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4/3/24 Wednesday

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US Can Do 'Nothing More Than Create Crises' to Maintain Its Hegemony

With multiple proxy wars ongoing, $34 trillion in debt, and a world turning against it, many are starting to see the writing on the wall: US empire and imperialism are in decline. But how the US reacts to that reality will determine the fate of humanity in the 21st century.

American foreign policy has become a practice in "incompetence and foolishness" Dr. Anthony Monteiro, an activist and scholar, told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Wednesday.

"The world is changing," Monteiro explained. "US empire and US imperialism is in decline. And they can do nothing more than create crises where there were none."

Monteiro and co-hosts Wilmer Leon and Garland Nixon were discussing the US policy towards Cuba, which Monteiro says has resulted in the US –not Cuba– being isolated from the world, but also noted that it is part of a larger trend of US policies isolating it from the world, mentioning Gaza, the "rapid de-dollarization" of the world and its meddling in Africa. "At the end of the day," Monteiro postulated, "it is all a manifestation of a declining empire, of the dismantlement of perhaps as Martin Luther King Jr. said in his famous speech, the major purveyor of violence in the world."

Leon characterized it as "the last kicks of a dying mule," an assessment Monteiro agreed with. "We are dealing with a ruling class that has lost its mind, a ruling class that has become so pathological that [it is] not only a danger to the rest of humanity, but they are a danger to themselves and to this nation."

Monteiro also noted that the increase in depression and suicide is another reflection of the increasingly bleak future for the US. "The [leaders] have messed things up for the people of this country that we the people don't see a future, or a way out of this dilemma and the paradoxes produced by the domestic and foreign policies of this ruling class," he said "And we have to use that language: the ruling class. We have to call them out by name."

The elite are motivated by "making money off war spending," Monteiro said, adding that "creating chaos" is its only strategy for maintaining what's left of US hegemony, describing the ruling class as "a group of people so cut off from humanity that they have lost their minds. These are people who ultimately must be removed from any instrument of social, political and economic power in the country. They're a danger to humanity."

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US Wants ‘Another Kosovo’ in Syria’s Northwest, Keep Control of Oil, Wheat in Northeast

13-years into a bloody civil war the US has financed, Syria remains fractured, controlled in parts by no less than seven factions.

The United States wants to create “another Kosovo” in Syria while cutting off the country’s resources from its adversaries in the region, investigative Syrian-American journalist Hekmat Aboukhater told Sputnik’s Political Misfits on Wednesday.

Aboukhater was speaking about the fractured state of Syria and the US control in the northeast of the country, ”This area happens to be the place where we have our oil derricks, all of Syria’s natural resources are there, along with the wheat,” he explained, noting that Syria produces 350-400,000 barrels of oil a day. “These revenues are going [towards] sustaining this Kurdish enclave that’s supported by the US and funds the operation.”

“So the United States [requires] a very light footprint to remain in northeast Syria,” Aboukhater explained, while also getting to “cut the supply lines from the so-called axis of resistance between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

“They want to create another Kosovo in the northwest of Syria to see Syria further segmented and balkanized into a million different pieces, which was always a dream of the State Department starting in 1979 when Syria was placed on the official state sponsor terrorism list.”

Aboukhater recently went undercover at a Syrian lobbying event, where the American Coalition for Syria pushed for an extension of sanctions that were set to expire in 2024.

“These sanctions are not affecting the government. The [Bashar al] Assad regime, as they like to call it, is eating beautifully. The Syrian people are the ones that are struggling,” Aboukhater explained. “I have family in Damascus, I have family in Homs, I have family in Aleppo, and I’m seeing it every time I go down. I see the situation gradually becoming worse and worse.”

Aboukhater noted that the situation in Syria is “as complicated as it gets” and encouraged readers to read his article but summarized the US position as “very happy with the status quo,” with them controlling the northeast of Syria through the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Meanwhile, the northwest, controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) an offshoot of Al-Qaeda shares a common enemy with the US in the Assad government, which the American Coalition for Syria lobbied US lawmakers to fund through more than just humanitarian aid and the US would like to “make a Kosovo out of.”

“Twenty-three years from 9/11, we’re supporting al-Qaeda,” he explained.

