Haredi community, at enlistment age, who are not joining."

Israel's economy has been battered in recent months as a portion of the workforce has been called up to fight in Gaza. The prospect of war against Hezbollah in Lebanon threatens to place even more strain on the IDF. Additionally, some half a million Israelis have reportedly fled the country since last October's Hamas attack.

Netanyahu may soon face no choice but to conscript new troops from the ultra-Orthodox community. But in doing so he risks a major social explosion that might further fracture an already intensely-divided Israeli society.

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China Elevates Ties With Angola as BRICS Promises to Pave Way for Multipolar World

The BRICS bloc overtook the G7 in its share of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020, and looks set to continue to grow.

China and Angola announced they were upgrading diplomatic relations to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership on Friday as 2024 looks to be a landmark year for economic development in the Global South.

The announcement was made during a meeting between Angolan President Joao Lourenco and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing. The leaders announced bilateral relations would be elevated to the level of a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership." Cooperation in the areas of trade, infrastructure, agriculture, and green development was discussed.

"Mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Angola… dispels the notion propagated by some Western media of China engaging in 'debt trap diplomacy,'" read an article in Chinese media outlet Global Times. Some US officials have used the term to accuse China of exploiting African countries with burdensome loan packages.

But African leaders have repeatedly expressed respect for China as a major success story of growth and progress in the developing world. "We have observed with interest and admiration China's remarkable economic ascendance," said South African President Cyril Ramaphosa in 2018. "We applaud its achievements in social development, lifting millions of its people out of poverty."

The upgrading of ties comes as nearly three dozen countries have expressed interest in joining the BRICS bloc in 2024, of which China and Russia are major members. South African Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor said 34 nations have explored becoming part of the organization.

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BRICS is an economic alliance formed in 2009 by the leaders of Brazil, Russia, India, and China. South Africa joined shortly after, and last year Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates were added.

China promised to expand partnership with Angola as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to fund and construct infrastructure projects throughout the world. China calls the initiative a model of "win-win" economic cooperation as upgraded infrastructure allows China to more easily transport goods while also contributing to the development of partnered countries.

"Our expectation is to mobilize more investment and cooperation, especially from private sectors to our country in agriculture, industrialization, and sustainable development," said Luis Cupenala, head of the Angola-China Chamber of Commerce, who hailed the upgrading of relations.

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West's Aggression Unites Russian People Behind Putin - ex-US State Department Analyst

Hostile forces have long sought to weaken and divide Russia's centuries-old civilization, but President Vladimir Putin's triumph suggests its people are more united than ever.

"This is a great day for Russia," declared former US State Department counterterrorism analyst Scott Bennett as early results showed a landslide victory for Vladimir Putin in 2024's presidential contest. Bennet made the claim during an interview with Sputnik as it was revealed a record high number of Russians participated in the election.

"The record turnout of the Russian people and the record landslide of Vladimir Putin… indicate the following," said the former Army officer. "One, that the Russian people see [that] President Putin has the best hope for moving the people and culture and country forward in a prosperous, healthy, traditional way. Two, the Russian people see themselves unified in one voice, and together, oppose the violent economic, diplomatic and informational war that has been waged against them and President Putin by the West for the last 10 years."

"And, three, the Russian people are prepared to face any challenge and realize their strength in unity is what empowers them to withstand the aggression against them," he concluded.

Russia was met with political condemnation and economic sanction in 2022 when President Vladimir Putin sent troops to carry out a special military operation in the Donbass region. Western countries portrayed the move as an act of unprovoked aggression and imperial conquest. Putin asserted the decision was inevitable, claiming Ukraine was being transformed into an anti-Russia force that threatened Moscow's national security.

Recent revelations of longtime CIA involvement with the Kiev regime have since proven the Russian president's claims.

A fierce information war has been waged against Moscow in recent years, with observers saying the West's attempts to discredit Russia's presidential election represent the latest intensification of the campaign.

"The West is trying to compromise President Putin's victory because they have always feared him," claimed Bennett. "And now with this victory they will especially fear him, and become

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increasingly loud, obnoxious, and hostile because they understand this landslide victory will inspire the Russian people to greatness and boldness to challenge – not just withstand – and overcome the European-American sanctions against them."

"This will also greatly inspire the rest of the world to stand shoulder to shoulder with Putin," the analyst said.

Bennett claimed Putin's convincing victory will frustrate attempts to divide and weaken Russia's centuries-old civilization. Two years ago, the US-government sponsored Helsinki Commission held a hearing on its plans to balkanize Russia under the pretext of "decolonization." The country has long been seen as a threat to Western and US hegemony with its vast territory, wealth of resources, and cultural resilience.

Former US Vice President Dick Cheney once proposed carving Russia up into several smaller countries, while ex US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski advocated transforming it into a "loosely confederated" union of republics. The United States employed such tactics in the former Yugoslavia and has openly admitted to funding separatists in China to erode national unity.

"The West understands that with Putin's victory they have lost the chance to dismember and cannibalize and weaken the Russian government, culture, and people," said Bennett. "This is significant because the West's strategy has always been to disintegrate and steal Russian resources."

"This is a great day for Russia and it gives new hope and promise that the future has a greater chance for peace and stability with President Putin at the helm of Russia than it would without him," he concluded. "Moving forward we will see the Russian people stand with one voice, one heart, and one vision, and they will emerge as a dominant political country as Europe crumbles in the confusion of their own jealousy, envy, greed, and berserk belligerency."

US Democrats signal disagreement with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but will change follow?

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US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) engaged in sharp criticism of Netanyahu during a speech on Thursday, which former US defense department security analyst Michael Maloof said is a signal of President Joe Biden's displeasure over the Israeli prime minister.

"I think it's a sign that policy is definitely changing not only for this administration, but also of the flavor of dislike of what is going on over there in the United States Congress," said Maloof. "If Schumer comes out – being Jewish, as he says, and a major supporter of Israel – if he's laying that gauntlet down, I think that is a signal."

The Biden administration may prefer someone more moderate in tone like Benny Gantz to lead the country, according to Maloof, as Biden bleeds support from younger voters and Arab

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Americans. But he said the US president would need to be willing to consider withholding military aid to Israel to succeed in changing the country's policy

"If he [Schumer] can be successful in cutting off the funding, that's going to be the key from the congressional standpoint, [and] then the administration doesn't have to take the hit for it," he said. "But something's got to be done and, as we approach the elections even closer, I think that's why you're seeing Schumer speaking out now."

"We see overkill in a dramatic way, in the way that they have absolutely leveled and carpet-bombed Gaza," concluded the analyst.

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Effort to ban TikTok shows bipartisan US fear of China, influence of Zionist lobby?

The last several years have seen increasing debate throughout the Western world over the role of social media. Now Washington's move to ban or force the sale of the video sharing app TikTok demonstrates the fragility of modern US imperialism, according to author and historian Gerald Horne.

"It reflects the hysteria about the People's Republic of China and its growing role in the political economy of planet Earth," said Horne on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Friday. "It also represents the fact that the United States is finding it difficult to compete with China. And so, therefore, it's going to basically try to kneecap China."

Horne noted that the effort against TikTok undermines US mantras of free expression and free competition. The author also responded to speculation about the role of the Zionist lobby in pushing for the app to be banned. In recent days leaked audio of Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt reemerged revealing Greenblatt's concern over pro-Palestine content on TikTok, which is popular with young Americans.

Horne acknowledged the connection but claimed the controversy signals something much broader.

"By seeking to crack down on TikTok, Washington is looking at future confrontations with China, future confrontations with regard to who is in ultimate control of the means of communication," said the professor.

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Next proxy war: US positions special forces one mile from Chinese mainland

One might assume that two unpopular wars in Gaza and the Donbass are enough for any president. Not so, say analysts Steve Poikonen and Jim Kavanagh, who joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program to discuss President Joe Biden's recent act of saber rattling thousands of miles away from the United States.

"This is as if China put a permanent presence of Chinese special forces troops on Long Island," said Kavanagh in response to Taiwan's confirmation of the presence of US special forces. The US troops are stationed on Taiwan's Kinmen Islands, located only about a mile away from the shore of the Chinese mainland.

"They are de-facto trying to create, posit and position Taiwan as an independent country, and that is against the entire one-China policy that's supposed to have been in place since 1972 when Nixon went to China," the analyst emphasized.

Poikonen called the idea of war with the Asian country "counterintuitive to anything other than a nationwide suicide mission."

"We've known that there are US soldiers in Taiwan since they talked about sending training officers," he added. "That's what they originally said about Vietnam… That's how all of these conflicts usually start."

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On thin ice: US falling behind Russia in mobility in Arctic region

As the United States' armed forces restructure to wage large-scale combat against adversaries like Russia and China, US lawmakers are pressing for renewed attention to an often-overlooked region of the globe.

General Gregory Guillot, who heads up the US' Northern Command, warned Congress this week that the United States only has one remaining large icebreaker ship while Russia has about 40. Icebreaker ships are designed with a special reinforced shape and increased power to enable them to pierce through polar sea ice, opening up routes for more traditional vessels.

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

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Speculation has emerged the Arctic could represent a major theater of war in future conflicts. Russia would be well prepared for such a contingency, possessing the most powerful icebreaker ships in the world. Russia is so far the only nation to operate nuclear-powered icebreaker vessels.

The US' lone heavy icebreaker ship, the Coast Guard's 13,000-ton Polar Star, was commissioned nearly 50 years ago.

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Native American lawsuit in New York sheds light on dark aspect of US history

A lawsuit by the indigenous Onondaga Nation against the US government is drawing attention to America's colonial past and its ongoing disregard for the rights of indigenous people.

"If we don't admit that those things have happened, how do we move forward together?" asked Joe Heath, a lawyer for the Onondaga tribe as it files suit against the United States at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The indigenous nation hopes to receive recognition of the theft of its historical territory and a say in environmental policy in their historic lands, which are despoiled by 24 polluted Superfund sites.

The doctrine of discovery, a colonial-era legal concept granting European explorers the right to take indigenous lands, was cited by the US Supreme Court as recently as 2005 in a ruling against another New York tribe. Today, the same sense of entitlement is observed as the United States fashions itself as a global arbiter and enforcer of morality.

From the legacy of African slavery, Manifest Destiny, Jim Crow and the Monroe Doctrine right up to American exceptionalism and the dictates of foreign policy neoconservatives, the United States has insisted on enforcing its will on others. Should a country with such history be allowed to lecture others? The modern struggle for a multipolar world promises to finally answer that question in favor of the oppressed.

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Feeling strain of war, Israel considers conscripting ultra-Orthodox Jewish population

Ultra-Orthodox Jews have long been exempted from military service in Israel as young members of the religiously conservative community devote themselves to study of the Torah in schools known as yeshivas. But that policy may change as Israeli society feels the strain of the country's months-long operation in Gaza.

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"There are not enough soldiers," said opposition leader and former Prime Minister Yair Lapid at a Thursday rally in Tel Aviv. "And at the same time there are 66,000 young and healthy members of the Haredi community, at enlistment age, who are not joining."

The issue is a conundrum for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who counts many conservative and ultra-Orthodox Jews among his political coalition. But polling shows most Israelis oppose the community's exemption, and Netanyahu's opposition has hammered him over the issue.

Israel's economy has been battered in recent months as a portion of the workforce has been called up to fight in Gaza. The prospect of war against Hezbollah in Lebanon threatens to place even more strain on the IDF. Additionally, some half a million Israelis have reportedly fled the country since last October's Hamas attack.

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West's aggression unites Russian people behind Putin - ex-US State Department analyst

Putin's convincing victory will frustrate attempts to weaken and divide Russia, Scott Bennett, the former Army officer, former US State Department counterterrorism analyst told Sputnik.

"The West understands that with Putin's victory they have lost the chance to dismember and cannibalize and weaken the Russian government, culture, and people," said Bennett. "This is significant because the West's strategy has always been to disintegrate and steal Russian resources."

Hostile forces have long sought to weaken and divide Russia's centuries-old civilization, but President Vladimir Putin's triumph suggests its people are more united than ever.

