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**3/27/24 Wednesday**

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Is Biden Administration 'Slow Rolling' Assange Case to Keep Journalists in Limbo?

Having been proven incompetent on any number of issues, the White House seeks to delay a decision on the Wikileaks founder's fate.

Journalist Julian Assange's long-running legal saga took another unexpected turn Tuesday when the UK's High Court of Justice ruled the Wikileaks founder would be granted a temporary reprieve from his expected extradition to the United States.

The self-described transparency advocate has been effectively imprisoned in London for 12 years, first in the UK's Ecuadorian embassy where he was granted refuge and then in Belmarsh Prison, a notorious high-security facility often called "Britain's Guantanamo Bay." Assange, an Australian citizen, is wanted by the United States for publishing leaked government documents including secret diplomatic cables and video evidence of US war crimes in Iraq.

Observers have warned the prosecution of Assange would create a chilling effect for free speech in the West, setting the precedent the US can extradite and convict journalists worldwide merely for publishing leaked material. US President Joe Biden, undaunted, has continued efforts by his predecessors to try the activist in court despite his increasingly deteriorating health condition after years of confinement.

Wilmer Leon, host of Sputnik's The Critical Hour program, spoke to a series of guests Tuesday to assess the latest development in the case.

"The British High Court ruled today that Assange can mount a final challenge against extradition to the US to face trial for publishing secret diplomatic and military files, which, by the way folks, is not illegal," Leon said. The host explained the UK court was seeking assurances from the United States that Assange would be granted First Amendment rights and would not be given the death penalty.

"It's a limited appeal," noted Steve Poikonen, a national organizer for the group Action for Assange. "They're not allowed to introduce some evidence that shows that the CIA was plotting to kidnap and possibly murder Assange while he was under protective custody of the Ecuadorian embassy. They have reduced the amount of arguments they can introduce at the appeal."

Assange's legal team was also barred from challenging his extradition on the grounds it is being conducted for political purposes. The UK's extradition treaty with the US prohibits the exchange of someone undergoing political persecution.

"The United States, along with already trying to kidnap and kill the guy, or at least talking about kidnaping and killing him – thank you, President Trump and Mike Pompeo – has said that there could be additional charges added once he gets here that could result in 175 years in prison and/or the death penalty," noted Leon. "By the way, if you are subjected to 175 years in prison without the possibility of parole, that is a fact that you will die in prison."

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“It's very complicated and it's really just, I think, slow-rolling to try and keep him in jail as much as possible,” said journalist Jim Kavanagh, weighing in on Tuesday’s announcement. “They hope he'll die in jail. I don't know what they want to do about this. I don't think it's going to be a good thing for the Biden administration, especially in the current circumstances, to bring him into the United States and have them put him on trial here.”

Kavanagh also addressed rumors published by Consortium News that Assange may be offered a plea deal that would keep him out of prison if he pled guilty to a misdemeanor charge of mishandling classified documents. The journalist speculated the Biden administration may be trying to finally find a way out of the controversial issue.

“You've got to just think that the British court is kind of fundamentally consulting with the Americans about how to play this game and drag it out as much as they can,” he said. “This is a horrible thing that this is still going on. He's being tortured. There's no reason for him to be in solitary confinement. He's been convicted of no crime, and he's being treated like a serial killer. It's disgraceful.”

Analyst Caleb Maupin suggested various players in the long-running saga are merely looking to pass the buck, not wanting to be held responsible for Assange’s fate as his health continues to decline.

“I'm forced to think about some of the police brutality cases I worked on in Cleveland when I was an activist,” said Maupin. “And there were many examples where somebody looks at a case, a judge or prosecutor. They think ‘I don't want to be the one to have my fingerprints on it. I don't want to be the one to do this.’”

“And I look at how they're just kind of prolonging the legal proceedings and it seems like there's a lot of people in the British legal system that really don't want to have their fingerprints on whatever happens to Julian Assange,” he concluded. “They're trying to do everything they can to not be the one responsible for what ultimately occurs.”

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Billionaire Financier George Soros Overtaken by Trump in List of World’s Wealthiest - Report

Soros’ defenders often deflect criticism by accusing his detractors of antisemitism, but a cursory analysis of his outsized global influence demonstrates his conduct is ripe for critique.

Billionaire financier George Soros has been overtaken by former US President Donald Trump on Bloomberg’s index of the world’s richest people, it was revealed Tuesday.

The US news outlet’s updated rankings showed the prominent liberal donor at number 378 on the list with an estimated $7.16 billion net worth. Trump was ranked just above Soros at the 377th slot in the ranking.

The former US president’s net worth more than doubled this year after his Trump Media & Technology Group merged with Digital World Acquisition Corp. Trump Media & Technology Group owns and operates the real estate mogul’s Truth Social online platform, where Trump took refuge after being banned from Twitter (now X). His increased wealth also places him above figures like Home Depot founder Bernie Marcus and Netflix cofounder Reed Hastings.

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Soros' net worth has changed little in recent years as the 93-year-old former hedge fund manager devotes his attention to social causes. He's perhaps best known in Europe as "The Man Who Broke the Bank of England;" his short sale of the British pound sterling netted him $1 billion in profit during the UK's 1992 Black Wednesday financial crisis.

The wealthy financier's political giving has made him a controversial figure. A 1991 article in the Washington Post dubbed Soros an "overt operative" of US-backed regime change operations in Europe. Alongside US government organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Soros funnels his massive wealth towards pro-Western activists who help bring down Russian and socialist-aligned governments.

Author William Blum describes a striking example of such tactics in his 1995 classic Killing Hope. When voters returned popular socialist parties to power in post-communist Albania and Bulgaria, the NED lavished opposition groups with millions of dollars to foment political unrest. Massive protests forced the collapse of both governments, which were replaced by neoliberal parties committed to economic reforms in the interest of Western capital.

After their economies were hollowed out, Eastern European countries were then integrated into Western institutions like the European Union and NATO, further surrendering their sovereignty to leaders in Washington and Brussels.

The strategy was repeated again and again over the next several years, with donors like Soros pouring millions into ostensibly "pro-democracy" causes. Soros helped fund two such "color revolutions" on Russia's border, once during Ukraine's so-called "Orange Revolution" in 2004 and again during the 2014 Maidan coup. In both cases elected leaders aligned with Russia were overthrown in favor of pro-Western governments that dramatically shifted Ukraine's political allegiances.

Soros' Open Society Foundations played a key role in Ukraine's 2014 regime change by funding a 3-D model "reconstruction" pinning the blame for a massacre of protesters at Kiev's Maidan Square on government forces. The rendering was touted by The New York Timesand other news outlets as "proof" that President Viktor Yanukovych's government was using deadly force to repress demonstrators, a key narrative leading to his overthrow.

The reconstruction was later found by a Ukrainian court to be a complete fabrication, a piece of "deliberate fraud and disinformation" that allowed Soros to interfere in Ukraine with deadly consequences.

Soros has since poured his resources into influencing US politics, funding organizations that promote censorship on social media in the name of "combatting disinformation" and lobby for sanctions on Cuba and Venezuela. In 2022 Soros was the single largest donor to Democratic Party-aligned causes, just above disgraced cryptocurrency entrepreneur Sam Bankman-Fried.

The influential billionaire's defenders often claim criticism of Soros is antisemitic, but a cursory analysis of his outsized global influence demonstrates his conduct is ripe for critique.

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Could Ethnic Strife in the Baltic States Fuel the Next War?

Ethnic Russians are being targeted by nationalist governments in the Baltics, creating a potentially explosive dynamic.

Recent statements by French President and aspiring EmperorEmmanuel Macron have generated speculation the proxy war between Russia and the West could escalate to a new and dangerous phase.

To the consternation of other European leaders, Macron has repeatedly suggested France may send soldiers to the Donbass to avert the collapse of Ukraine's diminished armed forces. Other countries would likely hesitate to join the French president in his quixotic endeavor, but analyst Scott Ritter speculates the increasingly anti-Russia Baltic States might be among the first to contribute troops.

Tensions are already growing in the Baltics between nationalist forces and ethnic Russians who, as in other Eastern European countries, make up sizable minorities. Could racial strife lead towards violent conflict in the Baltics as it has in Ukraine? Journalist Dan Lazare joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Wednesday to examine that question.

"Der Spiegel International reports, 'Latvia Tightens the Screws on Its Russian Minority," said host Wilmer Leon, reading from the German online magazine. "'Around 30% of the Latvian population are Russian speakers. The government believes they could provide Vladimir Putin with a bridgehead into the country. The atmosphere is growing tense.'"

"I think the comparison [to Ukraine] is absolutely, absolutely, appropriate," said Lazare. "All through Eastern Europe you have essentially nationalist regimes that have targeted their Russian-speaking residents as somehow disloyal or somehow contrary to the national project and have implemented various forms of discrimination. It's especially severe in Latvia, but it's also the case in Estonia and Lithuania."

"They're threatening them with deportation, they are firing them from jobs, they're forcing them to take language tests," the author continued. "Washington… says absolutely nothing about these abuses because they work in favor of US foreign policy."

Leon continued reading from the piece in Der Speigel, recounting the story of a Latvian woman whose cousin received a government letter declaring he "must immediately leave the country for the protection of national security." Federal agents appeared at his door shortly after, giving him one hour to pack before sending him to a detention center to be deported to Russia.

"It's outrageous," said Lazare. "Latvia for the Latvians. Where have we heard that before?"

"All these countries have extensive minorities – linguistic, religious, etcetera," he noted. "The US has been playing footsie with this kind of nationalism, and it's disastrous. It's led to one war and it'll lead to others."

Lazare described a dynamic in the Baltics similar to that of Ukraine during World War II, where pro-Soviet citizens supported the Soviet Union and nationalist regimes sided with the fascist Axis.

"They tear down Soviet war memorials and, on at least one occasion, put up memorials celebrating the achievements of World War Two [Nazi] collaborators," Lazare explained. "We saw at least a million examples of this in the Ukraine, where statues of Stepan Bandera, the pro-Nazi World War Two collaborationist leader, have popped up all over the country. But we've seen it as well in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania."

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“In Latvia I believe the veterans of a World War Two SS battalion staged yearly parades, to the applause of bystanders. In Latvia, amazingly enough, elderly war veterans who served in partisan units – many of them Jewish – have been prosecuted for war crimes, believe it or not. So this is absolutely explosive, and it's been percolating for years,” he said.

