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United States 'Mocking' International Law, Creating 'World of the Jungle'

Journalist Elijah Magnier slammed the US for its disavowal of the Security Council's ceasefire resolution while also criticizing Israeli conduct in Gaza. "They know they are doing [war crimes]," said the analyst.

The Biden administration made waves on Monday when its delegation to the UN abstained during a Security Council vote calling for a ceasefire in the besieged Gaza Strip. The act was significant as the US has vetoed three previous resolutions with similar language.

The passage of the statement raised hopes that violence could finally come to an end in the enclave as Israel's nearly seven month-long operation has left over 32,000 Palestinians dead, most of them thought to be civilians.

But the US immediately backpedaled in the hours since, insisting the Security Council resolution is "non-binding." The Biden administration's statements have caused analysts like Elijah Magnier to conclude the country is using the UN merely to manage its relationship with Israel, damaging the authority of international law and threatening world peace in the process. The journalist offered his thoughts during a discussion on Sputnik's Fault Lines program Tuesday.

"First of all the resolution was [drafted] with the word 'permanent' ceasefire, and then the Americans rejected the word 'permanent' and changed it with a 'lasting' ceasefire," explained Magnier. "And there's a big difference between a 'lasting' ceasefire and a 'permanent' ceasefire. A lasting ceasefire implies a cessation of hostility that is intended to be stable and enduring, but not necessarily to be part of a comprehensive peace agreement that addresses all the issues that the Israelis and the Palestinians have been fighting about since 1948."

"It also requires a mechanism of verification of the ceasefire that has not been put in place," he noted. "The Americans came out after the meeting of the Security Council with something so absurd by the US ambassador saying, 'well, this resolution is non-binding.'"

The statement was made by White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby during a press conference after the vote. The Biden administration has taken pains to insist the United States' relationship with Israel hasn't changed in light of the UN resolution. But Magnier said such statements do great damage to the power and legitimacy of international law.

"If you look at Article 25 of the UN charter, all members of the United Nations agreed to… accept and carry out the decision," said the journalist, noting that Security Council resolutions are intended to be binding and enforced by members. "Every single US official came out to say, 'oh, this is a non-binding resolution,' undermining international laws."

"If these laws are not implemented we live in the world of the jungle, we don't live in an institution and we don't live in international law."

The veteran war correspondent, who has reported from Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Yugoslavia, said the erosion in international cooperation seriously threatens the world's ability to peacefully resolve global conflicts.

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"At this point I think the whole world needs something to happen because the Second World War brought the United Nations," Magnier said. "Do we need a third World War to change the world constitution and start putting a mechanism in place where all countries should abide by international laws? Because it seems the Americans are cherry picking who can implement international laws and who cannot."

"When the United Nations Security Council is told by a permanent member, i.e., the US, that this binding resolution is non-binding, then we have a serious problem worldwide," he added.

Israeli newspaper The Times of Israel crowed about the United States' obstruction in an article published on Monday, writing, "it demonstrates the highly limited influence the UN has when weighing into conflicts around the world."

But Magnier said the passage of the resolution is a blow to Israel, which carefully attempts to manage its international reputation despite frequently criticizing the UN and disregarding its resolutions.

"The Israelis give a lot of importance for their image," said the reporter. "This is why when the United Nations is accusing Israel and asking for a ceasefire, that is a demand that the Israelis can ignore, but with consequences… But nothing is going to force the Israelis to implement a resolution when they have already disregarded 64 other United Nations resolutions agreed [to] by the Americans, not abstained by the Americans, in relation to Palestine, and they have never implemented."

The correspondent claimed the sadism and brutality of the Israeli military is unprecedented during his time as a journalist.

"In my field experience, with 35 years of war, I have never seen an army taking pictures, taking videos, posting videos on social media and showing all the war crimes that [they] are doing, laughing and [not] giving a damn about world opinion or about international laws," Magnier claimed. "They are committing war crimes, they know they are doing it. They're committing crimes against humanity... and they say, 'we don't care what you think. One day you will forget.'"

Video has circulated of Israeli soldiers stripping men down to their underwear and rifling through women's panty drawers after forcing their way into Palestinian homes. Recent footage of the IDF firing on and killing three unarmed Gazan civilians drew widespread condemnation online.

"People [in Gaza] spend all their time in the middle of the month of Ramadan just begging for a bowl of soup or a bowl of meat once a day at the end of the day, and they have no strength to continue," said Magnier. "And this is happening in the south. In the north it's ten times worse."

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'Not Real Muslims': Moscow Terrorists Were Mercenaries Engaged in 'Political Act' - Analyst

"This was a political act linked to an American policy objective being implemented by Ukrainian intelligence services," said former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter of last week's terrorist attack in Moscow.

Speculation has run rampant since last week's horrific terrorist attack in a Moscow suburb left 139 dead and scores more wounded. The United States immediately seized on a statement

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from a figure allegedly linked to the terror group ISIS*, claiming Ukraine had no involvement in the tragic incident. Some have taken the US explanation at face value.

Others have critically scrutinized aspects of the attack, pointing out incongruities with typical terrorist actions.

Former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter is in the latter camp, claiming the incident appears dissimilar to the typical "handiwork" of the so-called Islamic State. Ritter joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program on Tuesday to expound on his analysis.

"These aren't hardcore ISIS followers," said the former US Marine Corps intelligence officer. "These are people who self-identified as ISIS by posting an image that was picked up by the ISIS media arm and then published and ISIS looked at it and said, 'okay, they're doing all the right things. They published a photo, they made Shahada – announced the creed of Islam. So we're going to say yes, this is ISIS, this is ours.'"

But Ritter claimed various aspects of the attackers' alleged profession of faith seem amiss.

"Shahada is the Islamic creed that is extraordinarily important because that's how one says 'I am Muslim,'" explained the former weapons inspector. "It's a very pious act. It only counts if it's meant seriously. And there's nothing in the Islamic religion that says that you have to raise a finger. That is something that has come into trend with jihadists because Osama bin Laden did that."

"So you'll see a lot of al-Qaeda Islamists do Shahada raising their right hand," he continued. "Right hand, by the way, is very important – it's the hand of righteousness, it's the clean hand, it's the hand that does good. The left hand is the hand of Satan, the hand of evil, the hand that does bad."

"These four perpetrators of this action in Moscow posted a photograph of them giving Shahada with their left hand, which tells you they have no clue what they're doing," said Ritter. "These aren't Muslims. These aren't real Muslims. These are people who are pretending to be Muslims."

Ritter also pointed to the fact that the perpetrators fled the scene of the terrorist attack afterwards, rather than fighting to the death. Islamic terrorists typically go out as "martyrs," he noted, following their "true north" to eternal reward in Heaven. Friday's attackers instead attempted to flee to Ukraine, suggesting their "true north" is Kiev.

"The biggest takeaway, though, is that they blurred their faces," he claimed. "If you're getting ready to announce your creed to Islam and you're going to be a martyr, navigating true north to heaven and the 72 virgins that await you, you want your faces seen. You're announcing this piously, publicly. They blurred their faces. Why?"

"Because these aren't jihadists, these are mercenaries," Ritter concluded. "These are people who took money to commit an act of irregular warfare. We can call it terrorism because that's what it was. But the purpose of this action was attached to a larger policy objective of disrupting Russian presidential elections."

Recently released video from the scene of the attack appeared to show one of the attackers scoping out the Crocus City Hall venue earlier this month. The evidence has led to speculation the attack was originally intended to be carried out before Russia's presidential contest in order to disrupt the election and undermine trust in President Vladimir Putin.

The terrorist was apparently dissuaded from striking at that time due to the security presence at the concert hall leading up to a performance by the popular Russian singer Shaman.

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“It's a political act, it had nothing to do with Islam or nothing to do with a conflict between Russia and Islamic forces in Afghanistan or Syria,” said Ritter. “This was a political act linked to an American policy objective being implemented by Ukrainian intelligence services.”
The analyst said both major branches of ISIS were “largely defeated” after intelligence agencies successfully infiltrated the groups. But afterwards Western countries decided to utilize the notorious terrorist gangs for their own ends, Ritter claimed.
“What we did is once we captured ISIS, we started using ISIS for our own purposes,” he said. “For instance, in Syria, targeting them against the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. We have American officials bragging. Hell, even Hillary Clinton at one time bragged about how we controlled ISIS to undermine Assad.”
“And in Afghanistan, we used ISIS to undermine the Taliban,” Ritter added. “And so there is every reason to believe that ISIS has been thoroughly infiltrated by Western intelligence services – the British, the Americans. So we now know that there's an ISIS element that has aligned itself with Ukraine and actually is fighting on the side of Ukraine in Ukraine.”
“ISIS is in many ways today a controlled client of Western intelligence services.”
The US is ‘mocking’ international law, creating ‘world of the jungle’

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Journalist Elijah Magnier slammed the US on Sputnik’s Fault Lines program for its disavowal of the UN Security Council’s ceasefire resolution, which Biden administration officials have claimed is “non-binding.”

“If you look at Article 25 of the UN charter, all members of the United Nations agreed to… accept and carry out the decision,” said the journalist, noting that Security Council resolutions are intended to be binding and enforced by members. “Every single US official came out to say, 'oh, this is a non-binding resolution,' undermining international laws.”

“If these laws are not implemented we live in the world of the jungle, we don't live in an institution and we don't live in international law.”

The reporter said the erosion in international cooperation seriously threatens the world’s ability to peacefully resolve global conflicts.