"This is a great day for Russia," declared Bennett as it was revealed a record high number of Russians participated in the election. "The Russian people see themselves unified in one voice, and together, oppose the violent economic, diplomatic and informational war that has been waged against them and President Putin by the West for the last 10 years."

Russia has long been seen as a threat to Western and US hegemony with its vast territory, wealth of resources, and cultural resilience.

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Harris to Host Guatemalan President for Talks on Migration, Bilateral Ties – White House

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) – US Vice President Kamala Harris will host Guatemala's President Bernardo Arevalo on March 25 for talks on migration and other bilateral relations, White House spokesperson Kirsten Allen said on Monday.

"The Vice President and President Arevelo will discuss additional efforts to address the drivers of irregular migration from northern Central America while continuing the implementation of the Biden-Harris Administration's Root Causes Strategy, including in the areas of: civilian security, good governance, human rights and labor protections, gender-based violence, and economic opportunity," Allen said in a statement.

She added the meeting would strengthen the bilateral relationship and advance ongoing joint efforts to promote development, bolster democracy and address the root causes of migration.

Harris will convene leaders from the government, the private sector, and civil society to mobilize US investments in northern Central America to create jobs and economic opportunities, Allen added.

In February, the United States, Guatemala and Mexico expressed commitment to taking steps to further deepen trilateral cooperation and address mass migration issues in the shared region.

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Over 40% of Americans Continue to See China as Top US Enemy – Poll

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) – The majority of Americans, 41%, continue to perceive China as the United States' top enemy for the fourth consecutive year, according to a Gallup poll released Monday.

Russia remained in second place at 26% and Iran in third at 9%. However, the percentage of Americans citing China and Russia fell from last year, from 50% and 32%, respectively, while those citing Iran increased from 2%.

Five percent of respondents named the US as its own greatest enemy, an increase of four percentage points from the previous year, and a record high in the history of Gallup's annual World Affairs poll, which has been taken since 2001.

Israel and Ukraine each received 2% of the vote.

The latest poll was conducted from February 1-20.

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US Evacuates Over 30 Americans From Haiti on First Charter Flight - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has flown over 30 American citizens from Haiti on a government-chartered flight as the country is gripped by escalating gang violence, the State Department said.

"On Sunday, March 17, the Department of State facilitated the safe departure from Cap-Haïtien, Haiti of over 30 U.S. citizens on a U.S. government charter flight," the State Department was quoted by Fox News as saying in a statement.

The flight landed at the Miami International Airport, the statement said.

A US official told Fox News earlier the same day that the more precise number of the US citizens evacuated was 47, the report said.

The State Department announced Saturday it would offer limited charter flights for US citizens from the northern city of Cap-Haitien. American should should consider the charter flights only if they believe they can safely reach Cap-Haitien.

Americans taking the flights are required to sign a promissory bill agreeing to reimburse the government, the report said.

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Russia Not Interested in Canada's Reaction to Presidential Election - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Russia is not at all interested in Canada’s reaction to the presidential election in Russia and has no illusions about the possible recognition of the results, Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

"I have no illusions that Canada will somehow recognize our elections. But, on the other hand, we are completely uninterested in whether they recognize our elections or not. What’s interesting for us is how our citizens voted, but the opinion of Canada or the United States, or the European Union, for us is somewhere beyond our interest," Stepanov said.

Discussing the future of relations between the two countries, the Russian diplomat emphasized that Russia wants to see a "predictable, good neighbor" in Canada. He added that Russia and Canada are connected by many things, including Arctic and climate issues.

Vladimir Putin is leading in the presidential election in Russia with 87.33% of the votes, according to data from the Russian Central Election Commission after processing 99.01% of ballots.

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Antonov Says Russian Voters at Embassy in Washington Felt Intimidated

(Adds more comments by Russian Ambassador to US in para 5, background in paras 6-7)
WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said that the Russian citizens who came to cast a vote at the embassy in Washington DC felt intimidated and this will be the matter he will raise during his future meetings at the White House and the State Department.
"People said they would like to visit the embassy more often, but feared for their safety," Antonov told reporters after the polling station closed. "They asked if they could be arrested on the way out. Unfortunately, I couldn't give any guarantees."
Antonov stressed that the Russian people are intimidated due to a rigid Russophobic position of Washington.
"One of the important points during my further conversations in the White House and the State Department will be the demand to stop the persecution of our compatriots and those organizations that were actively carrying out their work," he said.
On Monday, the Russian Embassy in Washington DC will send a relevant note to the US authorities and express its protest over the lack of security during the presidential election, Antonov added.
The three-day voting in the Russian presidential election ended on Sunday evening. In addition to incumbent President Vladimir Putin, the candidates include Leonid Slutsky, the chairman of the lower house international affairs committee, Nikolay Kharitonov, the chairman of the lower house Far East and Arctic development committee, and lower house Deputy Chairman Vladislav Davankov.
Putin is leading in the election as of Monday morning with 87.3% of the vote after processing 99.72% of ballots, data from the Russian Central Election Commission showed.

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CORRECTION - Russian Ambassador to Canada Positively Assesses Work of Law Enforcers During Election

(Corrects headline to read 'Russian Ambassador to Canada')
WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Canadian law enforcement agencies responded positively to most of Russia's requests regarding security during the voting in the Russian presidential election at embassies in Canada, Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.
"I would praise them, express my gratitude to them, and I will make it official this week. I believe that in this case, Canadian federal law enforcement agencies acted very positively, and they responded to the vast majority of our requests in terms of security," Stepanov said.

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He added that despite attempts to organize anti-Russian protests near diplomatic missions, voters could calmly cast their votes.

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Russia Not Interested in Canada's Reaction to Presidential Election - Ambassador

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Russia's Antonov Positively Assesses Work of Law Enforcement Officers During Election

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Record Turnout Recorded in Russian Presidential Election in Canada - Ambassador

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WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Voting in the Russian presidential election at the Russian embassy in Canada was successful, and a record turnout was recorded at polling stations in Ottawa and Montreal, Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

"Ottawa and Montreal generally broke all records in election history. Very intense voting took place in Toronto," Stepanov said, adding that everything went in a very positive atmosphere.

He noted that "the voting took place in such high spirits, even somewhat unexpected, taking into account both the political nature of the relations between our countries and the pressure that the local environment puts on our community."

Vladimir Putin is leading in the presidential election in Russia with 87.33% of the votes, according to data from the Russian Central Election Commission after processing 99.01% of ballots.

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“People said they would like to visit the embassy more often, but feared for their safety,” Antonov told reporters after the polling station closed. “They asked if they could be arrested on the way out. Unfortunately, I couldn't give any guarantees.”

Antonio stressed that the Russian people are intimidated due to a rigid Russophobic position of Washington.

“One of the important points during my further conversations in the White House and the State Department will be the demand to stop the persecution of our compatriots and those organizations that were actively carrying out their work,” he said.

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US Secret Service Failed to Ensure Proper Security During Vote at Russian Embassy - Envoy

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The US Secret Service has failed to provide nature proper security during the voting in the Russian presidential election at the embassy in Washington DC, Russian ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said.

“I always respected the work of the State Department's secret service. And in most cases when we turned to them for help, they worked effectively. Today I cannot say this,” Antonov told reporters after the polling station closed. “On Monday we will send a diplomatic note and at the next meetings in the White House and the State Department we will express the strongest

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protest regarding the issue of ensuring the security of the Russian embassy."
Antonov explained that the Secret Service allowed "traitors" to block the entrance to the Russian embassy and interfere with Russian citizens going to vote.
"Moreover, they allowed agitation by provocateurs to prevent people from going to vote," he said. "The very fact of the entrance of the embassy being blocked is simply unacceptable. Moreover, our concerns were brushed aside by the Secret Service, this behavior is simply unacceptable."

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High Turnout at Russia's Embassy in US Shows US 'Anti-Russia' Project Failed - Envoy

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The high turnout in the Russian presidential vote at the Embassy in Washington DC demonstrates that the US "anti-Russia" project has failed, Russian ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said.
"The large number of our compatriots who have come to take part in the presidential elections, suggests that the American Russophobic course has failed," Antonov told reporters after the polling station at the diplomatic mission closed. "No matter how much money is invested in the anti-Russia project today, people don't listen to what's going on in political science centers or think tanks."
Antonov called the voting at the Russian diplomatic mission on Sunday a holiday.
"This election showed that interest in what is happening in the homeland, what the country's foreign policy should be, began to concern many more people than in previous years," he said. "This indicates that our diaspora has perked up, and people began to believe that the fate of the country depends on their vote."
He also said that the results show that citizens approve of the course that the president is implementing.

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Antonov says Russians Voting at Embassy in Washington Were Intimidated, He Will Raise This Issue with US officials

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Russian People Understand They Face Threat From 'Washington Empire' - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Russian people realize that they are facing a threat emanating from the United States, former US Assistant Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik.

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"Some Russians are still influenced by the American propaganda from 'Voice of America' and 'Radio Free Europe' during the Cold War of the 20th century," Roberts said. "But as the lack of political support for Alexei Navalny demonstrated, the Russian people understand that they face a threat from Washington's empire, the response to which requires national unity."

Meanwhile in the United States, Roberts said, the Democrats and the corporations have the borders wide open in order to displace higher cost American employees and Republican voters.

"Unity in America and throughout the Western World has been destroyed by identity politics. In the Western world no government represents the ethnic citizens," he said. "Governments only represent the elite ruling interests. President Trump tried to change that, and we have seen what happened to him."

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US-Russia Relations Have No Prospects During Putin's Next Term - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The US-Russia ties have no prospects during the next term of incumbent Russian President Vladimir Putin, former US Assistant Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik.

"There is no hope for US-Russian relations … The budget and power of the US military-security complex, a powerful lobby encompassing the armaments industry, the Congress elected by campaign contributions, and the CIA and FBI, depends on having an enemy. Russia is the enemy of choice," Roberts said. "Americans were trained by decades of the Cold War that there is a "Russian threat."

Another reason why there is no hope for normalization of Washington-Moscow relations, Roberts said, is that US foreign policy in the Middle East is controlled by the Israel lobby.

"Israel's interests in the Middle East differ completely from Russia's interests," he said. "Israel's interest is the destruction of Iran, which would open a pathway for CIA 'jihadis' to flow into the Russian Federation and the former Central Asian provinces of the Soviet Union. Instead of one Ukraine, there would be many."

Roberts went on to say that Putin has the concept of good and evil.

"He is learning that in the West he faces evil. The Russian Church sees it as well and supports him," he concluded.

Vladimir Putin is leading in the presidential election in Russia with 87.29% of the votes after processing 94.07% of ballots, data from the Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) showed on Monday.

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Putin Unlike Biden Focused on Unifying People - Ex-US Official on Election Results

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WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Vladimir Putin who has claimed a landslide victory in the Russian presidential vote is focused on unifying his country and its people, unlike his US counterpart, Joe Biden, which also explains a record turnout, former US Assistant Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik.

"The election turnout is high in Russia because Putin, like Ronald Reagan and unlike Biden, is a leader who focuses on unifying the country," Roberts said. "From a Russian national perspective, there is little, if anything, about which to disagree with Putin."

Roberts added that Putin was one of a few leaders who was not using his office for personal gain.

"His recent address to the Russian people shows his concern as well as the active measures he is implementing to support families and soldiers," Roberts said. "It is rare for a country to have a leader who is not trying to survive being in office or using the office for his personal benefit."

With 93.06% of the ballots counted, Putin is leading with 87.26% of the vote, the highest ever result in Russia's post-Soviet history. According to the Central Election Commission, the turnout across Russia was 70.81%.

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Russian Presidential Election at Polling Station in Washington Proceeding Calmly - Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Voting in Russia's presidential election at the Washington, D.C., polling station is proceeding calmly and orderly, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Sunday.

"The election is taking place calmly, as expected, and in an orderly manner," Antonov said during a live video meeting with Russian envoys from Armenia, Argentina, Kazakhstan, the United Kingdom, and Russia's Central Election Commission.

He said there had been no provocations at the polling station in the diplomatic mission, but noted that protesters were trying to block the entrance to the building from outside.

Antonov called it unacceptable that the secret service allowed the protesters to do so. He also said that some of the Russians, upon leaving the embassy, expressed concern that they might be arrested for participating in the vote.