Lazare warned the conflict in the Donbass is reaching “the most dangerous stage” as Ukraine approaches its inevitable defeat. “That panic could take explosive forms,” the journalist said, with majority-Russian areas in Latvia, Estonia, and elsewhere potentially becoming “flash points” of violence.

He added that Ukraine’s loss should cause people throughout the continent to question why the United States is “plunging the region into war.” The US played a key role in destabilizing Ukraine with their support for the Maidan coup, which installed a Russophobic regime in Kiev. The event led to an armed conflict in the country’s Donbass region, compelling Russia to eventually intervene as the coup government turned its military on separatist forces.

The US again escalated tensions with the destruction of the Nord Stream pipeline, Lazare claimed.

“They [Europe] should definitely attend to that issue [of self preservation] and they should do so in a rational, long range manner,” the author concluded. “And that means not blindly following the US down some garden path which ends in disaster. America's military record of the last 30 years has been extraordinary, and not in a good way.”

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These Small Birds Flutter Their Wings as a Polite Gesture - Study

It is the first known case of a non-primate animal displaying a gesture for the purpose of symbolic communication.

On Monday, scientists reported in the journal Current Biology of a mated pair of Japanese tits (Parus minor) sharing a moment of polite gesturing. While humans may wag their fingers, raise a hand in a wave, or raise their eyebrows, non-primate animals have not shown that same habit. Until now.

These tiny Japanese tits have been observed making gestures as a way to express their etiquette. The small birds flutter their wings in a gesture as a way to communicate “after you” to their partners, the researchers have said. The bird essentially messages to its partner that they should enter the nest before they do.

Researchers observed eight mated pairs who made over 300 trips to their nests. They found that females would flutter their wings far more than males. The females would almost always enter the nest first unless they were the ones fluttering their wings---in which case the male would enter the nest first. The fluttering would also only occur in social interactions and not when a bird was alone.

The discovery shows that these birds “not only use wing fluttering as a symbolic gesture, but also in a complex social context involving a sender, receiver and a specific goal, much like how

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humans communicate," says Toshitaka Suzuki, a biologist at the University of Tokyo a co-author of the study.
After observing Japanese tits for nearly two decades, Suzuki discovered that these birds would sometimes bring food to the net, sit on a branch and flutter their wings. Their partners would then enter the nest before them.
"This led me to investigate whether this behavior fulfills the criteria of gestures," Suzuki says, adding that fluttering their wings instead of calling may help them avoid attracting predators.
Other animals, such as ravens and fish, have shown forms of "deictic gesturing" like pointing out objects or showing something of interest. But that differs from symbolic gesturing, which requires complex cognitive skills.

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Chemicals Found in Everyday Household Products Linked to Autism, Multiple Sclerosis - Study

Over 1.8 million people are estimated to suffer from multiple sclerosis (MS) worldwide, affecting their cognitive function, emotional, motor, sensory and visual areas after their immune system attacks their brain and spinal cord, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).
According to a new study, two chemicals found in common household products like cleaning products, hair products and furniture could be playing a role in the development of neurological disorders like autism and multiple sclerosis.
And because only a fraction of neurological problems can be attributed to genetics alone, it is believed that unknown environmental factors play a major role in these health issues.
The study, published in the journal Nature Neuroscience on Tuesday, found that some common household chemicals can specifically affect the brain's oligodendrocytes, which is a specialized cell type that creates a protective insulation around nerve cells.
A team of researchers from the Case Western Reserve University of Medicine examined over 1,800 common household chemicals and identified two that selectively damaged oligodendrocytes. The chemicals belong to two classes: organophosphate flame retardants and quaternary ammonium compounds (quats or QACs).
"Loss of oligodendrocytes underlies multiple sclerosis and other neurological diseases," said Paul Tesar, the study's lead author. "We now show that specific chemicals in consumer products can directly harm oligodendrocytes, representing a previously unrecognized risk factor for neurological disease."
According to the research, quats cause oligodendrocytes (brain cells that create the nerve cells protective layer) to die, while organophosphate flame retardants prevent them from maturing.
Quats are often found in products like body washes, fabric softeners, shampoos, sunscreens, baby wipes, shaving creams and disinfectants like Clorox and Downy products.
Organophosphate flame retardants are found in electronic devices, building materials and furniture made with flame retardant foam and plastic, according to the Green Science Policy Institute. The institute also found that products with flame retardants will burn similarly to those without the chemical, making their use seem more harmful than relevant.

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"Flame retardants continually migrate out of furniture and into indoor dust which is ingested by people and pets. Some of these chemicals are associated with lowered IQ in children, cancer, hormone disruption, and other health problems," the institute writes.
Research found that when oligodendrocytes production is disrupted, it can cause neurological disorders like multiple sclerosis and autism. According to Tesar, the researchers have managed to uncover a "previously unrecognized risk factor for neurological disease".
The WHO found that one in 100 children worldwide have been diagnosed with autism.
"We hope our work will contribute to informed decisions regarding regulatory measures or behavioral interventions to minimize chemical exposure and protect human health," Tesar said in a statement.

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China's Cheap Green Imports Hurt US Economy, White House Reportedly Laments

In 2023, China accounted for around 60% of global electric car sales, according to the International Energy Agency, a Paris-based intergovernmental group.
United States Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen reportedly plans to warn China against flooding the global market with cheap green energy exports, because it "hurts American firms and workers, as well as firms and workers around the world."
Yellen planned to deliver her message to Beijing from a solar energy manufacturer in the US state of Georgia on Wednesday. The plant, Suniva, closed in 2017 due to cheap imports flooding the market, the Treasury claims. However, its reopening is being incentivized by the Inflation Reduction Act, which provides incentives for green energy manufacturers. She will then travel to China for her second trip under her role as treasury secretary.
"It is important to the president and me that American firms and workers can compete on a level playing field. We have raised overcapacity in previous discussions with China and I plan to make it a key issue in discussions during my next trip there," Yellen will say, according to reports.
Using China's previous excess production of metals including steel and aluminum as an example, which she says damaged the economy, products like electric vehicles and lithium-ion batteries could also distort markets, Yellen claims.
"China's overcapacity distorts global prices and production patterns and hurts American firms and workers," she will say.
The Biden administration is trying to drive investment into its own domestic cleantech sector, and is offering large tax breaks and subsidies to developers to build green energy manufacturing facilities in the US in order to break from their dependence on Chinese supply chains.
US President Joe Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping have worked to stabilize their economic relationship, but differences over trade policy, investment restrictions, and cyberespionage paranoia have strained those ties.

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On Tuesday, China filed a World Trade Organization complaint against the US in response to what it says are discriminatory requirements for electric vehicle subsidies. And on Wednesday, Xi Jinping met with American business leaders and academics in Beijing, telling them that China is "building a first-class business environment that is market oriented."
The Chinese leader also said that in areas like trade, artificial intelligence and climate change, China and the US should help each other's development and not obstruct one another.
Allies of the US have also criticized the Reduction Act as "protectionist". And clean energy groups have also warned that restricting the flow of clean energy imports into the US will worsen goals to reduce emissions and will also make renewable technology more expensive and therefore less accessible.
Is the Biden administration 'slow rolling' Assange case to keep the journalist in limbo?

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Leon spoke to a series of guests to assess the latest development in the case:

▪ "It's a limited appeal," noted analyst Steve Poikonen. "They're not allowed to introduce some evidence that shows that the CIA was plotting to kidnap and possibly murder Assange while he was under protective custody of the Ecuadorian embassy." Assange's lawyers are also barred from arguing the extradition amounts to political persecution.

▪ "It's very complicated and it's really just, I think, slow-rolling to try and keep him in jail as much as possible," said journalist Jim Kavanagh. "They hope he'll die in jail… I don't think it's going to be a good thing for the Biden administration, especially in the current circumstances, to bring him into the United States and have them put him on trial here."

▪ "I look at how they're just kind of prolonging the legal proceedings and it seems like there's a lot of people in the British legal system that really don't want to have their fingerprints on whatever happens to Julian Assange," Analyst Caleb Maupin concluded. "They're trying to do everything they can to not be the one responsible for what ultimately occurs."

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Billionaire financier George Soros overtaken by Trump in list of world's wealthiest

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Billionaire financier George Soros has been surpassed by former US President Donald Trump on Bloomberg's index of the world's richest individuals, it was revealed Tuesday. The news outlet's updated rankings showed the prominent liberal donor at number 378 on the list with an estimated $7.16 billion net worth. Trump was ranked just above Soros at number 377.

The wealthy financier's political giving has made him a controversial figure. A 1991 article in the Washington Post dubbed Soros an "overt operative" of US-backed regime change operations in Europe.

Alongside US government organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Soros funneled his massive wealth towards pro-Western activists who helped bring down Russian and socialist-aligned governments.

Soros' Open Society Foundations played a key role in Ukraine's 2014 regime change by funding a 3-D model "reconstruction" pinning the blame for a massacre of protesters at Kiev's Maidan Square on government forces. The rendering was touted by The New York Times and other news outlets as proof that President Viktor Yanukovych's government was using deadly force to repress demonstrators, a key event that led to his overthrow.

The reconstruction was later found by a Ukrainian court to be a complete fabrication, a piece of "deliberate fraud and disinformation" that allowed Soros to interfere in Ukrainian politics with deadly consequences.

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Could ethnic strife in the Baltic states fuel the next war?

Tensions are growing in the Baltics between nationalist forces and ethnic Russians who, as in other Eastern European countries, make up sizable minorities. Could racial strife lead towards violent conflict in the Baltics as it has in Ukraine? Journalist Dan Lazare joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Wednesday to examine that question.

"I think the comparison [to Ukraine] is absolutely appropriate," said Lazare. "All through Eastern Europe you have essentially nationalist regimes that have targeted their Russian-speaking residents as somehow disloyal or somehow contrary to the national project and have implemented various forms of discrimination. It's especially severe in Latvia, but it's also the case in Estonia and Lithuania."

"They're threatening them with deportation, they are firing them from jobs, they're forcing them to take language tests," the author continued. "Washington… says absolutely nothing about these abuses because they work in favor of US foreign policy."

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Host Wilmer Leon read from a piece in German magazine Der Spiegel recounting the story of a Latvian woman whose cousin received a government letter declaring he “must immediately leave the country for the protection of national security.” Federal agents appeared at his door shortly after, giving him one hour to pack before sending him to a detention center to be deported to Russia.