“At this point I think the whole world needs something to happen because the Second World War brought the United Nations,” Magnier said. “Do we need a third World War to change the world constitution and start putting a mechanism in place where all countries should abide by international laws? Because it seems the Americans are cherry picking who can implement international laws and who cannot.”

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Veteran war correspondent Elijah Magnier strongly criticized the Israeli military's conduct in Gaza during an interview on Sputnik's Fault Lines program.

"In my field experience, with 35 years of war, I have never seen an army taking pictures, taking videos, posting videos on social media and showing all the war crimes that [they] are doing, laughing and [not] giving a damn about world opinion or about international laws," Magnier claimed. "They are committing war crimes, they know they are doing it. They're committing crimes against humanity... and they say, 'we don't care what you think. One day you will forget.'"

The journalist, who has reported from Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Yugoslavia, claimed the open brutality of the IDF is unprecedented during his time as a journalist.

Video has circulated of Israeli soldiers stripping men down to their underwear and rifling through women's panty drawers after forcing their way into Palestinian homes. Recent footage of the IDF firing on and killing three unarmed Gazan civilians drew widespread condemnation online.

"People [in Gaza] spend all their time in the middle of the month of Ramadan just begging for a bowl of soup or a bowl of meat once a day at the end of the day, and they have no strength to continue," he added. "And this is happening in the south. In the north it's ten times worse."

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These aren't real Muslims': Moscow terrorists were mercenaries engaged in 'political act'

"These aren't hardcore ISIS followers," said former US Marine Corps intelligence officer Scott Ritter of the suspects apprehended after last week's horrific terrorist attack in a Moscow suburb.

Ritter made the claim on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program where he explained that various aspects of the attackers' conduct were incongruent with that of typical ISIS terrorists. The former UN weapons inspector noted the terrorists were observed in a photo using their left hand rather than their right to pronounce allegiance to the creed of Islam, while also blurring their faces in images posted online.

Ritter added that the attackers attempted to return to their "true north" of Ukraine after the attack rather than going out as professed "martyrs."

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“These aren't jihadists, these are mercenaries,” Ritter concluded. “These are people who took money to commit an act of irregular warfare.”

Recently released video from the scene of the attack appeared to show one of the terrorists scoping out the Crocus City Hall venue earlier this month. The evidence has led to speculation the attack was originally intended to be carried out before Russia’s presidential contest in order to disrupt the election and undermine trust in President Vladimir Putin.

“This was a political act linked to an American policy objective being implemented by Ukrainian intelligence services,” Ritter concluded.

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‘Say the right thing for the cameras’: the Schumer-Biden-Netanyahu clash

On Friday, US President Joe Biden praised Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer’s address in which he called for new elections in Israel. Ecuadorian journalist Esteban Carrillo joined Sputnik’s Fault Lines and suggested that the White House is essentially saying to not “pay attention to what we have been doing for the past six months, pay attention to what we're saying now”.

“I'm pretty sure that this is related to the most recent opinion polls,” said Carrillo, a Beirut-based journalist and editor for The Cradle. “All of a sudden Joe Biden, the White House, is trotting out its highest, most senior Jewish official to essentially call for new elections in Israel.”

“Now, we are concerned. Now, we want to see less civilians dead,” Carrillo said of the Biden Administration. “Joe Biden said it himself in an interview, a few days ago. He said something like Rafah would be a red line and then immediately walked it back, he said there are no red lines for Israel. No matter what, we are going to continue sending weapons.”

Schumer’s recent address marks a growing concern among the Democratic party about their weakening voter support. During the Democratic presidential primary in the swing state of Michigan, 14.5% of voters voted “uncommitted” as a protest to Biden’s support for Israel’s offensive in Gaza.

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Western delusions shattered: Putin's firm stance on Ukraine highlights NATO's impotence

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Ray McGovern, former CIA analyst joined Sputnik's Critical Hour and explained Putin's approach to a possible battle with NATO, as French President Emmanuel Macron has toyed with the idea of putting boots on the ground—a sentiment his Western counterparts have vehemently rejected.

"This business about Macron and some of the European leaders saying, 'oh, my God, we can't let Putin win in Ukraine,' it doesn't really square with what's reality here because there is no way to prevent Russia from winning in Ukraine except by use of nuclear weapons," said McGovern.

"The Western press has taken to accusing Putin of threatening to use tactical nuclear weapons," McGovern added. "[But] he has not raised the issue of tactical nuclear weapons. It's the US that is raising this, which makes me suspicious," the analyst stressed.

"In my view, the whole name of the game is to keep it going without an obvious defeat until November, so that Biden has some reasonable prospect of not having to run having lost a war," he said.

"For Russia, Ukraine is an existential issue; for the West, it is not. And [former US President Barack] Obama added that, by giving weapons to Ukraine, that would be a bad idea because that would give them the idea that they could prevail against a much more powerful Russia," the former CIA analyst said.

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UN Expert's Report Accuses Israel of Committing Genocide in Gaza

The expert is not the first to warn that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians. Scholars and states, including a case brought by South Africa in December, have warned that offensive acts carried out by Israel in their war against Hamas have amounted to acts of genocide against civilians in the Gaza Strip.

A United Nations-appointed expert has found that there are "reasonable grounds" to believe Israel is committing genocide in the Gaza Strip, according to a report released on Monday. The expert said there are clear indications that Israel has violated three of the five acts listed under the UN Genocide Convention.

"It is my solemn duty to report on the worst of what humanity is capable of and to present my findings," Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the Occupied Territories, told the UN Human Rights Council on Tuesday. The Italian lawyer is one of dozens of independent human rights experts mandated by the UN to report and advise on specific themes and crises.

The UN expert wrote that she found "reasonable grounds to believe" that the "threshold indicating the commission of the crime of genocide against Palestinians as a group in Gaza has been met".

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"I implore member states to abide by their obligations, which start with imposing an arms embargo and sanctions on Israel and so ensure that the future does not continue to repeat itself," she said.

The report, "The Anatomy of a Genocide", writes that after "five months of military operations, Israel has destroyed Gaza". It notes that over 30,000 Palestinians have been killed, including more than 13,000 children.

At least 71,000 Palestinians have also been injured, the report says, with many receiving "life-changing mutilations". At least 70% of residential areas have also been destroyed, and 80% of the whole population has been "forcibly displaced".

"This report concludes that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the threshold indicating Israel's commission of genocide is met," the report writes. "One of the key findings is that Israel's executive and military leadership and soldiers have intentionally distorted jus in bello principles, subverting their protective functions, in an attempt to legitimize genocidal violence against the Palestinian people."

Albanese was prohibited by Israel to visit the war-torn region, therefore the report was based on "data and analyses from organizations on the ground, international jurisprudence, investigative reports and consultations with affected individuals, authorities, civil society and experts."

Nor did the report examine the crimes committed by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups in Israel on October 7—which it "firmly condemns" and urges the accountability of—as it is beyond the "geographic scope" of the expert's mandate. It also noted that Israel has carried out "five major assaults" on Palestine since it imposed the siege on Gaza in 2007.

"By Day 9, this assault had already caused more deaths (2,670) than Israel's previous deadliest war against Gaza, in 2014 (2,251). Only a fraction of the mass killing, severe harm and ruthless, life-threatening conditions inflicted on Palestinians over the following five months of assault can be captured in this report," she writes.

The 1948 Genocide Convention, which was enacted in the wake of the mass murder of Jews in the Nazi Holocaust, defines genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious groups". Israel's diplomatic mission in Geneva has rejected the report and maintained that the war is targeting the Islamist group Hamas and not Palestinian civilians.

An official from the US, Israel's top ally, told AFP that Washington is "aware" of the report but has "no reason to believe Israel has committed acts of genocide in Gaza".

"Many could not bury and mourn their relatives, forced instead to leave their bodies decomposing in homes, in the street or under the rubble," the report writes. "Thousands have been detained and systematically subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment. The incalculable collective trauma will be experienced for generations to come."

"Israel's actions have been driven by a genocidal logic integral to its settler-colonial project in Palestine, signaling a tragedy foretold."

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Foot in Your Mouth - Cartoon

Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of Palestine to the UN, noted that it has taken six months with more than 100,000 Palestinians killed and injured, to come to a decision to demand a ceasefire.

On Monday, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire for the month of Ramadan, and the “immediate and unconditional release of hostages” as well as the expansion of aid in the Gaza Strip. The US abstained from the vote while 14 voted in favor and no parties voted against the resolution. The act was significant as the US has vetoed three previous resolutions with similar language.

The Council rejected a Russia-proposed amendment calling for a permanent ceasefire.

The passage of the statement raised hopes that violence could finally come to an end in the enclave as Israel’s nearly seven month-long operation has left over 32,000 Palestinians dead, most of them thought to be civilians.

However, US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller immediately tried to alleviate the blow to Israel telling reporters that the resolution is “non-binding”.

"It is a non-binding resolution," said Miller. "We didn't veto because we thought the language, as it relates to the cease-fire, and the release of hostages, was consistent with the long-standing United States position."

When asked about previous UN Security Council resolutions that Israel has failed to comply with, Miller said the US expects all of its partner nations to comply with international law.

"I can’t say that this resolution is going to have any impact on those negotiations,” said Miller, in reference to the ongoing negotiations in Qatar in exchange for the release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners. "But those negotiations are ongoing. They've been ongoing over the weekend and they've made progress."

According to the UN Charter, all Security Council resolutions are legally binding under international law.