The ambassador also revealed that Russian citizens serving sentences in US prisons had called the embassy to say they had voted.

The three-day voting in the presidential election started in Russia on Friday morning. In addition to incumbent President Vladimir Putin, the candidates include Leonid Slutsky, the chairman of the lower house international affairs committee, Nikolay Kharitonov, the chairman of the lower house Far East and Arctic development committee, and lower house Deputy Chairman Vladislav Davankov.

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

Russia Does Not Care If Washington Endorses Results of Presidential Election - Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Russia does not care whether Washington recognizes the results of the Russian presidential election, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Sunday.

"It's up to Washington to decide whether they will endorse the results of this election," Antonov said in an interview with RT.

He added that it was up to the US to decide whether or not to recognize the results.

"It was said even before the voting procedure that they will not recognize the results of votes in Donetsk, Luhansk, Crimea irrespective of Sevastopol, but it's up to them. We don't care," Antonov said.

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Voting to Elect Next Russian President Kicks Off in US

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Polling stations in the United States on Sunday opened their doors to Russian citizens wishing to cast a vote in the presidential election, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

This time, Russian citizens in the United States can vote only at the diplomatic missions' buildings in Washington DC, New York and Houston. The polling stations in Washington DC and New York opened at 8 a.m. local time (12:00 GMT), with enhanced security presence near the Russian embassy in the US capital city.

Half an hour before the doors opened to voters, several Russians approached the gates, asking when they could come in.

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov welcomed visitors at the polling station in Washington DC. He was among the first ones to cast the vote, the correspondent reported.

The situation near the Russian embassy is currently peaceful. The medical personnel is present on the site.

Voters are treated to tea, coffee and sweets. Moreover, the embassy has for the first time prepared gifts, including books and candies, for voters and veterans.

Children coming with their parents to the polling station are gifted books bought by Russian diplomats. There is also a special area for children where they can draw and play, while parents cast their votes, the correspondent said.

A double voting prevention system is in place to prevent people from repeated voting.

Early voting in the Russian presidential election started abroad on March 1, while the main three-day voting was launched on March 15. In addition to incumbent President Vladimir Putin, the candidates include Leonid Slutsky, the chairman of the lower house international affairs committee, Nikolay Kharitonov, the chairman of the lower house Far East and Arctic

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Elon Musk Announces Plans to Get Starship on Mars in 5 Years

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - Starship will fly to Mars in five years, SpaceX founder Elon Musk said on Sunday, thus confirming his long-time idea to make human life multi-planetary.
"Starship will be on Mars within 5 years," Musk posted on his social media profile.
On Thursday, SpaceX launched its third test flight of the Starship rocket from the Starbase facility in Boca Chica, Texas, with the rocket reaching orbital speed for the first time.
Starship was sending imagery until about 48.5 minutes after the launch, but SpaceX later confirmed it had lost the 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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US in Touch With Niger Junta Gov't After Decision to Suspend Military Agreement - Official

WASHINGTON, March 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is in contact with the de facto ruling military junta of Niger after its decision to suspend the military agreement with the United States that allows for a presence of US troops in the African country, a US military official told Sputnik.
"We are aware of the CNSP's [National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland] Facebook [banned in Russia for extremism] post, which follows frank discussions at senior levels in Niamey this week about our concerns with the CNSP's trajectory," the official said on Saturday. "We are in touch with the CNSP and will provide further updates as warranted."
On Saturday, media reported citing the spokesman for the military transitional government of Niger, Amadou Abdramane, that Niger's government decided to terminate the military agreement with the United States.

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No Unity Among G7 Countries on Confiscation of Russia's Frozen Assets – Ambassador Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) – There is no unity among the G7 countries regarding the confiscation of Russia's frozen assets, as many understand the negative consequences of this move, Russian ambassador Anatoly Antonov said on Friday.
"As far as we know, there is no unity in the G7. Not everyone is ready to hang the 'thief' label on their chest. Many people understand the negative consequences of such actions, as the current international system of financial relations is collapsing and the position of the US dollar as the

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main payment currency is being undermined," Antonov said in an interview with Sputnik.

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US Using Ukraine as Weapon, Attempting to 'Bleed Out' Russia - Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is using Ukraine as a weapon against Russia in hopes of weakening and depleting the country's resources, Russian Ambassador in Washington Anatoly Antonov said in an interview with Sputnik.

"America has chosen Ukraine as a means, and if you like, a weapon, against our country," Antonov said, when asked about the United States' role in Ukraine. "The goal is to weaken, bleed out, and in the best case, divide Russia. And all means are acceptable for this."

The United States is a participant in the conflict in Ukraine and has shifted its support from providing small arms to missile systems, which have been used to target Russian cities, Antonov added.

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Diplomats at UN Growing Tired of Zelenskyy – Russian UN Diplomat

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - Diplomats at the United Nations and around the world are growing increasingly tired of Ukraine and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Deputy Russian Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik.

"There is a big fatigue about Zelenskyy and his regime in the world. There is a clear fatigue about that in the United Nations," Polyanskiy said.

He added that Ukraine senses that and is "desperately reminding" the world about themselves and continuing efforts not to be forgotten, particularly as global attention shifts to other issues.

"It's quite clear in the UN that majority of the countries of the Global South are concerned with other issues, and the war in Gaza is of course one of them. And this change is quite clear and quite visible," Polyanskiy said.

Polyanskiy added that Zelenskyy further alienates the diplomatic community by approaching the Ukrainian conflict from a position of force, instead of making real efforts toward finding a solution to the crisis.

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Western Military's Presence in Ukraine 'Open Secret' - Envoy

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UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The Western military presence in Ukraine is an "open secret" that was already known before Poland's foreign minister spoke about NATO troops in the country, Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik.

"It's an open secret that Western military personnel are present in Ukraine. We know not only through the Polish foreign minister but other sources," Polyanskiy said.

Polyanskiy pointed to the recent leak of a conversation between high-ranking German military officers as even more convincing evidence of NATO's presence in Ukraine.

"I think this is a much more loud revelation than the words of the Polish foreign minister," he said.

Following a Paris-hosted conference on Ukraine in late February, French President Emmanuel Macron said Western leaders had discussed the possibility of sending troops to Ukraine and, although no consensus had been reached in this regard, nothing could be ruled out. On Friday, Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski said that the presence of NATO forces in Ukraine "was not unthinkable," adding that he appreciated Macron's initiative on the possibility of sending Western troops to Ukraine.

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Russia Has No 'Rosy Dreams' of Perfect Relations With US Under Trump – UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - Russia does not have any "rosy dreams" that relations with the United States will change for the better if Donald Trump is re-elected as US president, Deputy Russian Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik.

"So I don't think that we have rosy dreams and expectations of a possible change of power [Trump winning the presidential reelection] in the United States," Polyanskiy said.

He added that it would be naïve to consider Trump pro-Russian, given that the bulk of sanctions were imposed on Russia before the start of the special by the Trump administration.

"It would be absolutely naive to consider Mr. Trump pro-Russian given his record [and] the way he acted toward Russia during his time in office," Polyanskiy said.

Former President Donald Trump has said multiple times during his recent presidential campaign that he always had a great relationship with the Russian President Putin. Trump also said that he would make Russia and Ukraine sit down at the same table and end the conflict within 24 hours.

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Zelenskyy Not Interested in Peace Talks as Long as Western Aid Keeps Coming - Polyanskiy

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UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his clique are interested only in seeing Russia defeated and are not interested in having serious peace negotiations because Kiev is still under the illusion that it can win aided by the collective West, Russian Deputy Envoy to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik.

"Zelenskyy and other representatives of his clique are not interested in serious and meaningful negotiations. All they are interested in is the capitulation of Russia. They still have some illusions that they can achieve military victory over Russia with the help of Western arms, they are interested in the supply of Western arms," Polyanskiy said in an interview.

According to Polyanskiy, when Kiev changes its rhetoric and declares readiness to consider other options for ending the conflict with Russia, this will mean that Ukraine no longer believes in its victory on the battlefield against Russia and is ready for negotiations.

"Tens of of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians are paying for this illusion [of victory] with their lives and this is a very unfortunate situation. Zelenskyy banned himself from negotiations with the Russian government by enacting a relevant decree back in 2022. So, certainly, it is ridiculous to say that Ukraine is interested in any negotiations," Polyanskiy said.

Polyanskiy pointed out that Russia has repeatedly confirmed its readiness to negotiate with Ukraine on how to achieve its special military operation aims peacefully, but it must be a completely different track and format from what Ukraine is trying to impose on other countries, including Zelenskyy's so-called peace formula.

Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Russian and Ukrainian delegations held several rounds of peace talks in the early days of the conflict, including in Turkey in March 2022.

Ukraine's former chief negotiator with Russia, David Arakhamia, said that then-UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson talked Kiev out of signing an agreement with Russia to end the conflict in the spring of 2022.

In October 2022, Zelenskyy signed a decree stating that Kiev could not hold peace talks as long as Russian President Vladimir Putin was in power.

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Pope Francis Call on Ukraine to Negotiate Reflects Concerns in World - Russian Diplomat

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - Pope Francis' call on Kiev to start peace negotiations with Moscow reflects the existing concerns in the world about the conflict in Ukraine, Russian Deputy Envoy to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday.

In an interview with Swiss broadcaster RSI, Pope Francis expressed his belief that the losing side should find the courage to "raise the white flag" and enter negotiations. The Pope's remarks were interpreted by many as a call for Ukraine to surrender. However, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said that his country would never raise any other flag apart from the national one.

"I think it reflects the deepening preoccupation with the situation at the front [in Ukraine], with the situation that is happening as a result of the decisions of Ukrainian leaders. Remember that

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Ukraine is in a desperate situation militarily, the prospects are very gloomy and [President Volodymyr] Zelenskyy and his henchmen are the only ones who deny looking into the eyes of the truth," Polyanskiy told Sputnik in an interview.

According to Polyanskiy, Russia continues to carry out the tasks of its special military operation in Ukraine, while standing ready to negotiate to achieve a solution to the conflict that would reflect its interests.

Russia would welcome reaching peace through diplomatic negotiations, but if this is not possible, Moscow will continue to seek peace through military means and only the Ukrainian leadership will be responsible for this, Polyanskiy said.

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No Unity Among G7 Countries on Confiscation of Russia's Frozen Assets –Ambassador Antonov

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"As far as we know, there is no unity in the G7. Not everyone is ready to hang the "thief" label on their chest. Many people understand the negative consequences of such actions, as the current international system of financial relations is collapsing and the position of the US dollar as the main payment currency is being undermined," Antonov said in an interview for Sputnik.

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BRICS Can Eventually Switch to Digital Currencies-Based Payment System - Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The BRICS group of nations can eventually switch to a new payment system based on digital currencies or use blockchain, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

"As part of the BRICS framework, work is being done to develop the Contingent Reserve Arrangement mechanism. As regards the use of monetary units alternative to the US dollar, we could talk in the future about an independent, depoliticized payment system that would be based on the latest technologies, such as digital currencies and blockchain," Antonov said in an

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interview.

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Russia Ready to Resume Strategic Stability Talks if US Stops Treating It as Enemy –Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) – Unless the United States stops treating Russia as its enemy, any strategic stability talks between Moscow and Washington are pointless and even harmful as they are nothing else but a cover-up for the US desire to suppress Russia's military development, Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov said in an interview for Sputnik.
"In such conditions [when the US continues deliveries of weapons to Ukraine], a conversation on strategic stability is not only useless but also harmful [for Russia]. Only when the Americans reconsider their foreign policy, in which Russia is viewed as an enemy, only when Russian national interests are recognized and the United States is ready for an equal, mutually respectful dialogue, will it be possible to talk about the prospects for resuming the dialogue," Antonov said on Friday.
"All they want in Washington is to limit our military-technological development, throw a test net over our strategic offensive weapons, stop their development, and ban some of them," Antonov added.

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Biden Administration Incapable of Negotiation - Russian Ambassador to US

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is incapable of engaging in negotiations with Russia, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said in an interview with Sputnik.
"A simple question arises: is the current administration capable of negotiation? The answer is no," Antonov said.
Responsibility for the lack of negotiations falls not only on Democratic politicians, but Republicans as well, Antonov added.