“It's outrageous,” said Lazare. “Latvia for the Latvians. Where have we heard that before?” He warned that praise and nostalgia for anti-Soviet Nazi collaborators is on the rise in the region.

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Crises in Palestine, Haiti rooted in legacy of Western colonialism

Major crises in Haiti and the Gaza Strip have shocked the world in recent months.

“The Zionist genocide of the Palestinian people and the political and socio-economic crisis in Haiti both have their origins in their respective episodes of destructive foreign intervention in the first decades of the last century,” reads a recent article by Palestinian activist Robert Fantina. Fantina joined Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program to discuss his article, entitled “Genocide, Coup d’Etat and Militarization: Palestine and Haiti.”

“This article… does make a very clear connection between the colonial histories of both countries, with Haiti having been invaded and really colonized by the French, and, of course, Palestine being colonized by Israel with the support of the United States,” said Fantina. “We should also mention that it was the United States also who occupied Haiti for over 15 years, 20 years… the result of both is the suffering of the people.”

The US has taken part in almost 400 military interventions in its short history, with half of them taking place since 1950 and a quarter occurring after the end of the Cold War. Fantina criticized the legacy of such foreign interference, claiming, “The United States government will talk about how it supports freedom and democracy around the world, but that's only if the democratic process leads to a government that is pleasing to the United States.”

Scenes of starvation have emerged from Gaza recently as Israel strictly limits the amount of food and aid allowed to enter the besieged enclave. US President Joe Biden, who often boasts of “restoring the soul of the nation,” is apparently insufficiently bothered by the mass casualty event to restrict supplies of weapons to the US ally.

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Pentagon Issues 15 Petroleum Fuel Contracts Worth Over $3Bln

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Fifteen US petroleum corporations will supply more than $3 billion worth of fuel to the US armed forces under new Defense Logistics Agency contracts, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

The Petromax Refining Company of Houston won a $553,956,872 contract, Phillips 66 Company of Houston received a $537,204,487 contract and Valero Marketing and Supply Company of San Antonio received a $313,265,241 agreement, the release said on Wednesday.

Placid Refining Company of Port Allen received a $246,912,575 contract, Sunoco of Dallas got a $204,164,226 one, Lazarus Energy Holdings of Houston received a $172,523,466 order and Carbon Asset Developer Associates of Alamo and VetJet Fuels of Dallas, Texas both received orders of more than $157 million each, the Defense Department said.

Husky Marketing & Supply Company of Dublin, Ohio got a $130,790,931 order, Alon USA of Brentwood, Tennessee a $105,685,589 one and Calumet Shreveport Fuels of Indianapolis a $94,363,454 one, the release added.

Smaller contracts went to Marathon Petroleum Company of Findlay, Ohio, Hermes Consolidated of Rapid City, South Dakota, Epic Aviation of Salem, Oregon and Associated Energy Group of Houston, the Defense Department said.

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Raytheon Gets $287Mln Contract Boost to Upgrade 166 Tomahawk Missiles - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has approved a $287 million contract extension to Raytheon in order to modernize 166 Tomahawk cruise missiles for an additional 15 years of service, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"[The] Raytheon Company [of] Tucson, Arizona is awarded a $287 million modification ...contract ...for ...[the] modernization of 166 Tomahawk Block IV All-Up-Round Missiles (142 for the Navy and 24 for Foreign Military Sales customers)," the release said on Wednesday.

The upgrades will enable the cruise missiles to remain operational for up to an additional 15 years of service, the Defense Department explained.

"[T]his modification provides for missile obsolescence and health monitoring, software maintenance, depot support, and associated hardware procurements," the release added.

Work on the program will be performed in Tucson, Arizona (58.3%); Pontiac, Michigan (14.7%) and in other US locations over the next two years and is expected to be completed in March 2026, the Defense Department said.

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Lockheed Martin Gets $440Mln Contract Boost to Maintain F-35 Combat Fleet - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has received an almost $440 million contract extension from the US Navy to continue providing support and pilot flight equipment for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Corporation [of] Fort Worth, Texas is awarded a $439,888,241 ...modification ...contract ...to provide support equipment, pilot flight equipment, and post ejection survival training material," the release stated on Wednesday.

The equipment will be provided to support the activities of the F-35A, F-35B and F-35C aircraft for the US Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy and Foreign Military Sales customers, the Defense Department explained.

The contract will also cover administrative, contract management, planning and readiness reviews and other activities to support the operations of the aircraft, the release said.

Most of the work to sustain the aircraft will be performed in Redondo Beach, California (91%) and the contract is expected to run for almost six years until December 2029, the Defense Department said.

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Russia Remains Party to CTBT With Same Obligations, Rights – Executive Secretary

UNITED NATIONS, March 28 (Sputnik) – Russia remains a party to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty with the same obligations and rights, despite the country withdrawing its ratification, Executive Secretary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) Robert Floyd told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"The Russian Federation remains a State Signatory to the Treaty, with the same obligations and rights as all other state signatories. The Russian Federation has stated that it remains committed to the Treaty, including the operation of all CTBTO monitoring stations on its territory and the sharing of that data with all states, and, at the close of last year, completed the development and certification of the Russian segment of the IMS [the International Monitoring System]," Floyd said in an interview.

Floyd added that he continues to engage with the Russian permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna.

In November 2023, Russia revoked its ratification of the CTBT to ensure parity with the United States, which has not ratified the treaty.

The CTBT is a multilateral treaty that bans nuclear weapon test explosions and all other nuclear explosions for civilian and military purposes. The treaty was adopted in 1996 but has never gone into effect, as it would require ratification by all 44 countries that had nuclear power or research reactors at the time it was signed.

Of the nine recognized nuclear powers, only France and the United Kingdom have signed and

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ratified the treaty. The United States, China, and Israel have signed but not ratified the treaty, while India, Pakistan, and North Korea have neither signed nor ratified it.

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Biden Admin Directs All US Federal Agencies to Designate Chief AI Officer - Harris

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has directed all US federal agencies to appoint a chief officer of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to oversee all related technologies, Vice President Kamala Harris said during a press briefing.

"We have directed all federal agencies to designate a chief AI officer with the experience, expertise and authority to oversee all ... AI technologies used by that agency," Harris said. "This is to make sure that AI is used responsibly."

The directive is one of three new binding requirements that the Biden administration is announcing to help ensure the safe, secure and responsible use of AI across US federal agencies, Harris said.

One of the requirements will ensure that when federal agencies deploy AI tools, they must first prove that these tools do not compromise the rights or safety of Americans, Harris said.

This would include, for example, ensuring that any AI tools do not have racially biased outcomes, she said.

A third requirement relates to transparency, Harris said, adding that the American people have a right to know that AI technologies are "being used, in a responsible way."

To improve transparency, the Biden administration will make it mandatory for US federal agencies to produce annual online publications detailing all of their AI systems, including risk assessments and management strategies, Harris said.

She added that the US would persist in urging all nations to prioritize the public interest in their governments' use of AI technologies.

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Of the nine recognized nuclear powers, only France and the United Kingdom have signed and ratified the treaty. The United States, China, and Israel have signed but not ratified the treaty, while India, Pakistan, and North Korea have neither signed nor ratified it.

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CTBTO Chief on US Maintaining Readiness to Test: All Parties Expected to Honor Moratorium

UNITED NATIONS, March 28 (Sputnik) – The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) expects all parties to the treaty to observe the moratorium, CTBTO Executive Secretary Robert Floyd told Sputnik, commenting on the US policy of maintaining readiness to conduct nuclear tests.

Speaking at the Brookings Institution earlier this month, Principal Deputy Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) at the US Department of Energy Frank Rose said that under US law, the American government is "required to maintain the readiness to test should the President direct us to." However, NNSA is of the opinion that, given the investments the US has made in stockpile stewardship, it does not need to return to testing, Rose stated.

"All States Signatories are expected to maintain the moratorium on nuclear testing," Floyd said in an interview.

On October 10, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said there were signs of the US preparing or at least having prepared "to the last" nuclear tests in Nevada. On October 18, the US conducted an explosive underground experiment at the site where it had previously tested nuclear weapons but denied it was a nuclear test. The experiment came hours after the Russian lower house passed a bill revoking the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

In December, US National Nuclear Security Administration chief Jill Hruby said that the United States is not preparing any nuclear tests at the Nevada National Security Site, adding that Washington had "nothing to hide" with regard to its experiments at the location.

The CTBT is a multilateral accord that bans nuclear weapon test explosions and all other nuclear explosions for civilian and military purposes. The treaty was adopted in 1996 but has never gone into effect, as it would require ratification by all 44 countries that had nuclear power or research reactors at the time it was signed. Of the nine recognized nuclear powers, only

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France and the United Kingdom have signed and ratified the treaty.
The US signed the treaty in 1996, but the Senate refused to provide its consent in 1999, thereby blocking its ratification.
On November 2, 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a bill into law to revoke the ratification of the CTBT. The Kremlin said that the move was meant to restore parity with the US.
Putin said in March that Russia is not ruling out doing nuclear tests if the United States conducts them first.

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CTBTO Secretary Urges North Korea to Keep 2018 Pledge on Nuclear Tests Ban

UNITED NATIONS, March 28 (Sputnik) – Executive Secretary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) Robert Floyd told Sputnik on Wednesday that he calls on North Korea to keep its 2018 pledge to refrain from nuclear tests.
The secretary said that he "urges DPRK to continue to abide by its 2018 pledge not to conduct nuclear tests."
Floyd said that during his visit to Seoul, South Korea in August, he messaged Pyongyang his willingness to meet with North Korean officials to discuss their concerns and underscored that signing the treaty would be a "major confidence-building measure."

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Iran Has Obligation to Maintain Nuclear Test Moratorium Under CTBT – Executive Secretary

UNITED NATIONS, March 28 (Sputnik) – Iran is obliged to not conduct nuclear tests as a state signatory to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, Executive Secretary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) Robert Floyd told Sputnik.
The West has repeatedly accused Iran of seeking to acquire nuclear weapons. Tehran maintains that its nuclear program is solely intended for peaceful purposes.
"Iran is a State Signatory to the CTBT and as such is expected to abide by its obligations under the Treaty, including maintaining the moratorium on nuclear testing," Floyd said in an interview, when asked about how high the risk is that Iran might conduct a nuclear test.
The CTBT is a multilateral accord that bans nuclear weapon test explosions and all other nuclear explosions for civilian and military purposes. The treaty was adopted in 1996 but has never gone into effect, as it would require ratification by all 44 countries that had nuclear power or research reactors at the time it was signed.
Iran has signed but not ratified the treaty. Of the nine recognized nuclear powers, only France and the United Kingdom have signed and ratified the treaty. The United States, China, and Israel have signed but not ratified the treaty, while India, Pakistan, and North Korea have neither

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signed nor ratified it.