The US’ abstaining from the vote angered Israel into canceling a visit to Washington. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly accused the US of “retreating” from a “principled position” by allowing the vote to pass without conditioning the cease-fire on the release of Hamas’ hostages.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on X (formerly Twitter) that the resolution “must be implemented” and that the failure to do so would be “unforgivable”.

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Americans Shift to Disapproval of Israeli Military Action in Gaza – Poll

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - Over 50% of Americans now disapprove of Israel’s military action in Gaza, a major shift from November when half approved of it, a new Gallup poll revealed on Wednesday.

"Fifty-five percent currently disapprove of Israel’s actions, while 36% approve," the poll said.

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This contrasts to November when 45% of Americans disapproved of Israel's behavior and 50% approved it.

Almost three-quarters of people said that they are following news from Gaza closely, and one-third are watching the situation "very closely."

"Disapproval of Israel's military action is similar regardless of how much attention Americans are paying to the conflict. However, those paying less attention are more likely than their counterparts to have no opinion on the matter, resulting in lower approval than seen among people paying greater attention," the poll said.

All three major voter groups have also become less supportive of Israeli actions. Republicans continue to express the most significant support, but even their support fell from 71% in November to 64% now. At the same time, 75% of Democrats and 60% of independents disapprove of Israel's military action in Gaza, according to the survey.

Only 27% of Americans approve of US President Joe Biden's handling of the situation in the Middle East, the findings showed.

The poll was conducted from March 1-20 among 1,016 adults in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

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UNSC Meeting on NATO Aggression Against Yugoslavia Scheduled for Thursday - Russian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 27 (Sputnik) - A UN Security Council meeting to mark the 25th anniversary of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia was scheduled for March 28 after France blocked holding the meeting on Monday, the Russian mission said on Wednesday.

"We have once again requested a meeting of the UN Security Council on NATO's aggression against Yugoslavia. After a day of fierce resistance from our opponents, we succeeded in having the Japanese presidency finally schedule it for 3:00 PM New York time [19:00 GMT] on March 28th," Russian First Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy wrote on X.

On Monday, France objected to Russia's request to hold a meeting marking the 25th anniversary of the 1999 aerial bombing campaign carried out by NATO against the former Yugoslavia. The representative of France questioned the relevance of the topic and requested a procedural vote on the matter.

The provisional agenda was not adopted after it failed to garner the required number of votes. Twelve countries abstained, none voted against, while Russia, Algeria and China voted in favor.

Western countries are afraid to expose NATO's real history to the world and therefore objected to a UN Security Council meeting on their bombings of Yugoslavia, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday.

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US Coast Guard Says Suspending Search for Missing People in Baltimore Bridge Collapse

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The six individuals who went missing after a bridge in Baltimore collapsed are expected to be dead due to the cold water temperature, a US Coast Guard official told reporters.

"So I would like to announce tonight that based on the length of time that we've gone in the search, the extensive search efforts that we've put into it, the water temperature, that at this point, we do not believe that we're gonna find any of these individuals still alive," the official said Tuesday evening.

The official added that rescuers are suspending search and rescue efforts for the missing people.

On Tuesday, the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed after being struck by a cargo ship. The Dali cargo ship was sailing under a Singaporean flag from Baltimore to the capital city of Sri Lanka, Colombo, at the time of the collapse, US media reported.

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White House Press Secretary Hangs Up on Reporter After Asked If Biden Has Dementia

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre hung up on a reporter during a radio interview after she was asked if President Joe Biden has dementia.

"I can't even believe you're asking me this question. That is an incredibly offensive question to ask," Jean-Pierre told the WBT radio news director Mark Garrison earlier on Tuesday before hanging up after a short rant.

Garrison emphasized to Jean-Pierre that it was a genuine concern on the minds of people in the US public.

The White House press secretary did an interview with the WBT radio station in Charlotte, North Carolina, in light of Biden's planned visit to Raleigh, North Carolina later on Tuesday evening.

Biden is currently trailing former President Donald Trump in North Carolina in the polls.

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General Dynamics Receives $311Mln Contract to Modernize Helicopter Carrier USS Bataan

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has given General Dynamics NASSCO at Norfolk, Virginia a more than $311 million US Navy contract to modernize and repair the USS Bataan (LHD 5) landing helicopter dock or amphibious assault ship, the Department of Defense

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announced in a press release.

"General Dynamics NASSCO–Norfolk, Norfolk, Virginia was awarded a $311,193,234 ...contract action for maintenance, modernization, and repair of the USS Bataan (LHD 5)," the release stated on Tuesday.

Work on the ship will be performed in Norfolk, Virginia over the next two and a quarter years and is expected to be completed by May 2026, the Defense Department said.

The Bataan is an 843-foot-long carrier with a more than 41,000 tons displacement. It carries a full complement of F-35 fighters, V-22 Osprey tilt-rotors, Super-Stallion heavy lift helicopters, Harrier attack aircraft, and several hovercraft for amphibious landings, according to published sources.

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US, Japanese Security Advisers Work on Deliverables For Biden-Kishida Meeting -White House

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met with Japanese National Security Adviser Akiba Takeo in Washington to work towards securing key deliverables in time for the upcoming official visit of Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to the United States next month, the White House said in a press release.

"The two discussed next steps to finalize key deliverables for the Prime Minister's visit to ensure its historic success, exchanged views on pressing regional and global challenges, and reaffirmed the importance of continued cooperation with like-minded partners with the US-Japan Alliance serving as the cornerstone for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific," the release said on Tuesday.

The Financial Times recently reported that Biden and Kishida during a meeting on April 10 intend to announce plans to restructure the US military command in Japan in order to strengthen military cooperation between the two countries.

The initiative is meant to counter China in the region, the report noted.

Japan reportedly hosts 54,000 US troops, hundreds of aircraft and Washington's only forward-deployed aircraft carrier strike group, media reported.

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Poor Management, Oversight, High Costs Hold Back US Military Space Programs - Report

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - US military space programs have suffered for well over a decade from management and oversight problems with continuing difficulties in supervising contractors, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report.

"For more than 10 years, we have identified management and oversight problems that hinder DOD [Department of Defense]'s space system acquisition programs," the report said on

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Tuesday. "Collectively, these challenges and risks have resulted in billions of dollars in cost overruns and years of schedule delays."

Defense Department space system acquisition programs have historically faced challenges relating to management, oversight, culture, and leadership, the GAO acknowledged.

"These problems include making overly optimistic cost and schedule estimates; pushing programs forward without sufficient knowledge about technology and design; and challenges in overseeing and managing contractors," the report said.

The Defense Department's culture has generally been resistant to changes in space acquisition approaches and the Pentagon needs to streamline its review processes and delegate more decision-making authority to lower levels, the GAO advised.

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ANALYSIS - Boeing Quality Control, Engineering Problems Deeply Rooted in Company Culture

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The decay in Boeing now goes back a long way and is deeply embedded, but the US defense contractor and aerospace giant is too big to be allowed to fail, leading analysts on the US military-industrial complex told Sputnik on Tuesday.

On Monday, Boeing announced a sweeping purge of its top management. Board chair Larry Kellner will step down at the annual shareholder meeting in May, CEO Dave Calhoun will leave by the end of this year and Commercial Airlines President Stan Deal is leaving immediately, the company said.

The moves follow several disastrous crashes and other safety issues with the company's next-generation 737 MAX airliner. In October 2018 and March 2019, two 737 MAX 8 airliners crashed in Indonesia and Ethiopia killing all 346 people on both planes. In January 2024, a door plug- flew off an Alaska Airlines 737 MAX 9, decompressing the plane.

DEEP DECAY

However, retired Pentagon analyst and military acquisition expert Chuck Spinney cautioned that the company's problems are far more deeply rooted than issues with a single airliner or program.

"The decay in Boeing goes back a long way and is now deeply embedded," Spinney said. "I believe it is a classic reflection of the problems outlined in Seymour Melman's book 'Profits Without Production,' which was an indictment of deindustrialization caused by the widespread adoption of neo-liberal economics. They applied the MBA strategies of financialization and managerialization that resulted in deskilling of production workers, outsourcing, and union busting in the interests of maximizing short-term profits and stock prices."

At Boeing, this decision-making value system was combined with a "trashing of the proven in-house engineering practices focused on design excellence and production quality control," Spinney recalled.

"One can hypothesize that the merger with McDonnell Douglas in 1997 was the turning point in Boeing's descent into hell. Offshoring and outsourcing, for example, were causing serious quality problems by 2001," he said.

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The implosion process of the company and its engineering quality issues were widely recognized and discussed as long ago as 2011, Spinney remembered.

The corrupt profits-obsessed processes of the military side of Boeing were kept segregated for a long time from the far higher standards of its commercial aviation business, but eventually, those barriers were allowed to erode, and the same sloppy practices spread throughout the company, Spinney explained.

"It is important to differentiate Boeing's commercial excellence from its military engineering practices, which have long been MICC [Military Industrial Congressional Complex] corrupted. Boeing used to have legendary policies to segregate its military divisions from its airline division to prevent the kind of MICC corruption of its airline engineering practices that wrecked Lockheed and Douglas," he said.

COST-CUTTING PROBLEMS

Historian and radio commentator Bruce de Torres agreed with Spinney's analysis and added that the problems that have nearly wrecked Boeing were widespread among the US and other major corporations.

"Boeing's profit-seeking and presumed cost-cutting is a disease infecting many such companies and institutions, American and worldwide. Some should always be expected to implode like a termite-eaten tree," he said.

The well-publicized crisis now rocking Boeing might inspire some short-term efforts at reform in large US corporations. However, they are unlikely to take root or last long, de Torres cautioned.