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Expecting US to Replace Nuland With 'Peace Dove' Would Be Naive - Russian UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik), Lenka White – It would be naïve to expect that the United States would appoint a "peace dove" to replace Victoria Nuland, a notorious Russia

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hawk, who recently resigned from the position of Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Russian Deputy Envoy to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik.

"I'm absolutely sure there are enough Russophobes and Russia haters in the United States and in US foreign policy [circles] to replace Victoria Nuland," Polyanskiy said. "It would be very naive to expect that somebody who will replace Victoria Nuland will all of a sudden become a peace dove."

Russia does not pay much attention to individual changes in the US administration and focuses instead on implementing its own goals, Polyanskiy said.

Nuland was the third-ranked US diplomat and a former US ambassador to NATO who distinguished herself for her aggressive stance toward Russia.

Under Secretary for Management John Bass will serve as Acting Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs until Nuland's replacement is confirmed.

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US Constantly Deceiving Russia, Leaking Confidential Talks in Information War - Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is constantly deceiving Russia and using confidential talks between Washington and Moscow as part of its information warfare campaign, Russian Ambassador in Washington Anatoly Antonov said in an interview with Sputnik.

"We are constantly being deceived. Any part of confidential conversations becomes part of the information war. There is no control over 'leaks' of the most sensitive information," Antonov said.

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US Eroding Credibility By Supplying Kiev Arms,Russia's Success Will Only Weaken US-Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is itself eroding its former prestige by providing weapons to Ukraine, and the more Russia advances on the battlefield, the weaker Washington will become, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

Antonov pointed out that the United States is part of the conflict in Ukraine as it is sending weapons to Kiev, and called Washington's role in the conflict a "sponsor of terrorism."

"The country that encourages murder and war. The country that is itself destroying the remnants of its former prestige," Antonov said. "The further we advance on the battlefield, the more America will weaken and the more the world order based on rules will break down."

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US Lying When Saying Russia Not Ready For Talks On Ukraine - Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is lying when it claims that Moscow is not ready for talks on Ukraine, and the conflict could be peacefully settled, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

"All claims about Russia's reluctance to negotiate are lies. The Russian President has repeatedly spoken about our readiness for a serious conversation," Antonov said. "If the Istanbul agreements, which were initialed by both sides in 2022, had been implemented, there would not have been hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians killed on the battlefield. Everything could be resolved peacefully. However, this did not suit the leadership of NATO countries, primarily the United States and Great Britain."

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US Starting to Admit Ukraine Front Falling Apart, Kiev Close to Defeat - Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is starting to concede that Ukrainian forces are beginning to fall apart on the frontlines, setting the stage for a Russian victory, Russian Ambassador in Washington Anatoly Antonov said in an interview with Sputnik.

"Recently, American officials have started to admit that the front is cracking. It is starting to crumble," Antonov said, when asked about the United States' role in the conflict in Ukraine. "It is recognized that the situation will worsen in the future. Kiev is close to a serious defeat."

The United States and other NATO member states have concluded that they need to increase aid to Ukraine to prevent a Russian victory, Antonov said.

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US Using Ukraine as Weapon, Attempting to 'Bleed Out' Russia - Antonov

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US-Drafted UNSC Resolution on Gaza Downplays Call for Ceasefire - Diplomat

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Diplomats at the United Nations Security Council are negotiating a US-drafted resolution on Gaza, but the text downplays calls for an immediate ceasefire, Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik in an interview.

The US has used its veto power at the Security Council three times over the past five months to kill resolutions demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, most recently on February 20, when it blocked an Algerian draft.

Washington has instead proposed a resolution that “unequivocally supports international diplomatic efforts to establish an immediate and sustained ceasefire as part of a deal that releases the hostages,” according to a draft seen by Sputnik.

The watered-down phrasing of the draft illustrates the difficulties that diplomats have faced over the course of the war in Gaza, a conflict that has put the US at odds with the rest of the world, including its own allies.

“There is a resolution on the table, and we are negotiating it right now," Polyanskiy said. "But the problem is the same as it was in previous efforts: the problem is that the US is absolutely allergic to any reference to the immediate ceasefire."

The rest of the Security Council's members would like to see stronger language in the resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire and opposing an impending Israeli operation in Rafah, but the US continues to obstruct such efforts, Polyanskiy said.

The US draft seem by Sputnik on Thursday mentions the impending operation by saying, "emphasizing its concern that a ground offensive into Rafah would result in further harm to civilians and their further displacement including potentially into neighboring countries."

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from Gaza and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. At least 31,300 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, local authorities said.

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

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

US Aviation Agency Says Investigating Missing Panel on United Airlines Boeing 737

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) told Sputnik it is investigating a missing panel discovered on a United Airlines Boeing 737 aircraft after it landed in Oregon.

"United Airlines Flight 433 landed safely at Medford Airport in Oregon around 1:45 p.m. local time on Friday, March 15," the FAA said Friday. "A post landing airline inspection revealed a missing panel. The Boeing 737 departed San Francisco International Airport. The FAA will investigate."

Photos of the incident circulated on social media, revealing damage to the aircraft's panel and revealing its undercarriage.

Earlier in the day, the Washington Post reported that Boeing warned airlines about a possible problem with loose switches on the pilot seats of its 787 Dreamliner aircraft after one of the planes went into a dive earlier this week and injured 50 people.

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US Authorities Locate Person of Interest in 'Swatting' Cases - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The authorities identified a person of interest residing in Serbia in connection with so-called swatting incidents involving government officials in the United States, CBS News reported, citing law enforcement officials.

Charges have not yet been filed against the individual although prosecutors could soon file charges, the report said on Friday.

The person of interest allegedly swatted US officials, including Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency Director Jen Easterly.

The FBI and the Secret Service conducted a search of the person of interest's residence in Serbia, during which they confiscated electronic devices.

Swatting involves making false calls to law enforcement entities in an effort to dispatch Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams to a victim's location. Such incidents have previously resulted in the deaths of innocent people.

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Northrop Grumman Wins $55Mln Deal to Maintain Close-to-Shore Ship Force - Pentagon

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WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman has received a more than $55 million contract extension from the US Navy to continue to maintain its force of close-to-shore operating Littoral Combat Ships, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation [of] Bethpage, New York is awarded a $55,206,800 ...modification ...contract for ...Littoral Combat Ship Mission Module engineering and sustainment support," the release said on Friday.

Work on the contract will be performed in Bethpage, New York (36%); Mayport, Florida (21%); Oxnard, California (21%); San Diego, California (21%) and Portsmouth, Virginia (1%), over the coming year and is expected to be completed by March 2025, the Defense Department said.

The US Navy ordered its LCS force around 20 years ago to provide close-to-shore support for amphibious operations. However, their ability to perform these missions has been called into question and the force is being gradually reduced in number, according to published sources.

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UN Chief Sent Letters to Putin, Zelenskyy on Shipping in Black Sea - Spokesman to Sputnik

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in February sent letters to Russian President Vladimir Putin, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the safety of commercial shipping in the Black Sea, United Nations Spokesman Stephane Dujarric told Sputnik.

"We continue our discussions with all parties to keep trade open, the food flowing and ships safe. In that vein, earlier in February the Secretary-General sent letters to the presidents of the Russian Federation, Turkey and Ukraine. The Secretary-General said that freedom of civilian navigation remains the overarching aim of the ongoing UN efforts. Food and trade routes must be safe, sustainable and predictable," Dujarric said in a statement on Friday.

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Georgia District Attorney Willis Accepts Resignation of Associate Wade in Trump Case

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - District Attorney Fani Willis accepted the resignation of Special Assistant District Attorney Nathan Wade, who led the investigation in the former President Donald Trump election interference case after the court left Wade no choice in order to continue the proceedings.

"I received your resignation letter dated March 15, 2024, and I accept it, effective immediately," Willis said in a letter to Wade published by her office on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the Superior Court of Fulton County in Georgia declined to remove Willis from the election interference case, arguing that the allegations against her were legally insufficient.

The court concluded that the case against Trump and other co-defendants could not proceed

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until the state of Georgia moves forward with one of two options: assigning a completely new team of investigators to the case, meaning that Willis and her entire team including Wade need to step aside or Wade's self-withdrawal from the case.

According to the case materials, Willis hired Wade on November 1, 2021, to investigate interference by Trump and other co-defendants for $250 an hour. During the hearing on the motion to remove her from the case, Willis acknowledged that her romantic relationship with Wade began in 2022 or after she decided to hire him.

While in the romantic relationship that according to Willis ended in the second half of 2023, the two made at least four trips to a variety of resorts with the District Attorney receiving a direct financial benefit of approximately $12,000 to $15,000 from her relationship with Wade, according to the court materials.

In August 2023, a Fulton County grand jury indicted Trump on 13 felony counts related to his alleged attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. Trump has pleaded not guilty to charges lodged by Willis in Georgia over the 2020 presidential election.

On Wednesday, Judge Scott McAfee of the Superior Court of Fulton County ordered six counts against Trump and five co-defendants to be quashed.

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West's Statements on Russian Election 'Unforgivable' Attempts of Interference - Polyanskiy

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - The Western countries' statements on the presidential election in Russia are "unforgivable" attempts to interfere in the country's internal affairs, Russia's First Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitriy Polyanskiy said.

"I will not comment on the absolutely unforgivable attempts heard in this hall when it comes to intervention in the domestic affairs of our country," Polyanskiy said during a UN Security Council meeting on Friday.

Voting in Russia's three-day presidential election started on Friday morning.

Four contenders for the position were registered by the Russian Central Election Commission - incumbent President Vladimir Putin; Liberal Democratic Party of Russia candidate Leonid Slutsky; New People Party Vladislav Davankov; and Russian Communist Party candidate Nikolay Kharitonov.

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UPDATE - Wall Street Ends Another Week Down Ahead of Federal Reserve Decision on Rates

(Updates with new information in paras 2-4; modifies headline, lede)

NEW YORK, March 16 (Sputnik) - Wall Street posted a second straight weekly loss as US blue chip and technology stocks fell on Friday in anticipation of price swings ahead of next week's

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interest rate decision by the Federal Reserve.

The New York Stock Exchange's S&P 500 index, which tracks stocks of the top 500 US companies, closed at 5,119, down 32 points, or 0.6% on the day. For the week, the S&P 500 slid nearly 0.1%, mimicking last week's decline.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee tech names such as Google, Amazon, Apple and Netflix, settled Friday at 15,973 - down 155 points, or almost 1%. For the week, the Nasdaq was 0.7% lower versus last week's 1.5% gain.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which serves as Wall Street's broadest equities indicator by tracking the stocks of 30 large US corporations, finished trade at 38,715 - down 191 points, or 0.5% on the day. The Dow slid 0.1% on the week, the same as the previous week.

The slide in blue chip and tech stocks came as numbers on US industrial output, factory performance and consumer sentiment varied in direction ahead of the March 20 Fed rate decision.

Thierry Wizman, a strategist in the United States for Australian financial group Macquarie, said varying US economic data could prompt policy-makers at the central bank to ask if inflation has cooled enough or whether rates should remain restrictive.

The stock market's overzealousness in pushing for a rate cut could also influence the Fed, Wizman added. "I think the other issue here is not just the 2024 and 2025 (outlook) … it is the other issues that the Fed is thinking about, which includes that the (stock) market is too frothy," he said in comments carried by the Wall Street Journal. "For that reason it could signal that it thinks long-term interest rates should be higher."

The Fed said it is looking to cut rates as inflation moderates. But the central bank says it needs the Consumer Price Index, an oft-used indicator of inflation, to first show an annual reading of 2% or lower.

The so-called CPI reading was up 3.2% year-on-year in February, higher than January's 3.1%.

Notwithstanding that, the current reading is drastically lower than in July 2022, when annual CPI stood at a four-decade high of 9.1%.

The Fed hiked interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023, responding to runaway inflation induced by the trillions of dollars of federal spending as part of the COVID-19 pandemic measures. The central bank's actions have added to the burden of Americans as the basic rate for lending rose to 5.25 percentage points from a pre-pandemic level of just 0.25%.