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Israel Attack on Iran Embassy ‘A Message To Americans’

On Monday, Israeli warplanes struck an Iranian diplomatic building in Syria which included the embassy and was below the home of the Iranian ambassador and his family. While the ambassador and family were not present at the time, several Iranian military officials were killed.

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The unexpected Israeli attack on the Iranian diplomatic building in Syria was part of a message being sent to the United States that Israel will enlarge the conflict if the US does not come to its "rescue," veteran war correspondent Elijah Magnier told Sputnik's Fault Lines on Wednesday.

"The Israelis are sending a very strong message to various actors. The first one is the United States that is slow in delivering weapons," Magnier began. "The Israelis are also sending another message to the Americans saying, 'Well if you don't come to our rescue and you don't stand by us, we are going to enlarge the war and drag Iran,'" into the fight.

Bringing Iran, which Magnier pointed out has been demonized since 1979, into the war will force the US to join because of its long-standing policy that "Israel is part of American national security."

The attack also sent a message to the world that everything is on the table for Israel. "If Iran does not respond and the West does not condemn Israel, it means that no embassy in the world can pretend to be safe," Magnier said, adding that Israel is going to hit any target they see and they "don't care who's going to burn on the way."

Israel wants Iran to respond and bring the US into the war, something Magnier says Iran is aware of, noting that it declined to respond to attacks against its generals who weren't in diplomatic buildings. "However, this time is different."

"If Iran does not respond, then the Israelis will go further and will hit even further objectives," Magnier explained. "But the response will be very thoughtful because Iran needs to be careful not to fall into the hands of [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu."

Magnier noted that Iran will not receive the same support and sympathy that the Palestinians receive from the international community. "The Israelis are killing civilians. The Israelis are killing United Nations workers. They are destroying infrastructure, schools, hospitals, universities, they're starving the population. This is why people around the world are standing with the Palestinian cause."

Co-host Melik Abdul noted that there are now protests in the streets of Israel, with some of them demanding a ceasefire to secure the release of the hostages.

"People are in the street camping in front of his house, in front of the Knesset, in front of the government," Magnier responded, saying that it is "very clear" to the protesters that the hostages are not his priority.

"At the end of the day, he is negotiating with the group that he's saying he is defeating and he wants to eradicate. He goes to Cairo [Egypt] and doesn't have any talks with them and without any outcome because he doesn't want an outcome."

Asked how Iran will ultimately respond, Magnier said that they have a range of options. "They have long-range precision missiles. They can flood the interception missiles of the Israelis" and hit somewhere in Israel. But they could also hit targets in the Red Sea, or US and Israeli targets in Iraq and Syria.

"Or they can increase the support to the axis of resistance and supply them with more advanced weapons that can damage Israel," he noted, but added that it is critical that Iran hits Israel directly "because it is important for the Iranians to know that their country has responded to the attack."

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Strike on Iranian Consulate Sign of Status Quo as US, Allies Let Israel 'Cross All Red Lines'

On Monday, Iran said that Israeli warplanes struck the Iranian embassy in Syria, killing seven military advisers, including two generals. On Tuesday, Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei vowed revenge.

As the US and its allies have continuously allowed Israel to "cross all red lines" in the past, it should be no surprise that it attacked an Iranian consulate in Damascus, Dr. Seyed Mohammad Marandi told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Tuesday.

"The Israeli regime is only able to carry out these attacks because the United States, the Europeans, the Canadians, the British, the Australians allow them to cross all red lines. When they're allowed to commit a genocide, when they're allowed to carry out a Holocaust, in the words of the president of Brazil, then, obviously, attacking an embassy shouldn't be unexpected."

However, the United States and Europeans continue to parrot Israel's lies, Marandi said, noting Israeli forces have attacked Al-Shifa hospital twice now, and the first time they falsely claimed it contained a tunnel network and Hamas command center.

"Now, they still try to repeat their lies even though it's much more difficult," Marandi explained. "They've wrecked all the hospitals. They've wrecked all the infrastructure. They shoot people carrying white flags."

"There's so much documentation that there's no way for the Americans and Europeans to escape the reality that this is a genocidal and criminal regime from top to bottom. Yet still, they behave as if this is a normal country, as if this is a country that's exercising its right and that it may be making mistakes."