In the short term, the 737 MAX crisis might also seriously damage Boeing by motivating the US armed forces to rely on it less and shift some of their most lucrative procurement programs to other companies, de Torres warned.

"Boeing's late or failed deliveries may cause the US military to find what it needs elsewhere, to maintain its strategic positions," he said.

However, even this development could backfire, as other companies face similar problems to Boeing and are not well positioned to handle major surges in demand, de Torres pointed out.

WAKE-UP CALL

Former Pentagon analyst, and retired US Air Force Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski said Boeing management and future executives need to keep their heads and recognize the company's remaining strengths while working to address its very real problems.

"Is America's second biggest defense contractor in a tailspin? I don't think it is, although this is a serious wake-up call," she said.

Since the two fatal 737 MAX crashes with major loss of life in Indonesia and Ethiopia in 2018 and 2019, Boeing's commercial aircraft have operated safely and reliably again around the world, Kwiatkowski pointed out.

"Despite the missing bolts and loose panels, Boeing's commercial aircraft had a pretty good safe landing record in the past 4 years, and the manufacturing problems have been accompanied by excellent pilots, at least so far," she said.

Also, Boeing could rely on the enormous, fixed demand for maintenance on the existing fleets of both its commercial and military aircraft and systems around the world to keep the company going, Kwiatkowski observed.

"If they don't shape things up, they risk the continued loss of US military share of fixed-wing manned aircraft, and commercial aircraft purchases around the world - but much of Boeing's

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income is derived from maintenance and upgrades of inventory product, so this is income that is more stable," she said.

Boeing remains the largest US exporter in dollar value, and therefore would likely fall into the "too big to fail" category, guaranteeing the financial support it needs from future US Congresses, Kwiatkowski concluded.

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Former State Dept. Official Says Welcomes London Court Decision on Julian Assange

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – Former State Department official and a retired US Army colonel Ann Wright told Sputnik that she welcomes the UK High Court's decision to grant WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange more time to appeal his extradition to the United States and described the state of US prisons as terrible.

"Today, the court has given [Assange] more time before a US extradition can come about. So, it's several months more, tragically still in prison, but at least the US is not just about to take him here to the US to put him in a terrible prison and it would be horrible if he is extradited here," Wright told Sputnik on Tuesday.

Wright expressed her hope that after spending some more time researching the state of US prisons the UK court will conclude that it cannot extradite Assange to the United States, as it will be torture for him.

Earlier in the day, the court ruled that Assange has a real prospect of success on three of the nine grounds of appeal. The court, in particular, asked the US government to provide assurances that the WikiLeaks founder would be able to claim the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees freedoms related to religion, expression, assembly, and the right to petition.

The court also asked that Assange be ensured trial without prejudice to his nationality and that he would not face the death penalty. The next hearing is scheduled for May 20 if the parties submit the necessary documents. Following the court's decision, Assange's wife Stella called on the US to drop its "shameful" case against her husband.

Assange, an Australian citizen, was transferred to London's high-security Belmarsh prison in April 2019 on bail breach charges. In the US, he faces prosecution under the Espionage Act for obtaining and disclosing classified information that shed light on war crimes and human rights violations committed by US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

If convicted, the WikiLeaks founder could face up to 175 years in prison. One of the last means of preventing his transfer to the US may be an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights. Assange lost his previous appeal at the UK High Court last June.

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US Justice Department Said Indicted Ohio Man for Concealing Ties to Rwandan Genocide

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - A 52-year-old Ohio man is facing criminal charges for allegedly concealing his involvement in the Rwandan genocide, the US Justice Department said in a statement.

"An Ohio man was indicted today by a federal grand jury in Boston for a nearly three-decade scheme to conceal his alleged involvement in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which left more than 800,000 people dead," the statement said on Tuesday.

The defendant, Eric Tabaro Nshimiye, faces one charge of engaging in a scheme to conceal material information from federal authorities. Nshimye allegedly lied to US immigration officials to gain admission to the United States as a refugee, where he ultimately received citizenship.

Nshimye also faces one count of obstruction of justice and four perjury charges for allegedly providing false testimony in a 2019 trial of a convicted Rwandan genocide perpetrator, the statement said.

The Justice Department accuses Nshimiye of participating in the killing of Tutsis by striking them with a nail-studded club and then hacking them to death with a machete, the statement said. Witnesses in Rwanda identified the locations of the alleged killings and drew pictures of Nshimye's weapons, the statement said.

Moreover, Nshimiye allegedly participated in, aided and abetted the rape of numerous Tutsi women, the statement said.

The charge of concealing information carries a sentence of up to five years in prison, the obstruction of justice charges carries up to 10 years and each perjury charge carries up to five years, the statement said.

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Majority of US Voters Believe Biden Weaker Military Leader Than Past Presidents - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - A majority of likely voters in the United States view President Joe Biden as a weaker commander and chief of the US military than other recent presidents, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll conducted March 18-20.

Fifty-three percent (53%) of respondents believe that Biden is a weaker military commander in chief than most recent US presidents, the poll report said on Tuesday.

Less than one-quarter of respondents, 24%, believe Biden is a stronger military leader than other recent presidents, and 20% believe he is roughly the same, the poll report said. The figures have only changed slightly since April 2022, the poll report added.

The poll comes amid US involvement in the conflicts in Ukraine and Israel, as well as a military operation in the Red Sea.

The poll surveyed 1,114 likely US voters and maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) –

TERRORIST ATTACK IN RUSSIA

* The Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations (EMERCOM) on Tuesday ended search and rescue operations in the Crocus City Hall concert venue, which was hit by a terrorist attack on Friday.

* The first information received from Crocus City Hall terrorist attack suspects proves a Ukrainian trace, Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov said.

* The FSB, along with the partner intelligence services of friendly countries, is identifying all participants in the deadly terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall near Moscow, Bortnikov said.

* Moscow's Basmanny District Court on Tuesday ruled to arrest the eighth defendant in the Crocus City Hall concert venue terrorist attack case, Alisher Kasimov, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the courtroom.

BRIDGE COLLAPSE IN BALTIMORE

* Rescuers are searching for up to 20 people in the Patapsco River after the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed in the US city of Baltimore, Kevin Cartwright, director of communications of the Baltimore City Fire Department, said on Tuesday.

* There is no credible evidence to indicate that the ship collision with the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore was the result of a terrorist attack, Maryland Governor Wes Moore said.

* At least six people remain unaccounted for after a major bridge collapsed in Baltimore following a ship collision, Maryland Transportation Secretary Paul Wiedefeld said.

* US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that there is no indication that the collision of a cargo ship with a bridge in Baltimore and its collapse was a result of an intentional act.

* Ship traffic in the port of Baltimore in the US state of Maryland is suspended until further notice following a bridge collapse after a cargo ship collided with it.

LONDON COURT DECISION ON ASSANGE

* The High Court of Justice in London on Tuesday ruled in favor of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, allowing him to continue to challenge the decision on his extradition to the United States in UK courts.

* The United States should drop its "shameful" case against Assange instead of issuing some "assurances" to him, Julian’s wife Stella said.

* A US Justice Department spokesperson declined to comment on a UK court ruling in Assange's case that delays his extradition to the United States while it seeks certain assurances from the US government.

* The decision of the High Court of Justice in London concerning Assange has turned the UK justice system into a laughing stock for the whole world, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

ISRAELI INVASION IN GAZA

* Russia expects that the UN Security Council resolution on the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip will

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de-escalate violence in the region and prevent an operation in Rafah, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday.

* Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said that he told US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that Israel will not end military operations in the Gaza Strip until all the hostages are freed.

* The Hamas movement has rejected all United States-made proposals for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip in exchange for the release of hostages, the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said.

* The statement by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office saying that the UN resolution on a Gaza ceasefire has emboldened Hamas to reject a compromise hostage deal proposal is "inaccurate in almost every respect," US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

DEVELOPMENTS IN SYRIA

* The US base at the Koniko gas field in Syria's eastern province of Deir ez-Zor has come under an attack by two UAVs, a local source told Sputnik on Tuesday.

* The United States must stop its illegal presence in Syria and the support for ISIS (banned in Russia) and other terrorist groups, the Syrian Foreign Ministry said.

* A US Defense Department official told Sputnik on Tuesday that reports of US strikes in eastern Syria earlier in the day are not true.

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Biden Admin. Unwavering On Clean Energy Despite China's WTO Lobby - US Trade Chief Tai

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will be unwavering in its clean energy pursuit, Trade Representative Katherine Tai said Tuesday as Beijing lobbied for World Trade Organization (WTO) input on the Biden administration's Inflation Reduction Act, which ties global growth targets with carbon standards.

"The Inflation Reduction Act is a groundbreaking tool for the United States to seriously address the global climate crisis and invest in US economic competitiveness," Tai said in a statement issued by her office.

"It is our contribution to a clean energy future that we are collectively seeking with our allies and partners."China, meanwhile, was going the other way, she said, referring to Beijing's request for WTO consultations on the clean energy effort.

"The PRC (People's Republic of China) continues to use unfair, non-market policies and practices to undermine fair competition and pursue the dominance of the PRC's manufacturers both in the PRC and in global markets," Tai said. "We are carefully reviewing the consultation request."

She said the Biden administration's aim was to tackle the global climate crisis and strengthen America's supply chains and energy security at the same time.

"We are building a clean energy economy, powered by American innovators, workers, and manufacturers that will create good-paying union jobs and cut the pollution that drives climate change and environmental injustice," Tai said.