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US Forced Russia to Cut Diplomatic Staff in Washington by 40% - Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States forced Russia to cut its diplomatic staff in Washington by 40%, Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov said in an interview with Sputnik.

"Last December, the composition of the consular department of our embassy was reduced by 40%, due to the demands of the American side," Antonov said.

The reduction significantly complicated the embassy's functions, including holding visiting

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sessions and assisting constituents outside Washington, Antonov said.
Such work is in high demand due to the absence of Russian diplomatic missions on the US west coast, Antonov added.

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US Judge Delays Trump's Hush Money Trial by 30 Days - Court Document

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - A US judge delayed former President Donald Trump's hush-money trial in New York by 30 days so that his lawyers can review new evidence, court documents revealed.
"Trial on this matter is adjourned for 30 days from the date of this letter on consent of the People," US judge Juan Manuel Merchan wrote in the court document on Friday. "The Court will set the new trial date, if necessary, when it rules on Defendant's motion following the hearing."
The trial was set to begin on March 25 but will now begin in mid-April. This is one of four criminal cases involving Trump, who is the presumptive 2024 Republican presidential nominee after securing enough delegates for the nomination earlier this week.

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US Systematically Blocking Movement of Russian Diplomats in US – Ambassador Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) – The United States systematically blocks the movement of Russian diplomats in the country, including in one instance when it denied a new Russian consul in Houston permission to travel to Washington, D.C., Russian ambassador Anatoly Antonov said.
"[US] authorities systematically create obstacles to [Russian diplomats'] business travel throughout the country. Our diplomats were not allowed to attend the International Grain Council events in New Orleans. They were not allowed to attend the opening of an Orthodox monument in San Diego," Antonov said in an interview for Sputnik. "Just the other day, [the State Department] denied the new Consul General in Houston a business trip to Washington, D.C."

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) –
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN RUSSIA

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* Incumbent Russian President Vladimir Putin voted in the ongoing presidential election online on Friday, a Sputnik correspondent reported.
* Putin said that the regime in Kiev is trying to carry out a number of armed criminal actions during the presidential election in Russia.
* The Ukrainian military has carried out strikes on polling stations in several parts of the Kherson Region, regional election commissions said.
* The Russian Foreign Ministry is closely monitoring the interference with the presidential election process in Russia's new regions and has already detected attempts to spread fake and provocative information, Russian Foreign Ministry special envoy Rodion Miroshnik told Sputnik.
* Russia requested an enhanced security presence near its diplomatic missions in the United States during the Russian presidential elections on Sunday, Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

SITUATION NEAR ZNPP

* International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi said that military activity near the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) has become a "daily reality."
* US Secretary of State and Grossi discussed the situation at the ZNPP in the wake of a Ukrainian attack on the facility, the State Department said after their meeting in Vienna.

MIDDLE EAST

* The United States has not yet seen Israel's plan on how to protect civilians in Rafah, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.
* Blinken confirmed that Hamas has put forward a counter-proposal on the hostage and ceasefire deal with Israel and said the United States is working with Israel, Qatar, and Egypt to finalize it.
* Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov welcomed the decision to form a new Palestinian government headed by Mohammad Mustafa, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
* Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has approved a military operation in Rafah, and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is preparing to evacuate civilians from there, media reported.
* Hamas' recent hostage release proposal is broadly within the bounds of the deal the United States has been trying to broker for several months, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* More than 2,500 service people, 35 tanks, and some 40 armored vehicles took part in Ukraine’s recent attempt to cross into Russia’s Belgorod and Kursk regions, President Vladimir Putin said on Friday.
* The Russian air defense systems have taken down another five Vampire MLRS missiles over the Belgorod Region, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* One civilian has been killed and two more have been injured from another Ukrainian shelling of Russia's Belgorod Region, Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said.
* The Russian armed forces with the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) prevented another Ukraine attempt to infiltrate Russia's Belgorod Region, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

EU SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The EU is planning to adopt the 14th package of sanctions against Russia, a senior EU official said on Friday.

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* The European Commission is evaluating the possibility of imposing restrictions on the import of agricultural products from Russia to the European Union, the commission said.

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Barely Anything Left of US-Russia Relations, Except for Space, Rosatom - Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - There is almost nothing left in US-Russia relations, except cooperation in space and contracts fulfilled by Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom, Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov said on Friday.

"There is barely anything left of Russian-American relations. In this regard, it is worth mentioning only space and contracts fulfilled by Rosatom," Antonov said in an interview for Sputnik.

The Russian ambassador said he wanted to emphasize that the remaining interaction between the two countries are mutually beneficial.

"The United States also benefits from it. However, even this cooperation is under attack as Russophobes are constantly talking about the importance of bringing bilateral contacts to a full stop," he said.

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Biden Unconcerned About Safety of Boeing-Made Presidential Planes - White House

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is unconcerned about potential safety issues with presidential aircraft manufactured by Boeing, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.

“No, he’s not concerned,” Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing, when asked whether Biden is concerned about the safety of his planes, following high-profile incidents involving Boeing.

The US president typically flies on a Boeing VC-25, which is a modified version of the Boeing 747 airliner.

In January, the door of an Alaska Air Boeing 737 Max 9 aircraft fell off during a flight, after having undergone repairs which involved the door plug. The door fell off due to a lack of bolts.

Earlier this week, US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) Chair Jennifer Homendy told lawmakers that NTSB is still unaware who performed repairs on the airplane. Boeing claims to have no records of the work and that security camera footage with the information was overwritten, Homendy said.

Boeing whistleblower John Barnett, who worked for the company for more than three decades and accused it of cutting corners to expedite production of its aircraft, was found dead from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound earlier this week. Barnett was involved in a whistleblower retaliation case against Boeing.

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Barnett showed no indications of suicidality, Barnett's lawyers said in a statement shared with Sputnik, adding that "no one can believe" the whistleblower took his own life. Barnett's lawyers called on law enforcement to investigate the whistleblower's death and share the findings publicly.

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US Approves $90.6 Million Sale Of AIM-9X Sidewinder Missiles, Gear Sale to Italy-Statement

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The US on Friday approved an arms deal with Italy, approving the sale of AIM-9X Sidewinder Missiles along with associated equipment, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency said in a statement.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Italy of AIM-9X Sidewinder Missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of $90.6 million," the statement said.

According to the statement, Italy has requested to purchase twenty-eight AIM-9X Sidewinder Block II+ Tactical Missiles, four AIM-9X Block II+ Tactical Guidance Units, eight AIM-9X Captive Air Training Missiles (CATM), and two AIM-9X CATM Guidance Units, alongside additional equipment such as active optical target detectors, personnel training, and logistics support services.

"This proposed sale will support the foreign policy goals and national security objectives of the United States by improving the security of a NATO Ally that is a force for political stability and economic progress in Europe...The proposed sale of this equipment and support will not alter the basic military balance in the region," the statement said.

RTX Corporation, based in Arlington, VA, will serve as the main contractor for this sale. Furthermore, the sale won't necessitate the deployment of extra US or contractor personnel to Italy, occasional temporary travel will be needed for training and technical support, the statement said.

The sale of AIM-9X Sidewinder Missiles to Italy will not restrict US defense readiness in any way, the statement added.

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US Intelligence Actively Seeking to Recruit Russian Diplomats – Ambassador Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) – US intelligence services are actively seeking to recruit Russian diplomats, including by sending them recruitment offers to their phones and approaching them in public, Russian ambassador Anatoly Antonov said on Friday.

"The situation around the [Russian] Embassy [in Washington, D.C.] is truly difficult. I cannot

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help but mention the unhealthy attention of the [US] intelligence services to Russian diplomats. We are talking about them sending recruitment offers to personal phones and provocative approaches to diplomats in public places," Antonov said in an interview for Sputnik.

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China To Facilitate Russia-Ukraine Talks, Seeks Constructive Role In Resolution - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 15 (Sputnik) - China is willing to provide conditions for negotiations between Russia and Ukraine while aiming to play a constructive role in the resolution of the crisis, China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Geng Shuang said on Friday.
"China is ready to provide the necessary conditions for Russia and Ukraine to engage in negotiations, and will continue to play a constructive role in promoting a political solution to the crisis," Geng Shuang said during the United Nations Security Council meeting.

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Deliveries of Long-Range Missiles to Kiev Prove US Party to Conflict – Ambassador Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov said on Friday that the fact that the United States is supplying Ukraine with long-range missiles indicates Washington's participation in the conflict against Russia.
"The United States is a party to the conflict [in Ukraine]. The provision of increasingly longer-range weapons systems is proof of this. Just a few years ago, the Americans limited themselves and supplied [Kiev] only with light weapons or firearms, but today we are talking about missile systems that shell Russian cities. American authorities are responsible for the deaths of Russian people," Antonov told Sputnik in an interview.

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Russian Ambitions to Send Nuclear Power Unit in Space 'Worrisome' - White House

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Russia's ambitions to put a nuclear power unit in space are worrisome, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Friday.
On Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin told government officials that space projects, including setting up a nuclear power unit in space, should be a priority.
"The nuclear rhetoric coming out of Moscow, not just from Putin, but from Lavrov and Peskov

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and others, is worrisome and you have to take it seriously with a nation with that kind of capability," Kirby said when asked about Russia's plans.

Kirby said the United States monitors Russia's activity very closely but sees nothing that spurs a need to change the US strategic nuclear deterrent posture.

Last month, the United States claimed that Russia is developing a space-based anti-satellite weapon that poses a serious US national security threat.

The Kremlin in response to US claims said the White House is trying to encourage Congress to vote for a bill to allocate money to Ukraine.

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Russia Requested Increased Security Near Missions in US On Election Day – Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Russia requested an enhanced security presence near it diplomatic missions in the United States during the Russian presidential elections on Sunday, Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik on Friday.

"We pay special attention to ensuring the security of the election process, and are closely monitoring the situation around our diplomatic missions," Antonov said. "We are in close contact with local law enforcement agencies. At our request, on election day, there will be a reinforced Secret Service presence, monitoring the situation around the Embassy and other Russian diplomatic missions."

Antonov noted that Russian diplomatic missions are aware of the plans of representatives of the “non-systemic opposition” to seriously complicate the organization of the electoral process and to try to influence the expression of the will of Russian citizens.

"We are ready for these kinds of provocations, and will not allow that day to be ruined for those who want to honestly fulfill their civic duty," he said. "We receive many calls from fellow citizens confirming their readiness and desire to come to the polling station ... However, given the rampant Russophobic sentiment fueled by the US authorities, we had to cancel early voting, as well as voting outside the premises of the polling stations."

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White House Says Hamas Hostages Proposal 'Within Bounds' of Deal US Has Worked On

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Hamas' recent hostage release proposal is broadly within the bounds of the deal the United States has been trying to broker for several months, White

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House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Friday.
"The proposal that was put forward is certainly ... in broad brushstrokes within the bounds of the deal that we've been working on now for several months," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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US Has Not Asked France to Refrain Talking About Sending Troops to Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The United States has not asked France to refrain from talking about the possibility of sending troops to Ukraine, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Friday.
"No," Kirby said during a press briefing, when asked if the United States requested that France refrain from talking about sending troops to Ukraine.
Kirby said sending troops to Ukraine is a sovereign decision for countries to make and based on that principle President Joe Biden has made it clear that US troops will not be deployed on the ground in Ukraine.
Last month, French President Emmanuel Macron said that Western leaders discussed the possibility of sending troops to Ukraine. Earlier this week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that Ukraine does not need French troops.

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'Propagandists,' 'Defectors' Seek to Disrupt Presidential Voting But Will Fail – Antonov

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - American propagandists and defectors from Russia are trying to disrupt the voting process in the Russian presidential elections, but their attempts are doomed to fail, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik on Friday.
"Local propagandists are trying to sow the seeds of discord among our compatriots and create doubts among them about the correctness of Russia's strategic course," Antonov said, noting that the main goal today is the upcoming presidential elections. "The task is clear: if not to disrupt the voting process, then at least to overshadow the work of our diplomats, to try to disrupt the electoral process and add an element of show to it. But I hasten to assure you that they will not succeed."
Antonov pointed out that growing Russophobic manifestations in the United States are 'fueled" not only by local officials but also by representatives of the Russian community, primarily from among the defectors.
"These traitors do not shy away from anything in an attempt to show loyalty to the local authorities," he said. "Under the guise of fighting for Russia's supposedly democratic future,

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they openly support the 'Zelensky regime.' Most of them are on the FBI's or other US intelligence agencies' hook. They are ready to slander and betray for a handout or permission to live here legally."