In November 2023, Russia revoked its ratification of the CTBT to ensure parity with the United States.

In 2015, Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with the involvement of the European Union. The deal committed Iran to scaling back its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. The US withdrew from the deal in 2018 under then-President Donald Trump but resumed talks with Iran in a bid to revive the deal under incumbent President Joe Biden. The talks have since hit a deadlock.

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Biden Offers $1.5Bln Loan to Restart Michigan Nuclear Power Plant - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has officially offered a $1.5 billion loan to restart the Holtec Palisades nuclear power plant in the state of Michigan, the US Energy Department said in a press release.

"The US Department of Energy (DOE) through its Loan Programs Office (LPO) today announced the offer of a conditional commitment of up to $1.52 billion for a loan guarantee to Holtec Palisades to finance the restoration and resumption of service of an 800-MW electric nuclear generating station in Covert Township, Michigan," the release said on Wednesday.

The nuclear power plant shut down in May 2022, but this loan will help upgrade it to produce baseload clean power until at least 2051, the release added.

The release noted that the project is anticipated to avoid 4.47 million tons of CO2 emissions per year for a total of 111 million tons of CO2 emissions during the projected 25 years of operation, which is an amount roughly equivalent to the annual emissions of removing more than 970,000 gasoline-powered cars from the road.

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Massive Fire in Bowling Green, Kentucky Causes Evacuation - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - A huge fire at a Comfuel gas station in Bowling Green, Kentucky led to the evacuation of businesses and schools in the area, Times Now reported on Wednesday.

A massive fire and explosion at a Comfuel gas station in Bowling Green Kentucky led to the evacuation of businesses and schools, such as the St. Joseph's Interparochial school, the report said.

According to the report, the local fire department responded to reports of an explosion on Raven Avenue on Wednesday afternoon.

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Fire officials say there are currently no reported injuries, according to the report.

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US Economy Depends on Baltimore Port, Daunting Task Ahead - Maryland Governor

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US economy faces a daunting task to overcome the trade disruption caused by the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore, Maryland Governor Wes Moore said during a press conference.

"The national economy and the world's economy depends on the Port of Baltimore," Moore said on Wednesday. "The port handles more cars and more farm equipment than any other port in the country. Last year alone, the port handled $80 billion of foreign cargo, the largest in the country.

Moore added that he does not know at this point what the total costs are going to be or the timeline or recovery efforts, but he underscored that the task will be "daunting."

In the early hours of Tuesday, a commercial cargo ship hit the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore soon after it departed its port. The bridge collapsed, sending at least eight people from a construction crew that was working on the bridge into the water. Six people were presumed dead Tuesday evening, authorities said.

Maryland police said at the press conference that two bodies were recovered from the water earlier on Wednesday.

Ship traffic in the port of Baltimore was suspended until further notice following the bridge collapse.

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China ‘Strongly Opposes’ Canada’s Groundless Accusations, Smear Against Beijing – Embassy

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – China “strongly opposes” the groundless accusations and smear against Beijing made by Canada over its alleged involvement in a series of cyberattacks, the Chinese Embassy in Ottawa told Sputnik.

The embassy shared the remarks with Sputnik in the wake of accusations made by Canada’s Communications Security Establishment (CSE) alleging that the country was also targeted by cyberattacks from the Advanced Persistent Threat Group 31 (APT31).

“We strongly oppose the groundless accusations and smears against China from a few countries like Canada. The Chinese side has made technical clarifications and responses to the so-called ‘APT31’ - related information submitted by the British side and made it clear that the evidence provided by the British side was inadequate and relevant conclusions lack professionalism. But there has been no further response from the British side,” the Embassy said.

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China not only firmly opposes but also fights all sorts of cyberattacks, the embassy stressed. The Chinese Government is committed to strengthening cooperation with all countries to deal with cyber threats through various means, such as bilateral dialogue and judicial assistance, it added. However, all cooperation must be done on the basis of equality, as well as mutual respect and benefit.

As the origin of the alleged cyberattacks is “highly complex and sensitive,” states must properly investigate and only present adequate evidence, the embassy said. Moreover, when proof is absent, parties should desist from engaging in smearing, it added.

“When investigating and determining the nature of cyber cases, one needs to have adequate and objective evidence, instead of smearing other countries when facts do not exist, still less politicize or even weaponize cybersecurity issues,” the embassy said.

Being part of the so-called Five Eyes alliance, Canada just like the US has a long record of violating international law and basic norms of international relations, the embassy said as it pointed out their involvement in large-scale, organized, and nondiscriminatory cyber theft, wiretap and surveillance on foreign governments, enterprises, and individuals.

The Chinese mission suggested that if Canada does indeed believe it fell prey to cyberattacks, it might want to take a closer look at where they are coming from.

On Monday, the United Kingdom imposed sanctions on two Chinese individuals and the Wuhan Xiaoruizhi Science and Technology Company, allegedly affiliated with Advanced Persistent Threat Group 31 (APT31), which London accuses of conducting cyberattacks. US President Joe Biden's administration sanctioned the same individuals and the entity but also announced hacking charges against seven other Chinese nationals.

On top of that on Tuesday, New Zealand's Government Communications Security Bureau (GSCB) blamed Chinese hackers for an alleged cyberattack on New Zealand parliamentary services in 2021.

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Schumer Says ‘Devastated’ by Former US Senator Joe Lieberman’s Death

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that he is devastated by the news of the death of former US Senator Joe Lieberman, who was the first Jewish candidate on a major party’s presidential ticket.

“I am devastated to hear about the passing of our former colleague Senator Joe Lieberman. My heart is with his beloved wife Hadassah and his family, and I am praying for all who knew and loved him,” Schumer said on Wednesday in a statement via social media platform X.

Earlier on Wednesday, Lieberman’s family announced the former lawmaker’s death at the age of 82. Lieberman died after complications from a fall, his family said.

Lieberman served in the US Senate as both a Democrat and an independent. Lieberman also served as Al Gore’s running mate in the 2000 US presidential election, marking the first time a Jewish candidate was featured on a major party’s ticket.

Following his congressional career, Lieberman worked with the centrist political group No

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Labels as a founding co-chair.

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CORRECTION - State Department Deputy Secretary Speaks With Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister - Statement

(corrects headline and lede to read 'Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister')
WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US State Department's Deputy Secretary Kurt Campbell spoke on the phone yesterday with the Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu as part of ongoing efforts to maintain open communication between the two countries, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.
"Deputy Secretary Campbell spoke yesterday with the People's Republic of China (PRC) Executive Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu. The call was part of ongoing efforts to maintain open lines of communication between the United States and the PRC and responsibly manage competition in the relationship," said Miller in the readout.
Miller added that the two leaders discussed the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and on the Korean Peninsula. Additionally, Campbell raised concerns with Zhaoxu over the PRC's alleged support for the Russian defense industrial base.

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Maryland Police Says 2 Bodies Recovered From Water After Baltimore Bridge Collapse

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Two bodies were recovered from the water after the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed earlier this week, Maryland police said during a press conference.
"The Maryland State Police along with the underwater recovery teams supported by state, local, and federal partners made a tragic finding shortly before 10 a.m.," state police said on Wednesday. "Divers located the red pickup truck submerged in approximately 25 feet of water in the area of the middle span of the bridge. Divers recovered two victims of this tragedy trapped within the vehicle."
In the early hours of Tuesday, a commercial cargo ship hit the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore soon after it departed its port. The bridge collapsed, sending at least eight people from a construction crew that was working on the bridge into the water. Six people were presumed dead Tuesday evening, authorities said.

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US Retailers Working to Reroute Supply Chains Hit by Key Bridge Collapse - Industry Group

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US retailers are working to reroute supply chains impacted by the Key Bridge collapse in Baltimore in order to minimize disruptions as much as possible, the US National Retail Federation (NRF) said in a statement to Sputnik.

"Retailers will be working with their supply chain partners to quickly implement diversion and mitigation strategies to ensure cargo reaches its end destination with minimal disruption," NRF vice president of supply chain and customs policy Jonathan Gold said on Wednesday.

It is unclear how long the Port of Baltimore will remain closed to inbound or outbound vessel traffic, but retailers are assessing how to redirect cargo to alternate East Coast ports, Gold noted.

Earlier in the day, US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg told reporters that the US government is seeking more clarity on the economic impact of supply chain disruptions after a major bridge collapse prompted the closure of the port of Baltimore.

In the early hours of Tuesday, a commercial cargo ship hit the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore soon after it departed its port. The bridge collapsed, sending at least eight people from a construction crew that was working on the bridge into the water. Six people were presumed dead Tuesday evening, authorities said.

Ship traffic in the port of Baltimore was suspended until further notice after the bridge collapsed. According to the governor of Maryland, the national economy depends on the Port of Baltimore, adding that last year alone, the port handled $80 billion of foreign cargo, the largest in the United States.

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US Lawmakers Urge State Department to Hasten Haitian Immigrant Visa Processing - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - A group of Democratic members of the US Congress sent a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Rena Bitter, urging the diplomats to hasten the processing of immigrant visas for Haitians amid political instability in the country.

“We urge the State Department to expedite the processing of immigrant visas for Haitians, particularly for relatives of US citizens and lawful permanent residents,” the letter, dated March 26, said.

Gangs now control an estimated 80% of the Haitian capital city of Port-au-Prince, according to the letter. Gangs are reportedly uniting and coordinating attacks that could spark a civil war in Haiti, the letter said.

The situation in Haiti has led many Haitian-American citizens and lawful permanent residents to

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petition for their family members in Haiti to reunify with them in the US, the letter said.
However, the US Embassy in Haiti has been operating on an emergency-only basis since July 2023, the letter said. The State Department's processing of immigrant visa applications from Haiti has stalled for the majority of Haitian relatives of Americans, the letter said.
The letter calls on the State Department to consider waiving the personal appearance requirement for Haitian immediate relatives of US persons, bolster immigrant visa processing capacity at a third-country post, and explore "creative locations" for in-person processing in Haiti outside of the US embassy.
The letter is signed by US lawmakers including Senators Elizabeth Warren and Edward Markey, and Representatives James McGovern, Ayanna Pressley and Katherine Clark. The lawmakers also sent a copy of the letter to US Citizenship and Immigration Services Director Ur Jaddou.