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These include major new investments in clean energy technology, from solar and wind to batteries and electric vehicles and beyond, she added.

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UPDATE - Manure Tossed at Homes of White House's Jake Sullivan, Defense Chief Austin - Reports

(Updates in paras 1-3 with reports that pro-Palestinian activists were behind incident, adds incident at Austin's home

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - Pro-Palestinian protesters have dumped manure outside the homes of White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Defense Minister Lloyd Austin to protest against the ongoing conflict in Gaza, Politico reported on Tuesday.

A video recorded by the activists and published by the Turkish state TV channel TRT includes shots of the protesters standing in front of the heaps of manure at the homes of Sullivan and Austin, shouting slogans such as "Austin, Austin, you ain't s***, we'll keep fighting until you quit."

A bomb squad responded on Monday after an unknown individual tossed what appeared to be manure in front of a home belonging to Sullivan, Fox News reported on Tuesday, citing a law enforcement official.

During the incident, first reported by Politico, a man threw manure out of a car, triggering a response from both the Secret Service and DC Police Department's bomb squad at around 8:30 am on Monday, according to the New York Post.

"The Metropolitan Police Department's Explosive Ordinance Disposal team responded and declared the scene as safe," Secret Service spokesman Anthony Guglielmi is quoted as saying in the report.

Politico reported that the incident is under investigation, and that local traffic and red-light cameras are being utilized in an attempt to identify the culprit.

The report added that officials from the city cleaned up the mess.

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UPDATE-RFK Jr. Announces Nicole Shanahan as Running Mate in 2024 US Presidential Election

(Update: adds Shanahan remarks in para 4, Trump campaign response in paras 6-7)

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - Independent US presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said on Tuesday that attorney Nicole Shanahan will serve as his running mate in the 2024 race.

"I'm so proud to introduce to you the next vice president of the United States, my fellow lawyer, a brilliant scientist, technologist, [and] a fierce warrior mom, Nicole Shanahan," Kennedy said

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during remarks in Oakland.

Shanahan is an attorney and donor to President Joe Biden's 2020 campaign. Shanahan was previously married to Google co-founder Sergey Brin.

The Democratic Party used to be the party of peace and compassion but has since "lost its way" as an institution, Shanahan said during remarks at the event. Kennedy is the only anti-war presidential candidate in the 2024 race, Shanahan said.

Kennedy holds 16% support in a three-way race with former US President Donald Trump and current officeholder Joe Biden, who are the presumptive nominees of their respective parties, according to an Ipsos poll conducted earlier this month.

In February, US media reported that Democratic Party strategists are concerned about support for alternative candidates like Kennedy.

It is no surprise that Kennedy would pick a "Biden donor leftist" as his running mate, Alex Pfeiffer, a spokesman for the pro-Trump political action committee Make America Great Again Inc. said in a statement.

Pfeiffer characterized Kennedy as a "far-left radical" who supports reparations and wants to ban fracking.

Kennedy campaign communications director Del Bigtree said during the event on Tuesday that Kennedy intends to be on the ballot in all 50 states.

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Russia Requests UNSC Session on NATO Aggression in 1999 – UN Deputy Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 26 (Sputnik) – Russia requested a meeting of the UN Security Council on the 25th anniversary of the NATO strikes against Yugoslavia in 1999, Deputy Ambassador to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Tuesday.

"I wish to recall that Russia had an official correspondence to the Japanese Presidency, officially requesting the convening of a meeting soon to commemorate the 25th anniversary of NATO's aggression against Yugoslavia," Polyanskiy said during the UN Security Council meeting.

Russia expects that Japan, as President of the Council in March, will provide an official response, he added.

Polyanskiy stressed that France announced on Monday that it did not agree with this meeting being held.

The Russian Mission to the UN requested the Security Council meeting to mark the 25th anniversary of the aerial bombing campaign carried out by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War in 1999.

However, several UN states raised objections to the meeting, saying it was not relevant under the UN Security Council agenda category of "threats to international peace and security." Later on, Japan, which holds the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council this month, canceled the meeting, saying it would discuss the matter with the Council members and inform them

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accordingly.

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Bomb Squad Responds After Manure Tossed at Home of White House's Jake Sullivan - Reports

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House Panel to Probe Biden Administration's Global Embassy Closures - Chairman

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The US House Oversight Committee has launched an investigation into the Biden Administration's global embassy closures and evacuations, the committee's Chairman James Comer said in a letter to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday.

"The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is conducting oversight of a series of embassy closures and partial evacuations around the world under the Biden Administration," the letter said.

The Committee is seeking a briefing on the reasons for the closure and evacuation of US posts worldwide due to worsening security since President Joe Biden's inauguration, and how these actions affect US foreign policy and security measures, the letter said.

Comer noted that the US has evacuated or suspended embassy operations in several countries due to escalating unrest, including Burma, Afghanistan, Belarus, Russia, Sudan, Niger, and Haiti, triggered by military coups, invasions, and deteriorating security conditions.

"The Committee is also concerned about the repeated necessity of withdrawing US personnel, and whether deteriorating conditions in those countries are the result, even in part, of failed US foreign policy," the letter said.

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The letter added that the Committee is seeking a briefing from the Department of State no later than April 2, 2024, to discuss the issue in "an appropriate setting."

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US Labor Supply 'Certainly' Impacted By Influx of Immigrants - Biden Advisor Bernstein

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's liberal policy on immigration has certainly impacted US labor supply, his economic adviser Jared Bernstein said Tuesday, although he maintained that American citizens still got to decide a major part of work and salary conditions.

"When we talk about … supply chain and supply and labor supply improvements, I'd say immigration certainly plays a role there," Jared Bernstein, chair of the United States Council of Economic Advisers, said to a question at a discussion hosted by the Washington-based Peterson Institute for International Economics.

In a speech earlier, Bernstein made a reference to immigrants in the labor force, saying they "at least are not a major determinant of domestic work or bargaining power".

In a dialogue session that followed, the White House economic adviser concurred that US workers have garnered greater bargaining power in the last couple years despite an influx of immigration.

"The increase in labor supply, as I mentioned in my talk, is coming from both foreign-born and native-born sources," said Bernstein. "President Biden has said unequivocally that the border is broken and needs to be fixed. He has presented extremely ambitious and, in my view, potentially highly effective policies to fix the border. The opposition has largely treated that as a political football, as opposed to trying to solve a serious problem."

Democrat Biden and his Republican predecessor Donald Trump have blamed each other for a surge in US illegal immigration and sought to take the offensive on an issue that could decide the outcome of November presidential elections that will once again pit them against each other.

Trump, says Biden, killed a bipartisan border bill that would have provided $20 billion to hire thousands of new border patrol agents and asylum officers and increase detention capacity. The measure would have included a trigger mechanism to effectively shut down the border, which the president said he would have been willing to invoke.

Illegal border crossings soared after Biden took office and signaled a more relaxed policy by rolling back many Trump-era restrictions on entry.

Trump, in response, says immigrants coming to America include those from countries such as China, Iran, Yemen and Syria, which were hostile to the United States. He characterized it as a "Joe Biden invasion", claiming those pouring into the nation included inmates of prisons and mental institutions.

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State Dept. Says UNSC Resolution on Gaza Should Be Respected, Though It's Non-Binding

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council's resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza should be respected and implemented even though the United States considers it "non-binding" nature, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"It's non-binding in that it does not impose any new obligations on the parties, but we do believe it should be respected — that it carries weight and it should be implemented," Miller said during a press briefing.

Miller explained that the US does not regard the resolution as binding because it lacks certain provisions such as obligatory sanctions to force parties to comply with it.

On Monday, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution calling for an immediate Ramadan ceasefire in Gaza. US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said afterward that Washington "fully supports some of the critical objectives in this non-binding resolution."

After the comments, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia lamented the fact that a permanent Security Council member "has essentially openly stated that it does not accept the Charter of our organization."

China's Ambassador to the UN Geng Shuang said the US should as a permanent Security Council member should take the lead in showing commitment to the implementation of the council's resolutions.

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Also on Monday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu canceled a visit by a high-level Israeli delegation to Washington after the US abstained from voting on the resolution, which demands an immediate Ramadan ceasefire that leads to a lasting cessation of hostilities in the Gaza Strip.

US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said the decision to cancel the Israeli delegation's visit was surprising and unfortunate.

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Texas Launches Own Space Commission to Promote Innovation in Space Exploration - Governor

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The US state of Texas will now have its own space commission aimed at promoting space exploration and commercial aerospace, Governor Greg Abbott announced on Tuesday.

"Now, with the Texas Space Commission, our great state will have a group that is responsible for dreaming and achieving the next generation of human exploration in space," Abbott said at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. "Texas is the launchpad for Mars, innovating the technology that will colonize humanity's first new planet. As we look into the future of space, one thing is clear: those who reach for the stars do so from the great state of Texas."

The Texas Space Commission will focus on advancing innovation in both space exploration and commercial aerospace opportunities, including the integration of space, aeronautics, and aviation industries into the state's economy.

The commission will governed by a nine-member board of directors, who were also announced at the inaugural event on Tuesday.

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US Abstention Vote in UN Won't Derail Israeli Support for Port Access to Gaza - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States' recent abstention vote on a UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza will not derail Israel's support for US efforts to build a temporary pier in Gaza to deliver humanitarian aid to the enclave by sea, Pentagon deputy press secretary Sabrina Singh said on Tuesday.

"No there was not," Singh said when asked if there was any indication Israel would pull its support for the US pier project in Gaza following the UN vote.