Marandi and co-hosts Wilmer Leon and Garland Nixon acknowledged the unlikelihood of the US not having advance notice about the attack; however, Marandi postulated it would showcase Israel's lack of respect for the US if they didn't.

"If the Americans didn't know, then it just shows that the Israelis have no respect for the United States, that the Israelis don't care what the implications are for the United States in this region and globally, because there is no doubt that the Iranians are going to respond. This is no ordinary attack."

Unlike the US and Europeans that allow Israel to "get away with anything," this attack is a red line "that the Iranians cannot ignore."

"The Iranians are going to hit back hard. And if the Americans didn't know, then that means the Israelis are putting the Americans at risk of a very complicated situation, but they don't care."

With the protests against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ongoing, and some US politicians calling for elections in Israel, Marandi stressed the importance of remembering that he is not alone in carrying out the genocide in Gaza. "Let's not allow the Americans to pin the blame on Netanyahu. Overwhelmingly people in Israel support the genocide, and, apparently, more than half believe it should be even more intense."

"The problem goes way beyond Netanyahu."

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Israel wants Iran to respond and bring the US into the war, something Magnier says Iran is aware of, noting that it declined to respond to attacks against its generals who weren't in diplomatic buildings. "However, this time is different."

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“We are dealing with a ruling class that has lost its mind, a ruling class that has become so pathological that [it is] not only a danger to the rest of humanity, but they are a danger to themselves and to this nation.”

Monteiro also noted that the increase in depression and suicide is another reflection of the increasingly bleak future for the US. “The [leaders] have messed things up for the people of this country that we the people don’t see a future, or a way out of this dilemma and the paradoxes produced by the domestic and foreign policies of this ruling class,” he said “And we have to use that language: the ruling class. We have to call them out by name.”

Read more in the full article.

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US, Finland to Expand Cooperation on Countering 'Foreign Disinformation' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – The United States and Finland have signed a memorandum of understanding to expand cooperation on countering "foreign state information manipulation," the US Department of State said on Thursday.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Finnish Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen signed the memorandum on the sidelines of a NATO meeting in Brussels.

"Foreign state information manipulation, which includes disinformation and propaganda, is a transnational security threat that can create or exploit divisions within and among countries, imperil election integrity, and undermine public trust in government," the State Department said in a statement.

Under the memorandum, the two countries will expand information sharing about "foreign disinformation," share practices for fighting it, and align policies.

Signed on the first anniversary of Finland’s accession to NATO, the memorandum represents "the expanding coalition of like-minded countries coming together to protect an open, fact-based, and resilient global information environment," the statement said.

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WCK Urges Five Countries to Join in Demand for Third-Party Probe into Israeli Airstrikes

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – World Central Kitchen (WCK) called on the US, UK, Canada, Australia and Poland on Thursday to join it in demanding an independent, third-party investigation into the Israeli airstrikes that killed seven of its aid workers in Gaza.

"We have asked the governments of Australia, Canada, the United States of America, Poland, and the United Kingdom to join us in demanding an independent, third-party investigation into these attacks, including whether they were carried out intentionally or otherwise violated international law," Executive Co-Chair Javier Garcia and CEO Erin Gore said in a release.

Seven WCK aid workers – one Palestinian and six foreign nationals with citizenship spanning the five countries named in the call – were killed on Monday after an Israeli strikes hit their three-vehicle convoy in Gaza.

WCK said it had asked the Israeli government on Wednesday to "immediately preserve all documents, communications, video and/or audio recordings, and any other materials potentially relevant to the April 1 strikes."

Gore called the strike "unforgiveable," noting that the convoy's movements had been coordinated with the Israeli Defense Forces. While Israel admitted to launching the strikes, it claimed the killings were unintentional.

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NATO's Washington Summit to Help Build Bridge for Ukraine Becoming NATO Member – Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - The 2024 NATO summit in Washington will help build a bridge for Ukraine becoming a NATO member, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Thursday.

"Ukraine will become a member of NATO. Our purpose at the summit is to help build a bridge to that membership and to create a clear pathway for Ukraine moving forward," Blinken said at a meeting with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in Brussels.