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US Space Operations Chief Says North Caroline Distillery Plans to Age Bourbon in Space

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US Chief of Space Operations Gen. Chance Saltzman said during the Mitchell Institute's 3rd Annual Spacepower Security Forum that a distillery in the US state of North Carolina has plans to age its bourbon in space for at least one year.
"There is a distillery in North Carolina that is looking to age their bourbon for three years on Earth, followed by one year in space," Saltzman said on Wednesday.
According to Saltzman, the distillery is going to enclose a barrel of bourbon in a titanium shell and launch it into orbit for one year.
Those willing to try space-aged bourbon will have to pay some $75,000 per bottle, Saltzman added.
In January 20223, Mystic Farm & Distillery from Durham, North Carolina announced its plans to age its 45% wheat bourbon in space and sell it under the name Mystic Galactic.
The distillery said that it is planning to sell about 1000 750ml bottles while the entire release will not exceed 1500 bottles.

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Since 2008 Number of Active Satellites Increased by 700% - US Chief of Space Operations

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – Since 2008, the number of active satellites in space has increased by 700% and the projected number of launches worldwide is up almost 400%, US Chief of Space Operations Gen. Chance Saltzman said during the Mitchell Institute's 3rd Annual Spacepower Security Forum.
"All measurable metrics continue to show dramatic growth in the use of space from 2008 to the end of this year. The projected number of launches worldwide is up almost 400%, and the

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number of active satellites is up more than 700%. The number of satellites launched per rocket is up a whopping 2100%," Saltzman said on Wednesday.

At the same time, Saltzman said that he is concerned with a corresponding increase in the amount of manmade debris in space, as the number of conjunctions or near collision situations to the International Space Station is up more than 1000%, resulting in multiple "Shelter in Place" warnings for astronauts.

The debris threat is allegedly exacerbated by the actions of Russia and China, which over the past decade have been coupling space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations with satellite navigated aided precision-guided munitions that can receive SATCOM updated targeting, Saltzman said.

China alone has more than 470 ISR satellites that facilitate a robust sensor shooter "Kill-Web," thus creating an "unacceptable risk" to US forward-deployed forces, Saltzman added.

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State Department Deputy Secretary Speaks With Chinese Foreign Minister - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US State Department's Deputy Secretary Kurt Campbell spoke on the phone yesterday with the Chinese Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu as part of ongoing efforts to maintain open communication between the two countries, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"Deputy Secretary Campbell spoke yesterday with the People's Republic of China (PRC) Executive Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu. The call was part of ongoing efforts to maintain open lines of communication between the United States and the PRC and responsibly manage competition in the relationship," said Miller in the readout.

Miller added that the two leaders discussed the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and on the Korean Peninsula. Additionally, Campbell raised concerns with Zhaoxu over the PRC's alleged support for the Russian defense industrial base.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) –

CROCUS CITY HALL ATTACK

* The Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations (EMERCOM) published on Wednesday the list of 143 people killed in the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack.

* The Russian Investigative Committee said that it has received 143 reports about people who are unaccounted for after the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack last Friday.

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* No official versions of the terrorist attack in the Crocus City Hall have yet been expressed, Russian special services are working to settle on one reasoned version, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said.
* The statements of the Russian officials about the traces of Ukraine and the West in the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack are not true and are irresponsible, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

RUSSIAN ECONOMY

* The inflation in Russia amounted to 7.61% in annual terms as of March 25, the Russian Economic Development Ministry said on Wednesday.
* Inflation in Russia accelerated to 0.11% on March 19-25 from 0.06% one week earlier, Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) said.
* Russia's gas production increased by 11.3% year-on-year and amounted to 110 billion cubic meters in January-February, the Rosstat said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* French President Emmanuel Macron's initiative on sending troops to Ukraine is not well prepared, and NATO is not ready to make such decisions, Latvian Prime Minister Evika Silina said on Wednesday.
* The United States does not support Ukrainian attacks on energy infrastructure in Russia, US Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Geoffrey Pyatt said.
* A Ukrainian drone has crashed into an administrative building in Russia's Belgorod, and there is one person injured, Russia's Belgorod Region, Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said.
* Ukraine was the only country that did not condemn the terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall concert venue near Moscow, unlike almost all of the rest of the world, including the West, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

BRIDGE COLLAPSE IN US

* The US Coast Guard's Deputy Commandant for Operations, Vice Admiral Peter Gautier said on Wednesday that the hazardous materials aboard the ship that collided with a bridge in Baltimore pose no threat to the public.
* Approximately a dozen ships remain unable to exit the port blocked by the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge near Baltimore, US Coast Guard Deputy Commandant for Operations Vice Admiral Peter Gautier said.
* The Dali cargo ship that struck a major bridge in Baltimore on Tuesday, causing its collapse, had to briefly stay in Chile last summer due to a propulsion issue, US broadcaster CNN reported, citing the Chilean navy.

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RPT - Trump's Media Stock Rallies on Day 2 Of Debut, But Analysts Warn of Perils Ahead

(Repeats to correct day of week in para 7)

NEW YORK, March 27 (Sputnik) – The media stock of former President Donald Trump rallied for a second day after its debut but analysts warned of perils ahead for investors in a company

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that might not yield a profit in the near future.

Shares of Trump Media & Technology Group, the holding company for the Truth Social site trading on the New York's Nasdaq under the DJT ticker, closed up 14% on Wednesday at $66.22 per share, after surging almost 60% the day prior to as high as $76.20 at one point.

But experts who track stock market behavior and the trading fortunes of companies with little track record for performance cautioned buyers to beware.

That's because in the first nine months of 2023, Truth Social's parent company made $3.4 million in revenue while losing $49 million, according to filings.

Truth Social also looks vulnerable from the point of market presence, say analysts. The site has almost 9 million sign-ups, but it has not said how many of these are active users.

In comparison, X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, had nearly 240 million daily active users as of June 2022, per latest available official data.

Reddit, which went public on Tuesday with DJT, has 73 million active users. Facebook (banned in Russia), has nearly 3 billion active users.

"If you're an investor looking for stable returns, I would not touch this with a 10-foot pole," Derek Horstmeyer, a finance professor at George Mason University in Virginia who specializes in corporate finance, said referring to DJT in comments carried by USA Today.

Truth Social's performance does not appear to be based on the conventional metrics of sound revenue and profit but rather on the hype and pump-and-dump that's common with meme stocks, Horstmeyer suggested.

Meme stocks is a description used for shares of companies that have a cult-like following on social media, and whose stock market performance is based on investor sentiment instead of fundamentals. Such stocks often do not often live up to high valuations.

Likewise, investors in DJT are "just going to be riding waves of sentiment," Horstmeyer said. "It's going to be like GameStop, where it goes up, and then it comes crazy down, and then it goes up again," he said, describing a meme stock that suddenly skyrocketed three years ago on so-called organized buying by investors, before its value crumbled.

Major stakeholders in DJT — including Trump himself — could dump shares to pocket money they may need, some analysts said. The former president was worth roughly $4.5 billion on paper as of Tuesday afternoon, based on his roughly 60% stake in the company.

"I do not think that the fundamentals of the company justify this valuation," Usha Rodrigues, a professor at the University of Georgia's School of Law who specializes in corporate finance and securities law, said in more comments carried by USA Today. "There were definitely a lot of investors who were interested in it because they had this opportunity to invest in the Trump brand."

Democrat President Joe Biden and his Republican predecessor Trump are facing a rematch in the November presidential election after a 2020 outcome that favored Biden.

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Trump's Media Stock Rallies on Day 2 Of Debut, But Analysts Warn of Perils Ahead

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NEW YORK, March 27 (Sputnik) – The media stock of former President Donald Trump rallied for a second day after its debut but analysts warned of perils ahead for investors in a company that might not yield a profit in the near future.

Shares of Trump Media & Technology Group, the holding company for the Truth Social site trading on the New York's Nasdaq under the DJT ticker, closed up 14% on Wednesday at $66.22 per share, after surging almost 60% the day prior to as high as $76.20 at one point.

But experts who track stock market behavior and the trading fortunes of companies with little track record for performance cautioned buyers to beware.

That's because in the first nine months of 2023, Truth Social's parent company made $3.4 million in revenue while losing $49 million, according to filings.

Truth Social also looks vulnerable from the point of market presence, say analysts. The site has almost 9 million sign-ups, but it has not said how many of these are active users.

In comparison, X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, had nearly 240 million daily active users as of June 2022, per latest available official data.

Reddit, which went public on Wednesday tonight with DJT, has 73 million active users. Facebook (banned in Russia), has nearly 3 billion active users.

"If you're an investor looking for stable returns, I would not touch this with a 10-foot pole," Derek Horstmeyer, a finance professor at George Mason University in Virginia who specializes in corporate finance, said referring to DJT in comments carried by USA Today.

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"I do not think that the fundamentals of the company justify this valuation," Usha Rodrigues, a professor at the University of Georgia's School of Law who specializes in corporate finance and securities law, said in more comments carried by USA Today. "There were definitely a lot of investors who were interested in it because they had this opportunity to invest in the Trump brand."

Democrat President Joe Biden and his Republican predecessor Trump are facing a rematch in the November presidential election after a 2020 outcome that favored Biden.

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Russia Dominates Global Nuclear Fuel Market, Supply of Nuclear Reactors – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – Over the past years Russia has surpassed the United States as the dominant supplier of nuclear fuel and technology around the world with an order book of $130 billion, the State Department's International Security Advisory Board (ISAB) said in a new report on Wednesday.

"Although the United States was once a dominant supplier of nuclear technology exports, it has fallen behind in its competitiveness. Stemming from trends that predated the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has become the dominant global supplier for nuclear reactors via Rosatom, with an order book of $130 billion," the report said.

Russia is one of the largest uranium producers, supplying an estimated 8% of uranium globally, according to the report.

Moreover, the report found that Russia holds about 38% of the world's uranium conversion capacity and about 46% of the world's enrichment capacity.

The ISAB also noted that the United States is "overly reliant on Russia for uranium for nuclear reactor fuel and overly reliant on China for key rare earth minerals," as the United States lacks a systematic assessment of how emerging security challenges are changing the balance of capabilities.