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met with Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant earlier on Tuesday to discuss the conflict in Gaza.

Discussions between the two defense leaders on Rafah were "certainly a frank and direct conversation" but ensured US concerns have been heard by the Israeli government, Singh

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noted.
Singh said Austin stressed to his Israeli counterpart that any Israeli assault on Rafah should not proceed without a credible and implementable plan that ensures the safety and humanitarian support for civilians sheltering there.

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New York Supreme Court Imposes Gag Order on Trump in Business Records Case - Filing

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - Acting New York Supreme Court Judge Juan Merchan filed an order on Tuesday to impose a gag order on former US President Donald Trump ahead of a trial in a case involving alleged falsification of business records.
Merchan approved a motion to restrict extrajudicial statements by Trump, such as making or directing others to make public statements about known or potential witnesses concerning their potential participation in the probe or proceedings.
The order also restricts Trump from making or directing others to make statements about counsel in the case other than the district attorney, members of the court's staff and the district attorney's staff, and family members of any counsel or staff if the statements are made with the intent to interfere with the case.
Moreover, the order restricts statements about prospective jurors in the case.
On Monday, a judge scheduled a trial in the case to begin on April 15. The case involves alleged hush-money payments to pornography actress Stormy Daniels during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Trump has denied any wrongdoing and said that holding a trial ahead of the 2024 election is unfair.

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Biden Approves $10Mln Security Aid for Haiti to Combat Gang Violence - White House

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has approved a $10 million assistance package for Haitian security forces to bolster their defense against gang attacks, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.
"The President approved an urgently needed assistance package for Haitian security forces to help them protect civilians and critical infrastructure against organized and targeted gang attacks. Our assistance package for up to $10 million ... may include weapons, ammunition, bulletproof vests, and helmets," Jean-Pierre said during a gaggle.

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

Israel's Statement That UNSC Resolution Hampered Talks With Hamas Inaccurate – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – The statement by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office saying that the UN resolution on a Gaza ceasefire has emboldened Hamas to reject a compromise hostage deal proposal is "inaccurate in almost every respect," US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"[Netanyahu's office] statement, which I believe said that Hamas pulled out of the hostage talks or Hamas rejected the most recent proposal because of the United Nations Security Council resolution, that statement is inaccurate in almost every respect, and it is unfair to the hostages and their families," Miller said during a press briefing.

Netanyahu's office said earlier in the day that "Hamas' stance clearly demonstrates its utter disinterest in a negotiated deal and attests to the damage done by the UN Security Council's resolution."

On Monday, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution calling for an immediate Ramadan ceasefire in Gaza. The motion was sponsored by the 10 non-permanent members of the UNSC. Fourteen countries voted in favor, while the United States abstained. US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said that Washington "fully supports some of the critical objectives in this non-binding resolution."

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UN Wants More Aid Deliveries to Gaza by Land Given Danger of Airdrops - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United Nations would like to see more aid deliveries by land into Gaza given the spate of recent deadly accidents involving airdrops, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Tuesday.

"We believe that there needs to be much more aid coming in by road which is both safer, but also much more efficient as a means of delivering aid," Haq said during a briefing.

Earlier in the day, the Gaza Strip authorities said that 18 people have been killed in recent hours due to improper airdrops of humanitarian aid from airplanes, blaming the US and Israel for the "policy of famine and siege." Twelve starving Gaza residents drowned in the sea while attempting to get parcels containing humanitarian aid and another six died in stampedes seeking to reach boxes dropped from airplanes, the statement said.

This is not the first time that aid airdrop malfunction has resulted in fatalities. On March 8, the parachute of an air cargo did not work, and the container fell on the roof of a residential building, killing five people.

Last October, Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip 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

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Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 32,400 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, local authorities said.

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Biden Says Ship Traffic in Baltimore Port Suspended Until Further Notice

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – Ship traffic in the port of Baltimore in the US state of Maryland is suspended until further notice following a bridge collapse after a cargo ship collided with it.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed after being struck by a cargo ship. The Dali cargo ship was sailing under a Singaporean flag from Baltimore to the capital city of Sri Lanka, Colombo, at the time of collapse, according to media reports.

"Ship traffic in the port of Baltimore has been suspended until further notice, and we will need to clear that channel before the ship traffic can resume," Biden said in his remarks following the collapse.

Biden added that he is planning to visit Baltimore as soon as he can.

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Biden Says No Indication Bridge Collapse Resulted From Intentional Act

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that there is no indication that the collision of a cargo ship with a bridge in Baltimore and its collapse was a result of an intentional act.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed after being struck by a cargo ship. The Dali cargo ship was sailing under a Singaporean flag from Baltimore to the capital city of Sri Lanka, Colombo, at the time of collapse, according to media reports.

"Everything so far indicates that this was a terrible accident. At this time, we have no other indication, no other reason to believe there's any intentional act here," Biden said in his remarks following the collapse.

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UN Says Cannot Check, Verify Information About Ukrainian Trace in Crocus Terrorist Attack

UNITED NATIONS, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has no information to verify whether there was Ukrainian involvement in the Crocus City Hall terrorist attacks in Moscow, the

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UN Spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Tuesday.

"We have no information to verify or confirm that," Haq said in the UN briefing.

Earlier today, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov said that the first information received from suspects in the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack proves a Ukrainian trace.

A shooting occurred last Friday in the Crocus City Hall concert venue in the city of Krasnogorsk, just outside Moscow, followed by a massive fire. A Sputnik correspondent who witnessed the attack reported that a number of gunmen in camouflage broke into the music hall, shooting people point-blank and throwing incendiary bombs. The Russian Investigative Committee said that at least 139 people were killed as a result of the terrorist attack.

Eleven people were detained in connection with the events, including four believed to be directly involved in the terrorist attack, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) said. The four main suspects in the case were detained in the Russian region of Bryansk, which borders Belarus and Ukraine, the FSB added. They were charged with terrorism and ordered to be held in pretrial custody until May 22, Moscow's Basmanny District Court said. All of them are from Tajikistan and could face a life sentence in prison.

The Moscow suburb concert hall terrorist attack is the deadliest in Russia in nearly 20 years.

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Biden Says Directing His Team to Reopen Baltimore Port, Rebuild Bridge After Collapse

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he is directing his administration to “move heaven and earth” to reopen the Baltimore port and rebuild the bridge as soon as possible after it collapsed earlier in the day.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed after being struck by a cargo ship. The Dali cargo ship was sailing under a Singaporean flag from Baltimore to the capital city of Sri Lanka, Colombo, at the time of collapse, according to media reports.

“I'm directing my team to move heaven and earth to reopen the [Baltimore] port and rebuild the bridge as soon as possible,” Biden said in his remarks following the collapse.

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US As Permanent Member of UNSC Should Take Lead Implementing UN Charter- China's Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States as a UN Permanent Member of the Security Council should be a good example of rightfully implementing the UN Charter, the Chinese Ambassador to the UN Geng Shuang said on Tuesday.

“Every country joined the UN with a commitment to implement the Council's decisions,” Shuang

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said during a Security Council meeting on the Palestinian question. “This is an obligation under the UN Charter. As a permanent member of the Security Council, the US should take the lead in its implementation.”

We also call on the US to play a constructive role in the Palestine-Israel settlement, he added.

Earlier in the meeting, the Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia asked the US Mission to clarify the statement made on Monday. Nebenzia said that if the US does not regard the Security Council as legally binding, then all the discussions are pointless.

On Monday, the US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield called the newly adopted resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza "non-binding," causing a wave of confusion and criticism at the United Nations.

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Thirty Million May View US Solar Eclipse as Scientists Seek New Discoveries - NASA

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - More than 30 million people across North America are expected to watch the rare event of a full solar eclipse across the US heartland on April 8, and scientists are anticipating a rich bonanza of new observations and potential discoveries from monitoring the event, NASA officials told a press conference on Tuesday.

"Things are happening in the solar corona that we do not fully understand. ... We are at solar maximum so the chance we see something amazing is very high," NASA Deputy Administrator Pam Melroy said.

NASA has deployed 20 Sun-monitoring satellites and an array of corona-graphs to study the solar corona, the outermost part of the Sun's atmosphere and they will study how solar flares affect life on earth, the US space agency said in an official blog.

"The 2024 eclipse path will also pass over more cities and densely populated areas than the 2017 path did. ... An estimated 31.6 million people live in the path of totality this year, compared to 12 million in 2017. An additional 150 million people live within 200 miles of the path of totality," NASA said.

The total eclipse will be visible in regions of Mexico and Canada and will cross the United States from Kerrville, Texas in the southwest to Houlton, Maine on the northeast coast.

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DeSantis Says Florida Ready to Help Maryland Following Bridge Collapse

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis said on Tuesday that the state is prepared to help Maryland in the wake of the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge.

“I have directed the Florida Division of Emergency Management to offer assistance to the State of Maryland, if needed, following the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge,” DeSantis said in

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a statement via social media platform X.

Earlier on Tuesday, the bridge collapsed after a cargo ship struck it, prompting Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott to declare a local state of emergency.

At least five vehicles, including three passenger cars and a cement truck, remain underwater, according to Baltimore City Fire Chief James Wallace. Some eight dive teams have been performing search and rescue operations, Wallace said.

There is no evidence the incident is linked to terrorism, Maryland Governor Wes Moore said.

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US Investigators Examine Jim Biden's Transactions as Part of Criminal Probe - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - US federal investigators in south Florida recently scrutinized the transactions of President Joe Biden's brother Jim Biden as part of an ongoing criminal investigation, Politico reported on Tuesday.