A lot of work has been done over the last couple of days during NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels, and more work is to be done "between now and the summit," he added.

The secretary also reiterated his call on Congress to move forward with President Joe Biden's supplemental request, which includes multi-billion-dollar aid for Ukraine.

"The supplemental will help ensure we can continue to deliver for Ukraine because Ukraine is delivering for us, fighting their fight every day," Blinken stated.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that NATO's expansion to include Ukraine would create a direct national security threat to Russia and that Moscow considers the non-aligned status of Ukraine to be extremely important to put an end to the years-long conflict.

Kiev's plans to join the bloc were among the reasons why Russia launched its special military operation in February 2022.

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Ukraine Among Top 5 Recipients of US Aid for Conventional Weapons Destruction - State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – Ukraine is among the top five recipients of US aid for the destruction of conventional weapons over the last 30 years, according to a new US State Department report released on Thursday.

Ukraine has received $263.5 million from the US for demining since 2004. This amount is almost $30 million more than the support provided to Vietnam over the last 30 years. At the same time, the US provided $716 million for Iraq, almost $580 million for Afghanistan, and about $390 million for Laos, according to the report.

The US provided Kiev with almost $30 million to clear once heavily mined areas along the line of contact in Donbass, the report noted.

“This also includes $182 million in regularly budgeted and supplemental FY23 funding as well as prior year funding committed since February 2022 to address the explosive hazard contamination from Russia’s ongoing war of aggression,” the report said.

In 2023, the Ukraine program covered such areas as survey and clearance of suspected and confirmed hazardous territories, digital and in-person explosive ordnance risk education for at-risk civilians, and training and equipment for government officials. The US also helped to establish a training facility and provided capacity-building assistance at a strategic level for Ukraine’s demining authorities, according to the report.

Ukrainian authorities were able to destroy 500 landmines and almost 1,500 explosive materials in 2023, it added.

In general, the US provided more than $5 billion in the past 30 years for conventional weapons destruction programs in 125 countries, according to the report.

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Enlargement Made NATO Hostage to Agenda Pushed by Eastern Europe - Ex-State Dept Adviser

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - The decades-long NATO expansion to all of Central and Eastern Europe has turned the United States into a hostage of the agenda pursued by Eastern European allies in a classic case of "tail-wags-the-dog," James Carden, former adviser to the US-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission at the Department of State, told Sputnik.

The United States together with 31 other NATO members is celebrating the alliance's 75th anniversary this week.

"NATO expansion has turned what once arguably (pre-March 1953) could have been called a defensive alliance into a (post-1992) classic tail-wags-the-dog situation," Carden said.

That has resulted in the former Soviet and Warsaw Pact states "pushing their parochial agenda

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/04/2024 11:05:49 AM

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on the United States," he said.

"Not a good state of affairs but here we are," Carden concluded.

Even at the height of the Cold War, and a quarter century before the peaceful disintegration of the Soviet Union, NATO's tendencies to over-extend itself to the east and become a tool for the continued US domination and micro-management of Europe had been noted by the great, visionary French statesman President Charles de Gaulle, Carden pointed out.

"Over-extension is the core issue, identified early on by no less a statesman than de Gaulle, who intuitively understood that the opening of the European Economic Community (ECC) to the United Kingdom (UK) would introduce an American Trojan horse into the most sensitive issues of European economic affairs," he said.

For years, Moscow has objected to NATO's continued expansion and military buildup near Russian borders. Ukraine's plans to join the bloc were among the reasons why Russia launched its special military operation in February 2022, President Vladimir Putin said.

In response to the latest NATO enlargement, Russia will station its troops and strike systems near the borders of Finland and Sweden, Putin said in a March interview with Rossiya Segodnya Director General Dmitry Kiselev for the Rossiya 1 broadcaster and RIA Novosti.

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ANALYSIS - NATO at 75 Could Best Serve World Peace Through Self-Dissolution

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - Seventy-five years on, NATO has outlived its mission and turned into a "cancerously expanding entity" whose end would be the best contribution to global peace, experts told Sputnik.

NATO marks the 75th anniversary of its founding on Thursday. A statue of US President Harry Truman, who presided over the creation of the organization, has been shipped to the alliance headquarters in Brussels to celebrate the milestone.