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White House Says Up to Israeli People to Decide if They Want to Hold New Elections

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Friday that it is up to the Israeli people to decide whether they want to hold new elections.

"That's going to be up for the Israeli people to decide," Kirby said when asked whether US President Joe Biden wants to see new elections in Israel.

On Thursday, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer called for new elections in Israel and said that Prime Minister Benjamin 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 added.

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Trudeau to Run in Next Elections Despite 'Personal Sacrifices', Mulling Quitting Everyday

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday that he would run in the next elections despite having made several "personal sacrifices" and frequently considering the possibility of quitting his job.

"I could not be the man I am and abandon the fight at this point," Trudeau said as he spoke with host of Radio-Canada's Midi-Info radio program Alec Castonguay.

Trudeau admitted he has been considering quitting on a daily basis due to the "craziness" involved in his duties and the many "personal sacrifices" he has had to make since assuming the premiership in 2015.

However, Trudeau said he would not regard himself human if he did not regularly doubt what he was doing, adding that he considers the role of prime minister to be being extremely hard and boring at times.

Trudeau said he would run again despite the difficulties associated with the job and emphasized that he is motivated by the current "precarious" state of international affairs and democracies allegedly under attack, among other factors.

"To be there for this fight. That's why I entered politics. Not to be popular, not for personal reasons, but because I want to serve and I know I have something to offer," Trudeau added.

The next Canadian federal elections are scheduled to take place on or before October 20, 2025.

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Trudeau is facing serious challenges ahead of the elections as several polls show his Liberal Party would suffer a defeat to the Conservatives due to Canadians being increasingly concerned about the government's policies and its ability to address the most urgent needs amid soaring inflation and high interest rates as well as a severe housing crisis.

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UPDATE - Oil Rallies 4% on Week After Talk of Demand Boost

(Updates with new information in paras 2, 3; modifies headline, lede)
NEW YORK, March 15 (Sputnik) - Crude prices closed up 4% on the week, despite declining slightly Friday, as projections of higher demand boosted overall an oil market that had been volatile.
London-traded Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil, settled at $85.34 per barrel, up 4.0% on the week, after last week's drop of 1.8%. For Friday, Brent slid 8 cents, or 0.01%, although it hit a session high of $85.56, extending Thursday's four-month high of $85.22.
West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark for US crude, closed at $81.04 per barrel - up 3.9% on the week, after a tumble of 2.5% the prior week. For Friday itself, the WTI fell 22 cents, or 0.3%, after reaching a peak of $81.44 versus Thursday's four-month high of $81.62.
Oil's run-up this week came after the Paris-based International Energy Agency, which looks after the interest of the world's oil consumers, 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, commenting on the ForexLive forum.
Crude prices have also benefited from production cuts announced by OPEC+ for the second quarter. OPEC Plus (OPEC +) - an alliance grouping the 13-member Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries with ten 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 weeks in US crude inventories, after a build of more than 28 million barrels from late January.
A fire at the largest oil refinery run by Russia's state-owned Rosneft added to the momentum, traders said.

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UN Says 'Extremely' Worried About Israeli Prime Minister Approval of Operation in Rafah

UNITED NATIONS, March 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is extremely worried about the

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reports of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu approving a military operation in Rafah and the world body hopes that such operations can be avoided, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"We've seen these press reports. They're extremely worrying," Dujarric said during a press briefing on Friday.

Dujarric said this is not the first time the United Nations has received such reports and emphasized that the consequences of an Israeli ground operation in Rafah would be catastrophic for the Palestinians in Gaza.

"It would be catastrophic all around. We very much hope that all of this can be avoided," Dujarric said.

The UN spokesperson also said the United Nations understands that negotiations to establish a ceasefire are still ongoing and the United Nations hopes that the parties can reach a cessation of hostilities.

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Airdrops Can Have Catastrophic Consequences, We Need Land Routes in Gaza - UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, March 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations would prefer to see more land routes for aid deliveries in Gaza because airdrops can have catastrophic consequences, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Representative for the State of Palestine Dominic Allen said on Friday.

“When airdrops miss their target or malfunction it can have catastrophic consequences. What I saw earlier in January was medical supplies, even items such as morphine landing on a beach with children picking them up, or most recently the news reports which showed that tragic deaths followed malfunctioning airdrop equipment. So this is why it's so important to come back to getting aid in at scale by a road, because there can be no substitute for the land routes,” Allen said following his visit to Rafah.

Earlier this week, the United States conducted the sixth airdrop of 5,280 pounds of food into northern Gaza, including rice, flour, pasta and canned food, amid a dire humanitarian situation in the besieged Palestinian enclave.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas attacked Israel from Gaza during which more than 1,100 Israelis - military personnel and civilians - were killed and 240 others abducted. Israel imposed a complete blockade of Gaza, began massive bombardments and then invaded the Palestinian enclave. Well over 31,000 Palestinians have been killed so far in the Israeli operations and more than 76,000 wounded, according to the local authorities.

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UN Chief Says Some ‘Shamefully Exploit’ Anti-Muslim Hate For ‘Political Gain’

UNITED NATIONS, March 15 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday said that some are exploiting anti-Muslim hate and abusing it for political gain.

“Some are shamefully exploiting anti-Muslim hate and exclusionary policies for political gain. We must call this what it is. Hate. Plain and simple,” Guterres said during a high-level event commemorating the International Day to Combat Islamophobia.

In addition, Guterres said that online platforms have become a breeding ground for extremist ideologies.

Earlier during the meeting, Deputy Russian Permanent Representative Maria Zabolotskaya said that Moscow does not accept barbaric acts such as the burning of the Koran or insulting the feelings of believers. Moreover, Russia has a lot of experience with minority tolerance - it is home to more than 190 ethnicities and more than 20 million people follow Islam, she added.

According to the UN, with the current conflict in the Middle East, multiple reports have emerged showing huge spikes in Islamophobic incidents. There have been reported instances of anti-Semitism as well. The United Nations has always argued for the peaceful co-existence of all religious groups.

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UN Chief Condemns Russia for Holding Elections in Annexed Regions - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 15 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemns Moscow for holding presidential elections in regions formerly in Ukraine that had decided to rejoin Russia, given that their "annexation" is not valid under international law, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"The Secretary-General condemns the efforts of the Russian Federation to hold its presidential elections in areas of Ukraine occupied by the Russian Federation. He recalls that the attempted illegal annexation of regions of Ukraine has no validity under international law," Dujarric said in a statement.

The United Nations is committed to the territorial integrity of Ukraine, Dujarric added.

Moscow has repeatedly stated that the four regions in question had rejoined Russia by conducting referendums, which is the highest democratic method of expressing the people's will.

The three-day voting process for Russia's presidential election started on Friday morning.

Four contenders for the presidency registered with the Russian Central Election Commission, including Putin; Liberal Democratic Party of Russia candidate Leonid Slutsky; New People Party candidate Vladislav Davankov; and Communist Party candidate Nikolay Kharitonov.

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

Biden Calls Putin 'Thug' During Luncheon With Irish Prime Minister

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during a luncheon with Ireland's Taoiseach Leo Varadkar on Friday called Russian President Vladimir Putin a thug and urged the House of Representatives to approve a Senate-passed foreign aid bill that would provide some $60 billion in additional assistance to Ukraine.

"I think a vast majority of members of Congress are willing to do their part, and I continue to urge every member in this room to stand up to Vladimir Putin, he is a thug," Biden said during the luncheon with House Speaker Mike Johnson in attendance. "I urge you to send me the national security bill now."

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov previously said Biden's insults against the head of another state are unlikely to hurt Putin, but instead debase those who use such vocabulary.

Biden is eager to get Congress to approve additional funding for Ukraine aid after funds ran dry in December and as Russia makes territorial gains in the conflict.

Last month, Senate Republicans rejected a $118 billion national security supplemental package that included $60 billion for Ukraine, $14 billion for Israel and border policy reforms. Republicans said 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 with no border provisions to the House of Representatives, which Johnson has been reluctant to take up at the moment while lawmakers prioritize passing full year spending budgets.

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

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Migrant Arrested for Alleged Rape of Disabled Girl Entered US Under Biden Policy - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - A Haitian migrant arrested in Massachusetts for allegedly raping a disabled 15-year-old girl had entered the United States under a parole program operated by the Biden administration, Fox News reported on Friday.

The migrant, Cory Alvarez, came to the United States from Haiti in June 2023 through a parole program for Haitian, Cuban, Nicaraguan and Venezuelan migrants, the report said, citing US Department of Homeland Security sources.

Immigration authorities have since filed a detainer on Alvarez with local law enforcement, the report said.

The Biden administration's migrant program provides two-year humanitarian parole grants, which enable migrants to live in the US and apply for work authorization. At least 138,000 Haitians have entered the US since the start of the program in January 2023, according to US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data.

Earlier this week, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis ordered the deployment of 250 additional

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soldiers to address a potential influx of migrants from Haiti, amid a political and security crisis in the Caribbean country.

White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Thursday that US federal agencies have contingency plans in place to address a potential mass migration event from Haiti.

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Oil Heads for 4% Weekly Gain on Talk of Demand Boost

NEW YORK, March 15 (Sputnik) - Crude prices were headed for a weekly gain of around 4% despite falling on Friday as projections of higher demand boosted a volatile oil market.

With an hour to Friday's settlement, London-traded Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil, was at $85.51 per barrel, down 11 cents, or 0.1%. Earlier, Brent hit a session high of $85.56, extending Thursday's four-month high of $85.22. For the week, the global crude benchmark was up almost 4%, after last week's drop of 1.8%.

West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark for US crude, was at $81.05 per barrel - down 21 cents, or 0.3%. The so-called WTI hit a session high of $81.44, after Thursday's four-month peak of $81.62. For the week, WTI showed a gain of 3.8% after last week's tumble of 2.5%.

Oil's run-up this week came after the Paris-based International Energy Agency, which looks after the interest of the world's oil consumers, 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, commenting on the ForexLive forum.

Crude prices had also benefited from production cuts announced by OPEC+ for the second quarter. OPEC+ is an alliance grouping the 13-member Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries with ten oil producing countries steered by Russia. OPEC+ said it 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 weeks in US crude inventories, after a build of more than 28 million barrels from late January.

A fire at the largest oil refinery run by Russia's state-owned Rosneft added to the momentum, traders said.

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Trudeau Characterizes Situation in Gaza as 'Unacceptable Humanitarian Crisis'

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday that the situation in the Gaza Strip was an "unacceptable humanitarian crisis" and the reason why Ottawa has been seeking a ceasefire and urging Israel to avoid a military operation in

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Rafah.

Trudeau made the remarks as he participated in the Midi-Info radio-show hosted by Radio-Canada's Alec Castonguay.

Earlier on Friday, media reported that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had approved a military operation in Rafah and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were preparing to evacuate civilians from there.

"An unacceptable humanitarian crisis," Trudeau said when questioned by Castonguay on how he would characterize the current situation in the Palestinian enclave.

Trudeau said the humanitarian crisis is the reason why the Canadian government is pushing for a humanitarian ceasefire as soon as possible.

While Canada's attempts to have a ceasefire before the Islamic holy month of Ramadan failed, it continues to push back against an Israeli military incursion into Rafah.

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Carbon Tax Hike to be Maintained on April 1st Despite Calls to Cancel It– Trudeau

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) – The 23% carbon tax hike planned for April 1st will happen despite seven provincial premiers and the Conservative official opposition at the House of Commons (HoC) urging the government to cancel it, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

In 2019, the Trudeau government introduced "carbon pricing" 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 from 69% of Canadians as per a Leger poll earlier in March.

"Yes, I will preserve the hike," Trudeau said in French as he spoke with Alec Castonguay, host of Radio-Canada's Midi-Info radio program.

The Prime Minister argued that he intends to maintain the hike because the tax rebate will reimburse the money to the families paying it and bring more in return to eight in ten families in participating regions nationwide.