In February, UK media reported that the US nuclear industry expected President Joe Biden's administration to ban imports of enriched uranium from Russia in 2024 following two years of stockpiling. The White House did not initially support the ban on Russian uranium fueling US power plants, but the House of Representatives passed a bipartisan bill in December 2023 that sought to halt Russian imports through 2040. The bill remains stalled in the Senate.

Official US figures show that the United States imported $1.2 billion worth of enriched uranium from Russia in 2023, an all-time record.

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US Seeking to Assess Supply Chain Disruptions After Bridge Collapse - Transportation Chief

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The US government is seeking more clarity on the economic impact of supply chain disruptions after a major bridge collapse prompted the closure of the port of Baltimore, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said on Wednesday.

"We want to get a little more fidelity on how disruptive it can be," Buttigieg said during a White House press briefing when asked if impacts could be seen on the US economy as a result of the supply chain issues.

Buttigieg added that while the incident isn't a single point of failure akin to past Panama Canal issues, it doesn't necessitate that "a trip to the East Coast has to be substituted with a trip to the West Coast, which would be much more of a cost impact."

The accident occurred in the early hours of Tuesday. The ship, which was sailing under a

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Singaporean flag from Baltimore to Sri Lanka, hit the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore soon after it departed its port. The bridge collapsed, sending at least eight people from a construction crew that was working on the bridge into the water. Six people were presumed dead Tuesday evening, authorities said.

Ship traffic in the port of Baltimore was suspended until further notice after the bridge collapse.

Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott declared a local state of emergency for 30 days. Maryland Governor Wes Moore said officials were still investigating the incident but had no credible evidence that the collision was a terror attack.

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Hurdles to Young Canadians 'Too High,' Promise of Canada Remains Unfulfilled – Freeland

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – The hurdles standing in the path of young Canadians are "too high" and the promise of Canada remains unfulfilled for them, Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland said on Wednesday.

Freeland made the comments during a joint press conference with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau following a housing announcement in Vancouver, British Columbia.

"A fair chance to build a good middle-class life, to do as well as your parents or better, has always been the promise of Canada. Today, for too many younger Canadians, that promise just isn't being fulfilled. The hurdles are too high. Young Canadians are not getting a fair chance," Freeland said.

The minister further acknowledged that the concerns younger Canadians have for the future are not made up, their frustration is understandable, and they are not guilty in this situation.

Freeland pledged to make fulfill the "promise of Canada" for the younger generations, notably by focusing government efforts in delivering without delays more houses amid the ongoing housing crisis.

On Wednesday, Trudeau and Freeland in a budget preview announcement said that the federal government would launch a new $15 million Tenant Protection Fund, create a new Canadian Renters' Bill of Rights, and ensure that renters get credit for on-time rent payments.

"This is about protecting renters. But this is also about generational fairness – making sure Millennials and Gen Z, who are most likely to rent, get a level playing field in the rental market," said a statement from Trudeau's office.

The Canadian government will present its 2024-2025 federal budget on April 16 at the House of Commons.

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US Sanctions 6 People, 2 Entities for Aiding North Korean WMD Programs - Treasury

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WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The United States and South Korea jointly coordinated sanctions against six individuals and two entities for allegedly aiding North Korea's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, the US Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"Today, in coordination with the Republic of Korea (ROK), the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned six individuals and two entities based in Russia, China, and the United Arab Emirates, that generate revenue and facilitate financial transactions for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

South Korea is also designating six of the same individuals and entities for their alleged involvement in illicit financing and revenue generation through overseas DPRK workers, the statement said.

The sanctions target alleged agents of designated DPRK banks and companies that employ DPRK information technology workers abroad, the statement said.

The actors allegedly set up shell companies and manage surreptitious bank accounts to disguise the movement of illicit funds, evade sanctions and fund DPRK's WMD and ballistic missile programs, the statement said.

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Ottawa Seeks Constructive Work with India on Khalistani Separatist Murder - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – Canada seeks to conduct constructive work with India in the investigation over the murder of Khalistani separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday.

Trudeau's remarks answered a question on the lengths to which India is cooperating with the Canadian Government in investigating Nijjar's murder, notably as New Delhi expects Ottawa to conclude its inquiry before stepping in.

"We are looking to work constructively with the Government of India to get to the bottom of this, to understand how this could happen and to make sure that no Canadians are ever vulnerable again to foreign interference by any international power," Trudeau told reporters.

Trudeau said that the killing of Canadian citizens on the country's soil is not something that can be taken lightly. Canada made public India's alleged involvement in the assassination out of necessity to protect Canadians from foreign "illegal actions".

The Premier stressed that Canada has been unequivocal in standing up for the rule of law and ensuring that corresponding investigations into the murder are done in accordance with the Canadian justice system.

In September, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Ottawa was examining "credible allegations" linking Indian officials to the killing of Sikh separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar. The activist, who was shot by two masked men in the Canadian province of British Columbia on June 18, advocated for the creation of an independent Sikh state in India called Khalistan.

Following the incident, Canada expelled a high-ranking Indian diplomat allegedly linked with Indian foreign intelligence. In response, the Indian authorities ordered a senior Canadian

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diplomat to leave the country. The Indian Foreign Ministry later urged its citizens planning to visit or currently in Canada to exercise extra caution.

In late September, the Indian diplomatic mission in Canada suspended visa application services. In late November, India resumed the issuance of e-visas for Canadian tourists and business travelers.

Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said in early January that Canada's policy toward the Khalistan Liberation Force has a negative impact on Indian-Canadian relations.

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Biden's Mental Issues Worry Social Media Users After Remarks on Bridge Collapse

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - Concerns regarding President Joe Biden's mental issues resurfaced among social media users after his comments on the recent bridge collapse in Baltimore.

During his address on Tuesday, Biden mentioned commuting across the now-collapsed bridge numerous times by both car and train, inadvertently referencing non-existent railroad tracks.

"Which train tracks is he referring to? There are none on the Francis Scott Key bridge," remarked radio host Alan Sanders on X.

Others chimed in, with one user suggesting Biden's "train" was metaphorically "off the track," while pundit Chad Prather characterized it as "another instance of his mental derailment."

Critics also accused Biden of exploiting the tragedy to showcase his involvement, prompting one user to say, "So many falsehoods! He lies for the sake of lying."

Another commenter opined that the media's portrayal of Biden's gaffes amounted to mockery of someone experiencing cognitive decline in full view of the public.

The accident occurred in the early hours of Tuesday. The ship, which was sailing under a Singaporean flag from Baltimore to Sri Lanka, hit the Francis Scott Key Bridge soon after it departed its port. The bridge collapsed on the vessel, sending at least eight people from a construction crew into the water. Six people were presumed dead Tuesday evening, authorities announced.

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Salvadoran Marine Busts Nearly 1.48 Tons of Cocaine Worth Close to $37Mln – President

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – The Salvadoran National Marine has seized approximately 1.48 tons of cocaine valued at nearly $37 million off the costs of El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele said on Wednesday.

The confiscation was made after the Salvadoran National Marine intercepted a speedboat at some 490 nautical miles southeast of Bocana el Cordoncillo, estuary of Jaltepeque, the

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President said.
"It is estimated that it [speedboat] contains nearly 1.48 tons of cocaine, valued at some 37 million dollars," Bukele said via X.
The President further added that onboard the speedboat were 9 crewmembers, six Ecuadorians and three Guatemalans.
The country's record bust dates back to November 2018 when the National Marine confiscated 6.3 tons of cocaine transported by Colombian and Guatemalan nationals in a semi-submersible ship.

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US, Pentagon Still Lack Needed Cyber Experts to Meet New Challenges - DARPA Official

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) remains desperately short of enough cyber experts and technicians to meet its rapidly increasing demand, deputy office director for DARPA's Information Innovation Office Matt Turek said on Wednesday.
"There is still a shortage of trained cyber experts in the United States," Turek said.
DARPA and the rest of the US armed forces are in fierce market competition with the private sector to recruit the number of experts they need and many more need to be trained, Turek said. He added that AI was now necessary and used in more than two thirds of DARPA's programs and operations.
"Seventy percent of our programs have some kind of AI," he said.
Continuing progress on developing more advanced algorithms will increase the power and capabilities of AI and the eventual ceiling on its potential is still unknown, Turek said.

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White House Says Netanyahu's Office Agreed to Reschedule Rafah Meeting

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office agreed to reschedule a meeting with US officials about military operations in Rafah, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.
"The prime minister's office has agreed to reschedule the meeting dedicated to Rafah," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.
US and Israeli officials are working to find a convenient date for both sides, Jean-Pierre said.
Netanyahu said on Wednesday that he canceled an Israeli delegation's trip to Washington to send a message to Palestinian group Hamas, after the United States refused to veto a UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.
The US State Department has called the cancellation surprising and unfortunate.

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Blinken, Stoltenberg Discuss Upcoming NATO Summit, Support for Ukraine – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a call with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg discussed the upcoming summit of the military alliance and practical support for Ukraine amid its conflict with Russia, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. Secretary Blinken and Secretary General Stoltenberg discussed preparations for the upcoming NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting, particularly mechanisms to enhance NATO's political and practical support to Ukraine," Miller said in a statement.

Blinken and Stoltenberg also discussed NATO priorities for the Washington Summit in July which will mark the 75th anniversary of the military block establishment, the statement added.

Earlier in the day, Miller announced that Blinken would travel to France and Belgium on April 1-5 to underscore Washington's commitment to the NATO alliance and address global challenges.

In Brussels, Blinken will participate in the NATO foreign ministers meeting coinciding with the 75th anniversary of NATO on April 4 and have meetings with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, and representatives from other allied nations, Miller said.

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BAE Systems Receives $318Mln Contract to Service US Army M109 Howitzers - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The US Army has awarded BAE Systems a $318 million contract to service its force of M109 Self-Propelled Howitzers (SPH) heavy artillery over the next five years, the company announced in a press release.

"BAE Systems has been awarded a contract valued at up to $318 million from the US Army to perform technical and sustainment support services for its fleet of M109A6 and A7 Self-Propelled Howitzers (SPH) and their companion M992A3 carrier, ammunition, tracked (CAT) vehicles," the release stated.

Under the five-year System Technical Support and Sustainment System Technical Support contract, BAE Systems will provide continuous engineering and logistics services to those vehicles, the release explained.

"Sustainment services for the M109 allow the US Army to maintain a high level of operational readiness to take this powerful capability to the fight." BAE Systems' Combat Mission Systems Ground Vehicle Production Director Dan Furber said in the release.