The investigation is focused on his alleged attempts to secure Middle Eastern investments for Americore and other US ventures, the report said.

According to the report, Florida investigators are delving into Jim Biden's involvement in particular agreement and are scrutinizing loans Americore received from a fund managed by his associate. Last month, Jim Biden admitted to Congress that he played a role in arranging those loans.

Separately, Jim Biden has come under scrutiny amid an ongoing probe into a Medicare fraud case in Pennsylvania, with officials seeking details about his activities since last year, the report said.

Biden's legal representatives told Politico that the president's brother is not the subject of any ongoing investigations in either Florida or Pennsylvania, the report added.

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Chess Federation of Russia Made Right Decision to Move to Asia Due to European Ban - US GM

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – The Chess Federation of Russia (CFR) made the right decision to move to Asia after Europe imposed restrictions against the Russians in its tournaments, US grandmaster and three-time national champion Lev Alburt told Sputnik.

The CFR became the first, and so far the only Russian sports federation that switched its affiliation to Asia due to the European limitations imposed against Russian athletes following the start of Russia's special operation in Ukraine. The Asian Chess Federation (ACF) formally adopted Russia's membership in March 2023.

“This is a good decision because the people in the Chess Federation of Russia are wise.

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Russian players were strongly discriminated against in Europe, so from all points of view, it seems to be the right and successful move," Alburt said.

He expressed confidence that Russia can rejoin the European Chess Union if the situation improves and returns to normal.

The grandmaster pointed out that there are many great chess sponsors in Asia, particularly in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, where Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud and his brothers support the game.

"Chinese players are very strong. Indian players move up faster with the help of such champions like Viswanathan Anand and Vladimir Kramnik. Of course, there are very strong players in former Soviet republics, particularly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan," Alburt said.

However, he added that there are many strong players in Europe and in the US as well.

Alburt was born in the Soviet Union but emigrated to the United States in 1979. He won three US Championships and was introduced to the US Chess Hall of Fame in 2003.

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Treasury Sanctions Entities,Tankers in 5 Nations for Supporting Terrorist Groups-Statement

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The US Department of the Treasury's Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced on Tuesday sanctions against six entities, one individual, and two tankers across Liberia, India, Vietnam, Lebanon, and Kuwait for aiding the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force (IRGC-QF), the Houthis, and Hizballah.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is sanctioning six entities, one individual and two tankers that are based or registered in Liberia, India, Vietnam, Lebanon, and Kuwait that have engaged in facilitating commodity shipments and financial transactions for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), the Houthis, and Hizballah," the US Department of the Treasury's OFAX said in a statement.

According to the statement, the Sa'id al-Jamal network, involving entities like Hassaleh International Company and KNH Shipping Private Limited, used deceptive practices including forged documents to ship Iranian commodities, mainly to China, which led to sanctions for their support to the network.

Furthermore, Tawfiq Muhammad Sa'id al-Law, a Lebanese Syrian money exchanger, has been sanctioned for providing digital wallets to Hizballah, facilitating cryptocurrency transactions for its officials, and supporting the network of Sa'id al-Jamal, including through partnerships with two Kuwait-based companies, the statement said.

"This action, the sixth round of sanctions targeting the network of Iran-based, IRGC-QF-backed Houthi financial facilitator Sa'id al-Jamal since December 2023, represents yet another step in a concerted campaign to disrupt IRGC-QF finances and its support to terrorist proxies such as the Houthis," the statement said.

These sanctions lead to the freezing of assets and prohibition of transactions within the US of the mentioned individuals and entities, potentially exposing involved financial institutions and others to penalties or enforcement actions for non-compliance, the statement added.

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Russian Chess Players Major Favorites in FIDE Candidates Tournament - US Grandmaster

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – Russian chess players Ian Nepomniachtchi, Kateryna Lagno, and Aleksandra Goryachkina are major favorites of the upcoming FIDE Candidates Tournament, US grandmaster Lev Alburt told Sputnik.

Eight men and eight women players will be competing in the parallel tournaments, which will take place in Toronto, Canada, from April 3 to 22. Winners would play with reigning champions, Chinese Ding Liren and Ju Wenjun, for the World Chess Crown.

"I think that Nepomniachtchi is definitely a favorite in this tournament. I would estimate his chance is about 25-28% to win the competition," Alburt said.

Nepomniachtchi, 33, who lost the 2023 World Championship match against Chinese Ding Liren, is currently at the best age for playing chess and has extensive and successful experience, Alburt explained. The Russian grandmaster, who will compete under the FIDE flag due to the international restrictions imposed against Russia, knows how to win such tournaments, Alburt added.

"As far as I can judge, he was very serious about this candidates' tournament. He does not play much in blitz competitions or things like Robert Fischer chess. He has a good team of coaches, and he certainly has good sponsors," Alburt said.

Evaluating the chances of other players, Alburt pointed out that they are all quite good.

"So, I would put Nepomniachtchi first. I would put US grandmaster Fabiano Caruana close second, maybe 23% or so," he said.

Like Nepomniachtchi, Caruana, 31, is at a very good age, and he is also very motivated and has good sponsors, Alburt said.

Alburt emphasized that Hikaru Nakamura of the United States and Alireza Firouzja of France have smaller chances of winning for different reasons.

"Nakamura certainly has potential, but he is doing a lot of other things besides just playing chess. He is streaming, blogging, and playing blitzes. So, it really depends on whether he is taking this particular tournament seriously enough," the grandmaster stressed.

He added that Firouzja, 20, is a little bit too young but can win with good luck.

While the women's tournament is more closely contested than the men's one, Russia's Lagno and Goryachkina have the best chances to win among all competitors, according to Alburt.

"Lagno is more stable, Goryachkina has high ups and low downs. I would put them very close," he said.

Alburt also highlighted the "very talented" Anna Muzychuk of Ukraine and China's Lei Tingjie, who lost the World Championship match to her compatriot Ju Wenjun in July 2023.

"In the women's tournament, it is more difficult to say who is the favorite," he added.

Alburt was born in the Soviet Union and emigrated to the United States in 1979. He won three US Championships and was inducted into the US Chess Hall of Fame in 2003.

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RPT - US Sanctions 11 People, Entities for Supporting Syrian Government – Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – The United States imposed sanctions against 11 individuals and entities, including one Russian national for allegedly providing support to the government of Syria, the Treasury Department said on Tuesday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned 11 individuals and entities supporting the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad through the facilitation of illicit financial transfers and trafficking of illegal drugs, as well as the extraction and export of Syrian commodities," the statement said.

The US authorities suggested that Syria has become the leading producer and exporter of Captagon, a highly addictive amphetamine-type stimulant trafficked illegally throughout the Middle East and Europe.

"The revenue from the illicit Captagon trade has become a major source of income for the Assad regime, the Syrian armed forces, and Syrian paramilitary forces. The Assad regime also derives significant profits from extractive industries with the help of foreign entities," the statement said.

Washington also believes that the Syrian authorities continue to rely on Syrian money service businesses to circumvent sanctions, it added.

One of the entities, a Syria-based Maya Exchange Company, was designated for cooperation with a sanctioned Russian bank, the statement said.

"In mid-2023, Maya agreed to assist Aleksey Makarov (Makarov), the Vice President of sanctioned Russian Financial Corporation Bank (RFC Bank), and Muhammad 'Ali Al-Minala (Al-Minala) of the Central Bank of Syria (CBoS), which has also been sanctioned by the United States, with making payments to a Jordanian beneficiary and thereby obfuscating Russian involvement in the transactions," it said.

OFAC designated Maya and Makarov for having materially assisted, sponsored, or provided financial, material, or technological support for, or goods or services to or in support of the Central Bank of Syria, the statement said.

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Nebenzia Says No Point in UNSC Discussions if US Rejects UN Charter

UNITED NATIONS, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States rejecting the UN Charter makes all discussions at the UN Security Council pointless, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday, after the US called a Gaza ceasefire resolution "non-binding."

"If that is the case, then there is no point in our discussions in the chamber at all. One of the permanent members of the Security Council has essentially openly stated that it does not

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accept the Charter of our organization, disavowing the hard won fruits of discussions in the Council and including the hard won and historic resolution on a ceasefire in Gaza," Nebenzia said during a Security Council meeting on the Palestinian question.
On Monday, US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield called the newly adopted resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza "non-binding."

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US Defense Official Tells Sputnik Reports of US Strikes in Syria Today 'Not True'

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - A US Defense Department official told Sputnik on Tuesday that reports of US strikes in eastern Syria earlier in the day are not true.
Earlier in the day, Syria's state media reported that US forces bombed Eastern Syria at dawn, killing seven soldiers and one civilian.
"That is not true. The US did not conduct strikes in Syria today," the official said.

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US Justice Dept. Declines to Comment on Assange Ruling in UK - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - A US Justice Department spokesperson on Tuesday declined to comment on a UK court ruling in Julian Assange's case that delays his extradition to the United States while it seeks certain assurances from the US government.
"The Department declined to comment," the spokesperson said about the ruling.
Earlier in the day, the court ruled that Assange has a real prospect of success on three of the nine grounds of appeal. The court, in particular, asked the US government to provide assurances that the WikiLeaks founder would be able to claim the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees freedoms related to religion, expression, assembly, and the right to petition. The court also asked to ensure that Assange would not be prejudiced at his trial due to his nationality, and that he would not face the death penalty.
The next hearing is scheduled for May 20 if the parties submit the necessary documents.