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 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 citizens while others called on him to listen to the pleas of the people who are being hurt by continued increases in the costs of living. Trudeau reacted to the statements saying that his job was not to be popular but to do the "right thing" for Canada now, and for Canadians in

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the future.

As provincial premiers continued to express their disagreement with Trudeau and his carbon tax, the leader of Canada's Conservative Party Pierre Poilievre said on Thursday that he would force votes in the HoC next week to halt the hike and urged Liberal and New Democratic lawmakers to vote with the Tories.

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Wall Street Down as US Blue Chip, Tech Stocks Fall Ahead of Fed Rate Decision

NEW YORK, March 15 (Sputnik) - Wall Street was headed for a second straight weekly drop on Friday as US blue chip and technology stocks fell in anticipation of price swings ahead of next week's interest rate decision by the Federal Reserve.

With three hours to Friday's close, the New York Stock Exchange's S&P 500 index, which tracks stocks of the top 500 US companies, was at 5,105, down 45 points, or 0.9%. For the week, the S&P 500 slid nearly 0.1%, mimicking last week's decline.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee tech names such as Google, Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Netflix, was at 15,926 — down 202 points, or 1.3%. For the week, the Nasdaq was 0.7% lower versus last week's 1.5% gain.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which serves as Wall Street's broadest equities indicator by tracking the stocks of 30 large US corporations, was at 38,619 — down 287 points, or 0.7%. It was the only key index that bucked the weekly direction on the S&P 500 and Nasdaq by showing a 0.2% gain on the week, after last week's 0.1% drop.

The slide in blue chip and tech stocks came as numbers on US industrial output, factory performance and consumer sentiment varied in direction ahead of the March 20 Fed rate decision.

Thierry Wizman, a strategist in the United States for Australian financial group Macquarie, said in comments carried by the Wall Street Journal that varying US economic data could prompt policy-makers at the central bank to ask if inflation has cooled enough or rates should remain restrictive for now.

Stock market behavior, pushing for a rate cut, could also influence the Fed, he suggested. "I think the other issue here is not just the 2024 and 2025 (outlook) … it is the other issues that the Fed is thinking about, which includes that the (stock) market is too frothy," Wizman said. "For that reason it could signal that it thinks long-term interest rates should be higher."

The Fed said it is looking to cut rates as inflation moderates. But the central bank says it needs the Consumer Price Index, an oft-used indicator of inflation, to first show an annual reading of 2% or lower.

The so-called CPI reading was up 3.2% year-on-year in February, higher than January's 3.1%.

Notwithstanding that, the current reading is drastically lower than in July 2022, when annual CPI stood at a four-decade high of 9.1%.

The Fed hiked interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023, responding to runaway inflation induced by the trillions of dollars of federal spending to fight the COVID-19

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pandemic. The central bank's actions have added to the burden of Americans as the basic rate for lending rose to 5.25 percentage points from a pre-pandemic level of just 0.25%,

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US Industrial Output, Factory Data Vary Ahead of Federal Reserve's Interest Rates Decision

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Numbers on US industrial output, factory performance and consumer sentiment are varying in direction ahead of next week's Federal Reserve decision on interest rates, data released by the US central bank and other sources showed on Friday.

US industrial production rose marginally in February due to suppressed demand even as factory output across the country increased, a Fed report showed on Friday ahead of the central bank's March 20 meeting on interest rates.

Industrial production advanced by 0.1% at factories, mines and utilities, after a downward revised 0.5% drop in January. However, the Fed noted that manufacturing surged 0.8% last month, overcoming to an extent January's 1.1% decrease forced by harsh winter weather.

In New York State, the Fed's Empire State business-conditions index - a gauge of manufacturing activity - fell 18.5 points in March to a negative 20.9. The drop was larger than that expected by economists polled by the Wall Street Journal, who only forecast an average negative reading of 6.

In other data, the University of Michigan's closely-watched consumer sentiment survey showed Americans to be less optimistic about the economy despite a backdrop of easing inflation, growth and talk of interest rates going down at some point this year. The so-called UMich consumer-confidence survey slipped to 76.5 in mid-March from 76.9 last month. Economists polled by The Wall Street Journal had expected a reading of 77.1 on the average.

The New York Stock Exchange was headed for a second straight weekly drop on fears of price swings ahead of the Fed's decision on interest rates next Wednesday.

Thierry Wizman, a strategist in the United States for the Australian financial group Macquarie, said that varying US economic data could prompt policy-makers at the Fed to ask if inflation has cooled enough or interest rates should be kept restrictive for now.

Wizman suggested that stock market behavior, pushing for a rate cut, could also influence the Fed.

"I think the other issue here is not just the 2024 and 2025 (outlook) … it is the other issues that the Fed is thinking about, which includes that the (stock) market is too frothy," Wizman said. "For that reason it could signal that it thinks long-term interest rates should be higher."

The Fed said it is looking to cut interest rates as inflation moderates but it needs the Consumer Price Index (CPI) - an oft-used indicator of inflation, to first show an annual reading of 2% or lower.

The CPI reading was up 3.2% year-on-year in February, higher than January's 3.1%. The current reading is drastically lower than in July 2022, when annual CPI stood at a four-decade high of 9.1%.

The Fed hiked interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023, responding to

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runaway inflation induced by the trillions of dollars of federal spending as part of the COVID-19 pandemic measures. The central bank's actions have added to the burden of Americans as the basic rate for lending rose to 5.25 percentage points from a pre-pandemic level of 0.25%.

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Russia Rejects Position of Some States Indulging in Burning Quran - Deputy Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, March 15 (Sputnik)- Russia rejects the position of some states who insult the feelings of believers by allowing the burning of the Quran, the Islamic holy book, and not punishing those who conduct such acts, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations Maria Zabolotskaya said on Friday.

"The Russian Federation does not accept the position of those countries who, for example, indulge in the barbaric acts of burning the Quran, insulting the feelings of believers on their territories, and leaving those guilty unpunished on the grounds of their alleged right to freedom of opinion and expression," Zabolotskaya said during a meeting of the UN General Assembly on Islamophobia.

Zabolotskaya said Russia calls on the international community to protect religious groups.

Out of 143 million residents in Russia, more than 20 million are Muslims. Russia has traditionally stood for the peaceful co-existence of its 190 ethnicities and various religious groups residing on its territory.

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US Supreme Court Lays Out Social Media Moderation Rules for Public Officials - Ruling

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court said on Friday that public officials who prevent users from commenting on their social media pages are engaged in deprivation of rights if they possess governmental authority and purport to exercise such authority in their online activity.

"A public official who prevents someone from commenting on the official's social-media page engages in state action under Section 1983 only if the official both (1) possessed actual authority to speak on the State's behalf on a particular matter, and (2) purported to exercise that authority when speaking in the relevant social-media posts," the Supreme Court said in a ruling.

Section 1983 provides a cause of action against people who, under the color of state authorities, deprive someone of a federal constitutional or statutory right.

The ruling came in response to a case involving a city manager in Michigan who blocked a user and deleted comments from his social media page after the user expressed discontent with the city's COVID-19 policies.

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The user sued the city manager, claiming that he has a right to comment on the official's page because it counts as a public forum. A US circuit court initially ruled in favor of the city manager, contending that he maintained the social media page in a private capacity.

However, the Supreme Court vacated the lower court's ruling and remanded the case.

It can be difficult to determine whether a government official posting online about job-related topics counts as official or private speech, Justice Amy Coney Barrett said in the court's written opinion. A public official who fails to keep personal posts in a "clearly designated" personal account exposes themselves to greater potential liability, Barrett said.

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US Will Continue to Help Austria Move Away From Russian Gas - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to help Austria in its efforts to move away from Russian gas, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"Different countries have different energy relationships with Russia that have been built up over many many decades, so it's not always easy to change these things in one moment. It's a process and it's a transition ... to think of some very important steps that Austria has taken and is taking," Blinken said. "To that end, for the United States, as we've done with many partners in Europe, we want to be able to help and we have with LNG - liquefied natural gas. We'll continue to do that."

Austrian Energy Minister Leonore Gewessler said in February that Vienna is looking into the possibility of terminating gas supply agreements between Austria's oil, gas and petrochemical company OMV and Russia's energy giant Gazprom and will study all available withdrawal options.

Gewessler said that one of the reasons for Austria's high-level dependence on Russian gas was the OMV-Gazprom agreement, which provided for fixed obligations for the purchase of Russian gas.

In July 2023, OMV CEO Alfred Stern said that the company would continue to buy a major portion of its gas from Russia and was not planning to terminate its long-term contract with Gazprom despite securing alternative contracts from other sources to cover Austria's energy import needs. In September, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer said that OMV had supply contracts with Gazprom until 2040 and terminating them would be too expensive for Austria.

Reducing energy dependence on Russia became one of the European Union's top priorities after the start of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, when the bloc decided to phase out its imports of Russian fuels. The decision led to a sharp increase in gas prices in European Union. To curb the price hike, the European Commission presented several measures, including joint purchasing, price caps and increased energy conservation efforts.

As part of these efforts, the European Union has boosted energy cooperation with a number of countries, including the United States, Algeria and Nigeria, with a particular focus on LNG

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imports.

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Blinken Says Fentanyl Remains Major Killer of Young Americans

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) – Fentanyl remains the leading killer of young Americans, and countering that drug is the first priority of the Biden administration, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"Number one killer of Americans aged 14 to 45 is fentanyl," Blinken told reporters during the joint media availability with Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg in Vienna.

Blinken stressed that over 40% of Americans know at least one person who died from an opioid overdose. "In the US, there virtually no a town, a city, or a state that has not been affected and, in some cases, devastated by synthetic opioids and notably fentanyl," he added.

He emphasized that addressing this issue is a priority for the US administration.

The United States is facing a severe synthetic drug crisis, with fentanyl overdose being the leading cause of death among young people. Washington has repeatedly accused China of being the largest supplier of synthetic drugs to the US.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid primarily used as a painkiller for cancer patients. It is 50 times more powerful than heroin.

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US Has Not Yet Seen Israel Plan on How to Protect Civilians in Rafah - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The United States has not yet seen Israel's plan on how to protect civilians in Rafah, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"On Rafah... we have not seen it," Blinken said during the press conference. "We have to see a clear and implementable plan, not only to get civilians out of harm's way, but also to make sure that once out of harm's way they're appropriately cared for with shelter, with food, with medicine, with clothing - and we've not yet seen such a plan."

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Biden Says Schumer Notified Him in Advance of Anti-Netanyahu Remarks, Calls Speech 'Good'

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WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Friday that US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer contacted White House staff to inform them in advance of his intent to deliver a speech critical of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"Senator Schumer contacted my staff, my senior staff, he was going to make that speech. I'm not going to elaborate on his speech. He made a good speech," Biden said during remarks at the White House.

Schumer expressed a serious concern shared by many people in the United States, Biden said.

On Thursday, Schumer delivered remarks on the Senate floor, in which he called Netanyahu an obstacle to peace between Israelis and Palestinians, as well as called for new elections in Israel.

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Blinken Confirms Hamas Put Forward Counter-Proposal on Truce in Gaza

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Friday confirmed that Hamas has put forward a counter-proposal on the hostage and ceasefire deal with Israel and said the United States is working with Israel, Qatar and Egypt to finalize it.

"Yes, there has been a counterproposal put forward by Hamas," Blinken said during a joint press briefing with Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg in Vienna. "[W]e are working intensively with Israel, with Qatar, with Egypt to bridge the remaining gaps and to try to reach an agreement. We have conversations that are happening now as we speak here and I'm convinced they'll go into the coming days."

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

(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-12)

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The Superior Court of Fulton County in the state of Georgia on Friday declined to remove District Attorney Fani Willis from former President Donald Trump's 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 said.

On January 8, one of Trump's co-defendants, Michael Roman, filed a motion to disqualify Willis in the case, alleging an improper relationship between her and Special Prosecutor Nathan

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Wade and claiming financial impropriety and lavish vacations funded by taxpayer money.

In its order, the court admitted that the motion to disqualify prosecutor Willis was inevitable and unsurprising given the circumstances of the relationship between Willis and Wade, but disagreed with the defendants' arguments that the relationship presented a financial conflict of interest.