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The deal follows the M109A7 production contract that was awarded in November 2023, the release noted. In addition, the M109A7 uses the existing main armament and cab structure of a Paladin M109A6 and replaces the vehicle's chassis components with modem components common to the Bradley vehicle, providing greater survivability.

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Dozen Ships Remain Trapped in Port by Baltimore Bridge Collapse - US Coast Guard

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - Approximately a dozen ships remain unable to exit the port blocked by the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge near Baltimore, US Coast Guard Deputy Commandant for Operations Vice Admiral Peter Gautier said on Wednesday.

"I think roughly we've got about a dozen ships that remain in the port that are unable to get out," Gautier said during a White House press briefing.

The majority of the stuck vessels are foreign-flagged, Gautier added.

On Tuesday, a Singapore-flagged vessel struck the bridge, which collapsed on the ship. Local authorities believe that six people were killed as a result of the incident.

US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg declined to give a timeline for reopening the port.

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No Public Threat from Hazardous Materials After Baltimore Bridge Collision -US Coast Guard

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The US Coast Guard's Deputy Commandant for Operations, Vice Admiral Peter Gautier said on Wednesday that the hazardous materials aboard the ship that collided with a bridge in Baltimore pose no threat to the public.

"There is no threat to the public from the hazardous materials on board," Gautier said during a press briefing when asked if there was a threat to the public from any of the materials on board the ship.

Gautier added that upon assessment, despite the hazardous nature of the cargo such as mineral oils, it was determined there was no threat.

The accident occurred in the early hours of Tuesday. The ship, which was sailing under a Singaporean flag from Baltimore to Sri Lanka, hit the bridge soon after it departed its port. The bridge collapsed on the vessel, sending at least eight people from a construction crew into the water. Six people were presumed dead Tuesday evening, authorities announced.

Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott declared a local state of emergency for 30 days following the incident. Maryland Governor Wes Moore said officials were still investigating the incident but had no credible evidence that the collision was a terror attack.

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State Dept Says Russian Claims About Ukrainian, Western Trace in Crocus Attack 'False'

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The statements of the Russian officials about the traces of Ukraine and the West in the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack are not true and are irresponsible, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"I think it's clear that these claims are categorically false," Miller said. "I think the Russian government knows that the claims are categorically false. Ukraine wasn't behind these attacks. The UK wasn't behind these attacks. The United States wasn't behind these attacks. In fact, the United States warned Russia about the possibility of these attacks in advance because we wanted to see if the attacks could be averted and ultimately prevent a loss of life from the Russian people, or by the Russian people."

On Tuesday, Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov said the first information received from suspects in the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack proves a Ukrainian trace. He added 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, adding that the mastermind behind the terrorist attack has not been identified yet.

"I would say that these comments from multiple Kremlin officials are irresponsible, they're cynical. And it's just another example of President Putin and the rest of his team exploiting a national tragedy to try to justify the illegal war against Ukraine," Miller said.

Russia considers the position of the United States on the investigation into the terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall concert venue near Moscow as "biased," Washington is trying to "put Ukraine out of harm's way," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has told Sputnik.

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.

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US Intel Sharing With Adversaries Uncommon, Possible to Protect Innocent Lives - Official

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - US intelligence sharing with its adversaries is not common, but the US government will seriously consider it to protect innocent lives, US National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency Director Vice Adm. Frank Whitworth said on Wednesday.

"I'm not gonna submit that it's all that common, but this is another one of those situations where responsible nations do responsible things," Whitworth said when asked if it's common for the United States to share intelligence with its adversaries. "If a responsible nation like the United

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States has information that could help another nation no matter what their political bent, to protect innocents, then we take that responsibility seriously."

Whitworth was asked the question in light of US statements that it had warned Russian authorities earlier this month about a possible terrorist attack in Moscow. The information shared by the United States on the preparation of a terrorist attack was of a general nature, and the Russian special services took measures in response, the FSB said.

Gunmen opened fire in the Crocus City Hall concert venue near Moscow on Friday evening, killing 143 people, according to authorities. Eleven people were detained in connection with the attack, including four who were directly involved, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) said. All four were detained in the Russian region of Bryansk, which borders Ukraine, a few hours apart, the FSB added.

On Saturday, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov, commenting on US statements that the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia) is involved in the terrorist attack, told Sputnik that there is no need to rush to conclusions, as Russian special services are conducting investigative work to find those responsible for the attack.

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

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.

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Nobel Prize-Winning Economist Daniel Kahneman Dies at Age 90 - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - Daniel Kahneman, a scholar who won the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, died at the age of 90, The Washington Post reported on Wednesday.

Kahneman's passing was confirmed by his stepdaughter, Deborah Treisman, although she did not provide details on the location or cause of death, the report said.

Kahneman was born in 1934 in Mandatory Palestine and grew up in France, before moving back to Mandatory Palestine in 1949, prior to the creation of the state of Israel. Kahneman studied psychology and mathematics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and served in the Israeli Defense Forces.

Kahneman won a Nobel Prize alongside Vernon Smith for integrating insights from psychology into economics, particularly as it relates to human decision-making.

US President Barack Obama also awarded Kahneman the Presidential Medal of Freedom – the United States' highest civilian honor – in 2013.

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US State Dept Says Cannot Confirm Reports That Netanyahu Seeks to Reschedule Rafah Talks

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The US State Department is unable to confirm media reports that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wants to reschedule a canceled visit by an Israeli delegation to Washington for next week, spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

Netanyahu said on Wednesday that he had canceled the Israeli delegation's trip to Washington to send a message to Palestinian group Hamas, after the United States refused to veto a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

Netanyahu's office told the White House that it wants to reschedule the meeting, NBC reported earlier in the day, citing a US official.

"I cant confirm that exact report, but I can say that we do think it's important for that meeting to happen," Miller said in a press briefing.

The UN Secuirity Council passed the resolution on Monday by a 14-1 vote, with the US abstaining instead of vetoing the document as it had done with previous ceasefire resolutions. Netanyahu after the vote lashed out at his country's long-time ally for abandoning its support for Israel in the UN.

Miller at the time said that the decision to cancel the Israeli delegation’s visit is surprising and unfortunate.

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Blinken to Travel to France, Belgium to Underscore US Commitment to NATO - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to France and Belgium on April 1-5 to underscore Washington’s commitment to the NATO alliance and address global challenges, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

“Secretary Blinken will travel to Paris, France and Brussels and Leuven in Belgium April 1 to 5 to underscore our commitment to the NATO alliance, strengthening transatlantic partnerships and addressing global challenges,” Miller said during a press briefing.

In Paris, Blinken will meet with French President Emmanuel Macron to discuss support for Ukraine and efforts to prevent escalation of the conflict in Gaza, Miller added.

In Brussels, Blinken will participate in the NATO foreign ministers meeting coinciding with the 75th anniversary of NATO on April 4 and have meetings with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, and representatives from other allied nations, Miller said.

Also in Brussels, Blinekn will join European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan for a trilateral meeting to discuss Armenia’s economic resilience as it works to diversify its trade partnerships and address humanitarian needs, Miller

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said.

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Oil Rally Under Pressure After US Crude Stockpiles Jump, Snapping 2-Week Drop

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The 2024 oil rally came under renewed pressure on Wednesday as the US government reported a weekly jump in domestic crude stockpiles that indicated more volatility for a market trying to reconcile OPEC+ production cuts with rising output in countries outside the producer cartel.

Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil, was at $85.53 per barrel by 11:00 AM in New York (3:00 PM London), down 30 cents, or 0.4%, after an intraday low at $84.59. Last week, London-based Brent rose to as high as $87.80, its loftiest since an October peak of $92.32.

West Texas Intermediate, the benchmark for US crude, was at $81.39 per barrel — down 23 cents, or 0.3%, after a session low at $80.56. Last week, the so-called WTI benchmark hit $83.11, its highest since November's peak of $83.60.

Oil prices came under pressure after the Energy Information Administration, or EIA, said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report that domestic crude balances rose by 3.165 million barrels during the week ended March 22.

It was the first weekly rise in US crude balances since the week ended March 1, when there was a build of 1.367 million. Prior to that, crude stockpiles built by around 28 million barrels over a six-week period from late January.

Gasoline balances also rose during the week ended March 22, snapping a seven-week decline, according to the EIA, which serves as the data wing of the Energy Department.

Prior to the March 22 week, gasoline stockpiles fell almost 19 million barrels between the weeks ended February 1 and March 15.

Distillate stockpiles, meanwhile, bucked the spikes in crude and gasoline, dropping after two straight weeks of builds. Distillates are primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses, and ships, and also go into making airline fuel.

The EIA reported a 1.185 million-barrel deficit in distillates during the week ended March 22, after rising nearly 1.5 million barrels in total over two prior weeks. The latest decline contrasted with Wall Street's forecast build of 518,000 barrels on average for the week to March 22.

Notwithstanding Tuesday's slide, crude prices remain in an uptrend for the year, with Brent up around 11% and WTI gaining almost 14%.

The rally started almost as soon as the year began, triggered first by fears that the Israel-Hamas war could disrupt crude shipments from oil-rich countries around the conflict zone.

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

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Majority of Americans Believe Economic Growth Trumps Economic Fairness - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - A majority of adults in the United States believe that economic growth is more important than economic fairness, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll released Wednesday.

Most US adults, 55%, believe that economic growth is generally more important than economic fairness, the poll report said.

Just over one-third of respondents, 34%, believe that economic fairness is more important than growth, the poll report said. Eleven percent (11%) of respondents were unsure, the poll report added.

The share of US adults who believe that economic growth is more important than fairness fell from 64% in May 2023, the poll report said.

The poll surveyed 1,281 US adults from March 18-20. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Austin Expresses US Support for Philippines, Says Its Resupply Mission Lawful - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin expressed the US' "ironclad commitment" to the Philippines on Wednesday and stressed that Manila's resupply mission is lawful.

"Secretary Austin reaffirmed the ironclad U.S. commitment to the Philippines following the PRC Coast Guard and maritime militia's dangerous obstruction of a lawful Philippine resupply mission to Second Thomas Shoal on March 23," Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said in a statement after Austin's phone call with Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro.

On Saturday, the Philippine defense forces said that the Chinese coast guard used water cannons against a Philippine supply vessel in the South China Sea.