TEARS AND ASHES

"It is hard to respond to an anniversary of an entity that should never have existed in the first place and whose false mandate was nullified three decades ago," Canadian Patriotic Review founder, historian and political commentator Matthew Ehret said.

In an apparent reference to NATO operations and invasions, Ehret said that the "supranational monstrosity" has "run amok with only tears and ashes of once-viable nation states in its wake." The result was "the atrocious loss of life, law, order and basic human rights."

"This cancerously expanding entity has only accelerated as a tool of empire threatening to light the world on fire in a mad gambit to break the wills of any nation unwilling to sacrifice their own people and sovereignty on a sacrificial altar of unipolarism," the expert observed.

The aggressive acts by NATO and its leading member states have coincided with "accelerated systemic economic collapse of the trans Atlantic," reflecting "the moral failure of its member states led by ideological technocrats," Ehret said.

"These are more committed to an abstract utopian vision of global control over common sense or even self-preservation. They thus represent an existential threat to all of their member

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nations and humanity more broadly," he stated.

ENDLESS FAILURES

Any legitimate usefulness that NATO ever had already vanished more than three decades ago, political commentator and former hedge fund manager Charles Ortel insisted.

"NATO outlived its usefulness in 1992 when the Soviet Union imploded and the Iron Curtain fell. Since 1992, NATO has suffered failure after failure, at great human and financial cost," he said.

However, today, NATO's credibility is rapidly evaporating among the very American people whose government has led and directed the organization for so long, Ortel observed.

"Remarkably, inside America I sense growing support across our fractured electorate for a profound reduction in America's foreign military footprint," he said. "If we cannot even defend our own borders and guarantee impartial law and order at home, why are we meddling across the planet in conflicts that, in most cases, do not directly affect America's vital national interests?"

The greatest threat to individuals and households across the world now comes from governments spending more than they take in, Ortel pointed out.

NATO member states in particular are "piling up debt mountains while pursuing initiatives that chiefly enrich government contractors, politicians, and the donor class," he said.

"Though most people do not appreciate it, the largest expenditure that voters make is on the government whose true cost is buried in every purchase we make," Ortel said.

It would take national bankruptcies, sudden and unexpected ones, to wean important Western nations off of the "false gods of bloated government and unregulated 'globalism,'" the expert believes.

"Meanwhile, the end of NATO would be an excellent contribution to global peace, particularly when individual members of this alliance undertake and finance their own defense, with keen eyes on their true national interests!" Ortel concluded.

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Apples Services Experience Outage Worldwide, Issue Not Identified Yet - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - US tech company Apple is experiencing outages across its services worldwide, the 9to5Mac tech blog reported citing the company.

Apple's App Store is currently down for users around the world, the report said on Wednesday.

Apple has yet to acknowledge the problem, the report added.

Apple Arcade, Apple Books, Apple Fitness+, Apple Music, Apple Sports, Apple TV+, and Apple Podcasts are also facing outages, the report noted.

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NASA Names Three Companies to Compete to Build Artemis Mission Moon Vehicle - Release

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - NASA has chosen three companies, Intuitive Machines, Lunar Outpost, and Venturi Astrolab, to compete to build the $4.6 billion Lunar Terrain Vehicle (LTV) to give US astronauts increased mobility around the Moon's South Pole during their manned Artemis missions, the US space agency announced.

"NASA has selected Intuitive Machines, Lunar Outpost, and Venturi Astrolab to advance capabilities for a lunar terrain vehicle that Artemis astronauts will use to travel around the lunar surface, conducting scientific research during the agency's Artemis campaign at the Moon and preparing for human missions to Mars," an official agency release said on Wednesday.

NASA intends to begin using the LTV for crewed operations during Artemis V. The contract has a combined maximum potential value of $4.6 billion, the space agency said.

"We look forward to the development of the Artemis generation lunar exploration vehicle to help us advance what we learn at the Moon," said Vanessa Wyche, director of the NASA Johnson Space Center. "This vehicle will greatly increase our astronauts' ability to explore and conduct science on the lunar surface while also serving as a science platform between crewed missions."