Although the court was presented with evidence that Willis received a direct financial benefit of approximately $12,000 to $15,000 from her romantic relationship with Wade, the court did not consider these grounds sufficient to remove Willis from the case.

"After considering all the surrounding circumstances, the court finds that the evidence did not establish the district attorney's receipt of a material financial benefit as a result of her decision to hire and engage in a romantic relationship with Wade," the order said.

Moreover, according to the court, the evidence presented at the hearing demonstrated that the financial gain flowing from Willis' relationship with Wade "was not a motivating factor" on her part to indict and prosecute Trump's election meddling case.

At the same time, the court noted that it does not condone Willis' "tremendous lapse in judgment or the unprofessional manner" during her testimony at the hearing, according to the order.

As regards Wade, the court agreed with the defendants' arguments about the impropriety of his relationship with Willis.

"The established record now highlights a significant appearance of impropriety that infects the current structure of the prosecution team - an appearance that must be removed through the state's selection of one of two options," the order said.

The court concluded that the case against Trump and other co-defendants cannot proceed until the state moves forward with one of the options: assigning a completely new team of investigators to the case, meaning that Willis and her entire team including Wade need to step aside or Wade's self-withdrawal from the case.

A Fulton County grand jury indicted Trump on 13 felony counts related to his alleged attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. Trump has pleaded not guilty to charges lodged by Willis in Georgia over the 2020 presidential election.

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Trump Attorney Says Will Use 'All Legal Options Available' After Ruling on Fani Willis

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Former US President Trump's lawyer Steve Sadow on Friday criticized a court decision to allow District Attorney Fani Willis to continue prosecuting the Georgia election interference case and vowed to use "all legal options available" to fight the charges.

"While respecting the Court's decision, we believe that the Court did not afford appropriate significance to the prosecutorial misconduct of Willis and Wade, including the financial benefits, testifying untruthfully about when their personal relationship began, as well as Willis' extrajudicial MLK 'church speech,' where she played the race card and falsely accused the

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defendants and their counsel of racism. We will use all legal options available as we continue to fight to end this case, which should never have been brought in the first place," Sadow said in a statement.

Earlier today, the Superior Court of Fulton County in the State of Georgia declined to remove Willis from Trump's election interference case, arguing that the allegations against her were legally insufficient.

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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Blinken, Grossi Discuss ZNPP, Nuclear Safety – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi discussed the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) in the wake of a Ukrainian attack on the facility, the State Department said after their meeting in Vienna on Friday.

“The Secretary and Director General Grossi discussed nuclear safety, security, and safeguards issues, including the IAEA’s presence at Ukraine’s Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant,” the statement said.

Blinken stressed Washington’s strong support for the IAEA’s global nuclear nonproliferation verification mission, including in addressing outstanding verification issues in Iran.

“He also noted the IAEA’s critical role in helping Member States develop and benefit from the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, science, and technology to aid in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including to meeting the challenge of global climate change,” the statement added.

The ZNPP’s press office said on Thursday that the Ukrainian military shelled critical infrastructure at the plant, with explosives dropping five meters (16.4 feet) away from a fuel storage facility.

Located on the left bank of the Dnipro River, the ZNPP is the largest nuclear facility in Europe. It came under Russia's control in early 2022 and has since been repeatedly shelled, raising safety concerns. IAEA experts have been monitoring the situation Israeli Portrayal of Arabs Akin To Nazi Portrayal of Russians in 2022.

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Israeli Portrayal of Arabs Akin To Nazi Portrayal of Russians

Days after the Hamas surprise attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, Israeli Defense Minister said they were fighting “human animals” and called for a “complete siege” on the Gaza strip. “There

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will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed. We are fighting human animals and will act accordingly," he said.

The language Israeli officials are using to describe Palestinians and other Arab peoples seems ripped out of the Nazi propaganda playbook, journalist and managing editor of Covert Action Magazine Jeremy Kuzmarov told Sputnik's Fault Lines on Thursday.

"The Jews experienced pogroms and real persecution and atrocities by the Nazis, but [Israel is] doing the same thing now, and they can't see that. They're using dehumanizing language. That's the language of genocides… that's what I heard out of Israeli leaders," Kuzmarov asserted.

"How [Nazis] portrayed the Russians when they invaded Russia… as these Salvs, subhuman animals. That's how they could carry out these horrific atrocities on the eastern front… The exact quote [from Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant] 'human animals' could have come from a Nazi official talking about the Russians."

The reason this can go on while Israel still receives significant, though decreasing, support from the US population comes from a lack of historical knowledge, Kuzmarov argued.

"We see this phenomenon in the US. The media is so biased and the education system conditions people to think in certain ways. In the Israeli context, they are cut off from the true nature of history. They view Israel as this proud nation that had to fight off all these hostile forces. They don't consider the history of the Nakba, or the Six-Day War," Kuzmarov explained, comparing it to the conflict in Ukraine.

"Americans were never told the backstory of how the US interfered in Ukraine… they just thought "oh, Putin is a madman. He woke up one day to take over Ukraine' and they didn't have any knowledge that the CIA set up bases in Ukraine for years and they were provoking the Russians and attacking the people of eastern Ukraine."

During the conversation, show host Ted Rall noted the breaking news that Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) released a statement saying that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had "lost his way" and called for a new leadership in Israel.

"He's been a staunch supporter of military aid to Israel as well as Ukraine, so it's coming a bit late in the game for him," Kuzmarov recalled. "On the other hand, it is pretty significant that somebody in his position would make those kinds of statements. It goes to show [that] Netanyahu has totally lost. Even his own allies are turning against him because he's just gone way too far."

But Schumer's words, as with US President Joe Biden's recent comments distancing himself from Netanyahu, must be backed up with action to be taken seriously, Kuzmarov said. "We have Democratic Party politicians who may be conscious of public opinion [with] an election coming up in November," he began. "So, they're making certain public statements but we've never seen any overtures towards actually cutting off that money."

Kuzmarov thinks that is unlikely because US "foreign policy elites" depend on Israel to act as an American proxy in the region. "Schumer and Biden and the corporate Democrats are pro-imperialists and committed to Americans expanding or entrenching American power in the Middle East and accessing Middle Eastern oil. Whatever public statements they make, I don't know that they'll actually carry out any concrete action against Israel. If they did, that would be amazing to see, but my prediction is that they won't."

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Despite American Perception, Iran Does Not Control Yemeni Houthis

On Thursday, multiple media outlets reported on secret meetings between Iranian and US officials with Omani officials acting as a conduit. According to the reports, the US asked Iran to instruct the Yemeni Houthis to stop their blockade in the Red Sea.

However, Iran has made it very clear that they will not negotiate on behalf of their allies, Dr. Seyed Mohammad Marandi, a professor of English literature and Orientalism at the University of Tehran, told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Thursday.

"It's obvious that the Iranians are not going to negotiate on behalf of Yemen," Marandi explained, pointing to when Saudi Arabia and Iran were negotiating to reestablish diplomatic relations. "There were years of negotiations to reestablish ties. The sticking point was that the Saudis wanted Iran to negotiate on behalf of Yemen because [Saudi Arabia was] at war with Yemen… and the Iranians insisted that they [would] not negotiate on their behalf… ultimately, the Saudis removed that precondition."

Marandi insisted that contrary to media reports, "No negotiations between Iran and the United States took place [regarding Houthi attacks in the Red Sea] because the Iranians would not accept such negotiations."

To stop the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, the US simply has to stop supporting Israel's genocide in Gaza, Marandi argued. "[The Houthis] have said from the very beginning when the genocide in Gaza began that they will block shipping to Israel, to Israeli ports, in order to put pressure on the regime to stop the genocide and they said they will do it in accordance with the Genocide Convention," Marandi explained. "They are actually working within the framework of international law and their position is a deeply moral position… Yemen has said repeatedly that if the genocide stops, their actions in the Red Sea will stop."

Meanwhile, the US and its "sidekick, the British" are working to help the Israeli genocide, including by killing Yemeni citizens, Marandi said.

However, that has caused problems for those countries who were added to Yemen's blockade list in response. "[The US and UK] created a problem for themselves," he explained. "In this upside-down world that we live in today, the United States is attacking Yemen in order to help the Israeli regime continue with genocide unimpeded."

The reverberations of that decision and the US insisting that shipping companies go around Africa instead of through the Red Sea, is hurting more than just the US and its allies. "What the Americans want to do, is they want to make this a crisis, a global economic problem," Marandi said. "They want everyone to suffer so that they can gain leverage and put pressure on Yemen to end the blockade… for the sake of Israel and for the sake of the Israeli genocide, they're willing to make everyone suffer."

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US in 'Constant State of Neo-McCarthyism' - Political Expert

On Wednesday, US media published sensationalist headlines declaring that Russian President Vladimir Putin is "ready to use" nuclear weapons if the existence of Russia is threatened. But a deeper reading reveals that Putin was only reiterating the longstanding policy of Russia, which is shared by other nuclear powers.

The US fearmongering surrounding Russia is the result of a sort of "Neo-McCarthyism" Mark Sleboda, an international relations and security analyst told Sputnik's Fault Lines on Wednesday.

"If someone threatened the existence of the US state, they would use nuclear weapons. Putin is saying the exact same thing," Sleboda explained. "The Western media just loves putting Russia and nukes together in the same sentence. I think it has a certain amount of scaremongering, a kind of neo-McCarthyite effect just by seeing the two words together in a headline."

Show host Melik Abdul pointed to a panel between US commentators Candace Owens and Chris Cuomo, during which Cuomo refused to acknowledge that Putin is intelligent, Abdul said that it is emblematic of the West's refusal to "acknowledge basic stuff."

"I mean, could we agree that Putin is intelligent?" Sleboda responded playfully. "Could we agree that Putin is a human being? [Do] we agree that Putin's first name is Vladimir? None of these things, I guess, [can] be agreed on because we live in a constant state of hyper neo-McCarthyism," Sleboda added, noting that the term isn't quite correct since Russia is no longer communist.

"Maybe Russophobic hysteria" is a better term, he pondered.

"But Vladimir Putin is, obviously, an extremely intelligent and capable leader of his country. He is a thorn in the US hegemony's side. Numerous US politicians and officials have admitted that, but in the current social-political climate in the United States, it's simply verboten. It is forbidden to acknowledge things like that," Sleboda explained. "Let us understand that this is a propaganda bubble that Americans have, to a large part, inflicted on themselves."

Sleboda noted that Russia is not alone in being targeted by this type of propaganda by the US. "It's not just Putin, of course, this is against any opponent of the US," he explained. "A country is usually demonized to a caricature vision of one person, one leader, as it was done with [Former Iraqi leader] Saddam Hussein, as it was done with [former Libyan leader Muammar] Gaddafi, as it is done with [North Korean leader] Kim Jong Un."

He noted that some countries are reduced to a group rather than a single leader but the effect remains the same. "With China… It's the Chinese Communist Party. Or in Iran, it's the mullahs." Ultimately, the goal is to "dehumanize the opponent and then malign it into one easily identifiable evil package in this kind of childish, Manichean representation of the world, to make things easier for the American voter to understand who the enemy is."

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Iran has made it very clear that they will not negotiate on behalf of the Yemeni Houthis, Dr. Seyed Mohammad Marandi, a professor of English literature and Orientalism at the University of Tehran, told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Thursday.

"It's obvious that the Iranians are not going to negotiate on behalf of Yemen," Marandi explained, pointing to when Saudi Arabia and Iran were negotiating to reestablish diplomatic relations. "There were years of negotiations to reestablish ties. The sticking point was that the Saudis wanted Iran to negotiate on behalf of Yemen because [Saudi Arabia was] at war with Yemen… and the Iranians insisted that they [would] not negotiate on their behalf… ultimately, the Saudis removed that precondition.

"No negotiations between Iran and the United States took place [regarding Houthi attacks in the Red Sea] because the Iranians would not accept such negotiations," he added.

Meanwhile, the United States and its "sidekick, the British" are working to help the Israeli genocide, including by killing Yemeni citizens, Marandi said. "For the sake of Israel and for the sake of the Israeli genocide, they're willing to make everyone suffer," he added later.

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