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Five Cars Remain Underwater Following Bridge Collapse in Baltimore – Baltimore Fire Chief

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – At least five vehicles, including three passenger cars and a cement truck, remain underwater following a major bridge collapse in Baltimore after a cargo

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ship hit it earlier on Tuesday, according to Baltimore City Fire Chief James Wallace.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed after being struck by a cargo ship. The Dali cargo ship was sailing under a Singaporean flag from Baltimore to the capital city of Sri Lanka, Colombo, at the time of collapse, according to media reports.

“It's the dynamic of an incident like this, operating in a space of uncertainty, it just makes things very difficult," CNN cited Wallace as saying. "Add darkness to it, and it becomes dangerous."

According to Wallace, some eight dive teams have been performing search and rescue operations, while it remains unknown whether the fifth car is a passenger or work vehicle.

Earlier in the day, Maryland Transportation Secretary Paul Wiedefeld said that at the time of the collision, there was a crew of workers who were repairing potholes on the bridge and the work was not related to any structural issues with the bridge.

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Cuban President Slams UNSC Vote on Gaza Ceasefire Resolution as US ‘Global Shame’

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel said on Tuesday that the United States' abstention on a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza is shameful.

"While the UN’s Security Council approved a resolution demanding a ceasefire in Gaza for the month of Ramadan, the death toll of Israel’s genocide has continued to grow: Now more than 32,000! And the United States continues to refuse peace. Global shame," Diaz-Canel said via X.

On Monday, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution calling for an immediate Ramadan ceasefire in Gaza that leads to a lasting and sustainable ceasefire. The motion was sponsored by the 10 non-permanent members of the council. Fourteen countries voted in favor, while the United States abstained.

The draft resolution was to call for a "permanent sustainable ceasefire," but the word "permanent" was removed at the last-minute request of the United States.

Prior to the vote, Russia had proposed an amendment to restore the call for a "permanent ceasefire," protesting the "weak wording." The amendment was backed by China and Algeria, but was blocked by the United States, with 11 others abstaining.

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US Justice Department Says Seeking Forfeiture of Apartments Bought With Corruption Money

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department said on Tuesday that it is seeking the forfeiture of two apartments in New York City that were allegedly purchased using money from an international corruption scheme.

“The Justice Department filed a civil forfeiture complaint today in the U.S. District Court for the

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Eastern District of New York alleging that two apartments located in New York City were purchased for $14 million with the proceeds from an international corruption scheme and are subject to forfeiture based on violations of federal money laundering statutes," the Justice Department said in a statement.

The Justice Department alleges that former Mongolian prime minister Sukhbaatar Batbold used his position to profit from the sale of Mongolia's natural resources, the statement said. Batbold and his family used proceeds of the alleged corruption to purchase $14 million in real estate in the United States, the statement said.

Batbold allegedly used a "sophisticated money laundering scheme" to purchase the apartments, the statement said. The case is under investigation by FBI New York's International Corruption Squad, the statement said.

The forfeiture action sends a message that the Justice Department will not tolerate public corruption that undermines faith in government, the statement said.

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US Sanctions 11 People, Entities Russian for Supporting Syrian Government – Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – The United States imposed sanctions against 11 individuals and entities, including one Russian national for allegedly providing support to the government of Syria, the Treasury Department said on Tuesday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned 11 individuals and entities supporting the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad through the facilitation of illicit financial transfers and trafficking of illegal drugs, as well as the extraction and export of Syrian commodities," the statement said.

The US authorities suggested that Syria has become the leading producer and exporter of Captagon, a highly addictive amphetamine-type stimulant trafficked illegally throughout the Middle East and Europe.

"The revenue from the illicit Captagon trade has become a major source of income for the Assad regime, the Syrian armed forces, and Syrian paramilitary forces. The Assad regime also derives significant profits from extractive industries with the help of foreign entities," the statement said.

Washington also believes that the Syrian authorities continue to rely on Syrian money service businesses to circumvent sanctions, it added.

One of the entities, a Syria-based Maya Exchange Company, was designated for cooperation with a sanctioned Russian bank, the statement said.

"In mid-2023, Maya agreed to assist Aleksey Makarov (Makarov), the Vice President of sanctioned Russian Financial Corporation Bank (RFC Bank), and Muhammad 'Ali Al-Minala (Al-Minala) of the Central Bank of Syria (CBoS), which has also been sanctioned by the United States, with making payments to a Jordanian beneficiary and thereby obfuscating Russian involvement in the transactions," it said.

OFAC designated Maya and Makarov for having materially assisted, sponsored, or provided

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financial, material, or technological support for, or goods or services to or in support of the Central Bank of Syria, the statement said.

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Chad Faces Largest Humanitarian Crisis With Refugee Influx – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – Chad is facing the largest humanitarian crisis as thousands of refugees are streaming to the country from the conflict-ravaged neighboring state of Sudan, US Assistant Secretary of State Julieta Valls Noyes said on Tuesday.

"The situation with refugees arriving today is much worse. It is a profound challenge. It is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world right now," Noyes told reporters.

She stressed that 90% of the refugees are women and children with profound needs and very few resources.

"They are arriving with almost nothing but the clothes they are wearing. They are arriving after having been victimized on the route. They are arriving with needs and profound trauma," she added.

Noyes emphasized that the crisis requires a response from many countries and organizations to help the people and the government of Chad.

Chad is one of the poorest countries in the world. Almost 700,000 people have fled to Chad since the onset of the crisis in Sudan, according to the International Organization for Migration.

Before the recent emergency, Chad was already providing refuge to over 1 million people from different countries, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council. The majority of the refugees are from Sudan and arrived in Chad during the first Darfur war.

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Baltimore Mayor Declares State Of Emergency After Bridge Collapse

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott declared local state of emergency on Tuesday after a major bridge collapsed in the largest city of the US state of Maryland.

Earlier in the day, part of the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed after being hit by a cargo ship, officials said. At least six people remain missing after the incident, and one person is hospitalized Maryland Transportation Secretary Paul Wiedefeld said.

“Baltimore, I am officially declaring a local state of emergency in response to the collapse of our Key Bridge,” Scott said in a message on X social network.

He assured that emergency teams are mobilizing resources and working swiftly to address the situation.

The state of emergency remains in effect for 30 days and may be subject to renewal or

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cancellation depending on the situation, Scott said in an executive order.
Maryland Governor Wes Moore said officials were still investigating the incident but have "no credible evidence" that the collision was a terror attack.
The White House said that US President Joe Biden has been briefed about the situation and continues to receive updates.

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No Evidence of Terrorist Attack After Bridge Collapses in Baltimore – Maryland Governor

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – There is no credible evidence to indicate that the ship collision with the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore was the result of a terrorist attack, Maryland Governor Wes Moore said on Tuesday.
"We are still investigating what happened, but we are quickly gathering details. The preliminary investigation points to an accident. We haven't seen any credible evidence of a terrorist attack," Moore said during a press briefing.
Early Tuesday, the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed after being hit by a cargo ship. The Dali cargo ship was sailing under a Singaporean flag from Baltimore to the capital city of Sri Lanka, Colombo, at the time of collapse, according to media reports.

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Six People Still Unaccounted for After Bridge Collapsed in Baltimore – Maryland Official

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – At least six people remain unaccounted for after a major bridge collapsed in Baltimore following a ship collision, Maryland Transportation Secretary Paul Wiedefeld said on Tuesday.
Early Tuesday, the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed after being struck by a cargo ship. The Dali cargo ship was sailing under a Singaporean flag from Baltimore to the capital city of Sri Lanka, Colombo, at the time of collapse, according to media reports.
"A total of eight: one rescued and now in a hospital, one not in a hospital, but we have communicated with that person, and then six that we are searching for," Wiedefeld told reporters when asked how many people were on the bridge when the collision happened.

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Russia Concert Hall Attack Reminder IS Remains ‘Real Threat’ - Blinken

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WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – The deadly terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall concert venue outside Moscow is a reminder that the Islamic State terrorist group (IS, banned in Russia) remains a "real threat," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

The secretary made the remarks during a short press conference with Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Mohammed Hussein currently visiting the US.

"It's very important that unfortunately, we'd be reminded that ISIS remains a real threat and despite the very good work that we've done over the years in dealing with that threat, and mitigating it significantly, we're reminded by the horrific attack outside of Moscow … that ISIS remains a potentially potent force and one that we have to continue to deal with," Blinken said.

Blinken said the US mourned the loss of innocent lives during the attack. He added that following the tragedy it is even more important to ensure IS is unable to revive and regenerate.

A shooting occurred last Friday in the Crocus City Hall concert venue in the city of Krasnogorsk, just outside Moscow, followed by a massive fire. A Sputnik correspondent who witnessed the attack reported that a number of gunmen in camouflage broke into the music hall, shooting people point-blank and throwing incendiary bombs. The Russian Investigative Committee said that at least 139 people were killed as a result of the terrorist attack.

Eleven people were arrested in connection with the events, including four believed to be directly involved in the terrorist attack, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) said. The four main suspects in the case were detained in the Russian region of Bryansk, which borders Belarus and Ukraine, the FSB added. The perpetrators - all citizens of Tajikistan - were charged with terrorism and could face life imprisonment.

FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov said on Tuesday that while radical Islamists had prepared the terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall, the Ukrainian special forces were involved.

The Western intelligence and Ukraine needed the attack to create panic in Russian society, Bortnikov also said. The mastermind behind the terrorist attack has not been identified yet, the FSB chief stated.

The Moscow suburb concert hall terrorist attack is the deadliest in Russia in nearly 20 years.

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