Chinese National Defense Ministry spokesman Wu Qian said the next day that Beijing called on Manila to stop violations and provocations near the Second Thomas Shoal, also known as Ren'ai Reef in Mandarin, in the South China Sea.

As Ryder said, Austin emphasized US support for the Philippines in defending its sovereign rights and jurisdiction. He also reiterated that the bilateral Mutual Defense Treaty extends to both countries' armed forces, public vessels, and aircraft.

"The two officials discussed the importance of preserving the rights of all nations to fly, sail, and operate safely and responsibly wherever international law allows," the statement added.

They agreed to bolster bilateral and multilateral cooperation with like-minded partners in the South China Sea and committed to accelerate a number of bilateral initiatives to enhance

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information-sharing, interoperability, and capability enhancements for the Armed Forces of the Philippines, according to the statement.

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US State Department Offers $10M for Information on ALPHV BlackCat Cyber Group - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The United States is offering a new reward of up to $10 million for information on the BlackCat ransomware group accused of targeting US critical infrastructure, the US State Department announced on Wednesday.

"The US Department of State's Rewards for Justice (RFJ) program ... is offering a reward of up to $10 million for information leading to the identification or location of any person who, while acting at the direction or under the control of a foreign government, engages in certain malicious cyber activities against US critical infrastructure in violation of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act," the State Department said in a statement.

The statement added that the ALPHV BlackCat ransomware-as-a-service group had compromised networks in critical infrastructure sectors globally since its first deployment in November 2021, by installing ransomware, disabling security, stealing confidential information, demanding ransoms, and threatening to leak data if not paid.

In February, the US Department of State's Transnational Organized Crime Rewards Program announced a similar reward of up to $10 million for information leading to the identification or location of key leaders behind the ALPHV/Blackcat ransomware.

In December, the FBI said it disrupted the ransomware's operations by distributing a decryption tool it had developed, enabling dozens of victims to restore their computer systems and saving them from paying ransom demands totaling about $99 million.

ALPHV/Blackcat ransomware has affected more than 1,000 victims around the world. US authorities have previously linked ALPHV/Blackcat to Russian hackers.

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US, G7 Consider Further Lowering Price Cap on Russian Oil - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies are considering plans to further lower the price cap on Russian oil, US Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Geoffrey Pyatt said on Wednesday.

When asked whether the G7 was engaged in ongoing discussions on further lowering the price cap and whether the G7 was considering any additional steps in this regard, Pyatt said, "Yes."

"We are committed to working with our price cap coalition to deny Russia the resources that it uses to prosecute this terrible war against the people of Ukraine," Pyatt said.

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Earlier in March, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Moscow expects that the United States will not follow Ukraine's lead and will not agree to lower the Russian oil price cap to $30.

In late February, the G7 countries said in a joint statement that they intend to continue taking measures to reduce Russia's revenues from the sale of energy resources and other commodities.

The group also intends to continue imposing sanctions on third-country actors that support Russia, the statement said.

Also in February, International Monetary Fund (IMF) First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath said Russia has been able to export large quantities of oil despite the price cap, maintaining substantial export earnings.

In December 2022, the G7 countries, Australia, and the EU imposed a price cap of $60 per barrel on Russian crude oil transported by sea, blocking the transport of oil bought at higher prices.

In response, Russia prohibited selling its oil to countries supporting the price cap mechanism.

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US Working With Iraq, Turkey, Kurds on Reopening ITP Pipeline - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The United States is working with Iraqi, Turkish and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officials to reopen the Iraq-Turkey oil pipeline, US Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Geoffrey Pyatt said on Wednesday.

“Another is the work that we continue to do with officials in Baghdad, with officials in Ankara and with the KRG on the reopening of the ITP pipeline, which is an energy asset that the United States very much wishes to see brought back online,”

The ITP pipeline plays a critical role in helping to sustain the energy economy in the KRG region and the crude oil that it delivers to global, and particularly European, markets, Pyatt said.

The US is supportive of work between Iraq and global energy companies, Pyatt said.

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US, UK Sanctions 2 People, 2 Entities for Financial Support For Hamas – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – The United States and United Kingdom imposed coordinated sanctions on two people and three entities for facilitating financial support for Hamas, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

“Today, the United States is taking joint action with the United Kingdom by designating three entities: Gaza Now, Al-Qureshi Executives, and Aakhirah Limited; and two individuals: Mustafa Ayash and Aozma Sultana,” Miller said in a statement.

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Miller said the targets served as financial facilitators involved in fundraising for Hamas.

The Treasury Department said the targets include Gaza Now, an online entity that began fundraising in support of Hamas after October 2023. The US and the UK also designated the group's founder and director, Mustafa Ayash, for owning or controlling the company.

Washington and London also sanctioned two other companies and their director, Aozma Sultana, for providing the Gaza Now group with thousands of dollars, according to the statement.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel and breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. Nearly 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted during the attack. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 32,400 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, according to local authorities.

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US Plans to Impose More Energy Sanctions on Russia - State Dept Official

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The United States is set to introduce more sanctions against Russia's energy sector, US Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Geoffrey Pyatt said on Wednesday.

"There will be more [sanctions], I promise you that, as we seek to tighten the sanctions regime around Russia," Pyatt said. "I am not going to preview specific sanctions actions, but what I am here to tell you is that we are committed to the forceful implementation of those sanctions measures."

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US Seeking to Mobilize Energy-Sector Aid to Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The United States is seeking to mobilize aid to Ukraine’s energy sector amid Russian attacks on the country’s infrastructure, US Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Geoffrey Pyatt said on Wednesday.

“We will be seeking to mobilize immediate assistance, as we have been doing since October of 2022 when these energy-sector attacks began,” Pyatt said during a press briefing.

The US will also continue long-term work to build a clean energy system in alignment with European standards, Pyatt said.

The Biden administration hopes that the US Congress will soon pass a supplemental funding bill with Ukraine aid, Pyatt said.

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Congress has been deadlocked for months over a foreign aid supplemental bill that would provide funding for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

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US Will Push All Parties to Implement UNSC Resolution on Ceasefire in Gaza - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 27 (Sputnik) - The United States will encourage all parties to implement the recently adopted UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, the US Ambassador to the United Nations Robert Wood said on Wednesday.

"We are going to continue to push to make sure this resolution gets implemented by all sides," Wood told journalists.

Wood added that the implementation would be difficult, but said the US continues working with the parties in the region to resolve the situation on the ground.

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.

US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield created confusion afterward by saying that Washington calling the resolution "non-binding."

After her 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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US Does Not Support Attacks on Energy Infrastructure in Russian Territory - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - The United States does not support Ukrainian attacks on energy infrastructure in Russia, US Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Geoffrey Pyatt said on Wednesday.

Earlier this month, US media reported that the US urged Ukraine to stop strikes on Russian energy infrastructure to prevent retaliation and global energy price fluctuations.

"I am not going to comment on our diplomatic exchanges," Pyatt said during a press briefing, when asked by Sputnik about the reports. "The United States does not encourage or enable attacks on Russian territory."

Pyatt said that he has not seen changes in global energy prices in recent weeks as a result of Ukrainian attacks on Russian energy infrastructure.

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US in Talks With Turkey to Purchase Artillery Explosives Needed by Ukraine – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – The United States is seeking to purchase explosives from Turkey to ramp up the production of artillery shells amid a growing ammunition shortage in Ukraine, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday, citing officials familiar with the matter.

The United States is mostly interested in Turkish supplies of trinitrotoluene, known as TNT, and nitroguanidine, which are key elements of 155mm artillery shells production as the past two years have seen a record demand for the ammunition amid the conflict in Ukraine, the report said.

Pentagon said in February that a Turkish defense contractor will help the United States build munition lines in the state of Texas capable of producing 30,000 artillery shells each month by the end of next year.

The new production lines in Texas are expected to produce nearly one-third of all US-made 155mm artillery shells by 2025 while the US Defense Department has already placed an order for 116,000 rounds of ammunition from Turkey's Arca Defense for delivery this year, according to the report.

Earlier in March, CNN reported citing NATO intelligence estimates, that Russia produces about 3 million artillery shells a year while the United States and its European allies can collectively produce only 1.2 million munitions annually.

Western countries have been providing military and financial aid to Kiev since the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it would lead to further escalation of the conflict.

In April 2022, Russia sent a diplomatic note to all NATO countries on the issue of arms supplies to Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has warned that any cargo containing weapons for Ukraine will become a legitimate target for Russian strikes.

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Obama Fears Biden Losing to Trump, Maintains Close Contacts With His Advisers - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – Former US President Barack Obama has a "grave concern" that Joe Biden could lose to Donald Trump in the November election and makes regular calls to the incumbent president's top aides to share advice, The New York Times reported.

Biden himself is in regular contact with Obama either to catch up on the presidential race or talk about family, the report said on Tuesday.

Obama in turn regularly reaches out to White House Chief of Staff Jeffrey Zients and several

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other top aides at the Biden campaign to "strategize" and convey advice, the report added.
Such level of engagement between Obama and Biden and his staff shows the former president's endorsement for Biden, the report said.
However, according to a senior aide, it is also proof of his "grave concern" over the possibility of Trump winning in the 2024 presidential election.
The aide, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that Obama has always been worried about Biden's possible loss and is prepared to "eke it out" alongside Biden in a race that could come down to slim margins in some states, the report said.

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Yellen to Press China on Its Surging Industrial Capacity in Green Technologies - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Wednesday will announce plans to use her upcoming visit to China to press Beijing over its surging capacity in new green technology industries, according to excerpts of her planned remarks released by the Treasury Department.
"We see excess capacity building in 'new' industries like solar, EVs, and lithium-ion batteries. China's overcapacity distorts global prices and production patterns and hurts American firms and workers, as well as firms and workers around the world," Yellen will say. "We have raised overcapacity in previous discussions with China and I plan to make it a key issue in discussions during my next trip there."
Yellen will deliver the remarks this afternoon during a visit to the Suniva solar cell manufacturing plant in Norcross, Georgia, where she will hail recent US investments in solar technology and electric vehicles as a result of the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022.
She will also outline the Biden administration's efforts to ensure competitiveness in the market so that American businesses can "compete on a level playing field."
"I will convey my belief that excess capacity poses risks not only to American workers and firms and to the global economy, but also to productivity and growth in the Chinese economy," she will say, according to the excerpts.
Yellen will also say that she intends to press her Chinese counterparts to take the necessary steps to address this issue, according to the excerpts.

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