Each of the three companies will carry out a year-long special study to develop a system that meets NASA's requirements through the preliminary design maturity project phase. Then the agency will issue a request for a demonstration mission to continue developing the LTV, deliver it to the surface of the Moon, and confirm its performance and safety ahead of the Artemis V mission, the release added.

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US, UK Did Not Discuss Russian UNSC Statement on Attack on Iranian Consulate - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 4 (Sputnik) - The United States and the United Kingdom refused to discuss a draft statement of the UN Security Council proposed by Russia on Israel's attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the UN Dmitry Polyansky said on Wednesday.

"Following the results of the Security Council meeting on April 2 on the Israeli attack on the consular department of the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, Russia prepared a draft Security Council Statement for the press with a standard text for such cases. However, the United States and Great Britain did not even want to discuss it, citing the fact that during the meeting there was no unity in assessments of what happened," Polyansky wrote on his Telegram page.

He recalled that at that time only these two delegations, together with the French, did not condemn this obvious violation of international law, "but engaged in a verbal balancing act, from which it could be concluded that Iran itself is to blame for everything."

"This is the best illustration of the double standards of the Western "troika" and it's real, and not declarative, attitude towards law and order in the international context," the diplomat emphasized.

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Judge Rejects Trump's Motion to Delay Hush Money Trial Till SCOTUS Immunity Ruling – Order

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – A New York State Supreme Court judge rejected former President Donald Trump's motion to delay the trial in the "hush money" case till the US Supreme Court decides on the issue of his immunity from prosecution, according to a court order.

"Defendant's motion is DENIED in its entirety as untimely. The Court declines to consider whether the doctrine of presidential immunity precludes the introduction of evidence of purported official presidential acts in a criminal proceeding," the court order said on Wednesday.

The US Supreme Court is scheduled to decide whether Trump is immune from being prosecuted as a former US president on April 25 while the trial in the hush money case will take place on April 15.

The case involves alleged hush money paid via Trump's attorney Michael Cohen to porn actress Stormy Daniels and others from August 2015 to December 2017. Last year, Trump pleaded not guilty on all 34 counts of falsifying business records in connection with hush money.

Trump has repeatedly called the trial date "election interference" and vowed to appeal the decision.

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US Congresswoman Greene Says CIA Running Conflict Against Russia in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - The CIA is directing the conflict against Russia on the ground in Ukraine, US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said in an interview with journalist Tucker Carlson.

"To fund a war, to pay for it, to continue it, to advise it, to have our CIA on the ground over there running that war in Ukraine against Russia — nuclear-armed Russia… that is a complete departure from anything that is Christian," Greene said on Wednesday.

It is contrary to Christian principles to fund wars all over the world, Greene added.

Fighting a "proxy war" in Ukraine against Russia does not protect the US or serve its national security interests, Greene said. People in the US want to see a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine, Greene said.

Officials and media lie every single day by claiming that Russia intends to take over Europe, Greene said. Such a claim contradicts statements made by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Greene said.

In February, US media reported that the CIA created a network of spy bases in Ukraine over the past eight years, including a dozen forward operating bases along the Russian border that engaged in operations against Russia. CIA Director William Burns has personally visited Ukraine at least 10 times since February 2022.

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US Congresswoman Says Lawmakers Kept in Dark About Ukraine Aid Legislation Details

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - Members of the US Congress are being kept uninformed about the details of a bill with Ukraine aid set for consideration next week, US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said in an interview with journalist Tucker Carlson.

"Not one Republican member of our conference that I have spoken to has any idea what is in this foreign aid package that's going to give $60 billion to Ukraine," Greene said on Wednesday. "We're reading about it in the news, the same way the American people are, and it's outrageous."

Greene said that the legislation is likely to pass the US House of Representatives next week under suspension of the rules.

Earlier this week, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that he intends to advance Ukraine aid legislation after lawmakers return from a district work period. The legislation could include measures to fund Ukraine with loans or seized Russian assets, Johnson said.

Johnson will not allow lawmakers to amend the legislation, Greene said. Greene said she plans to speak with Johnson on Friday.

Johnson's character has changed since becoming House Speaker, to the point that people are asking whether he is "blackmailed," Greene said.

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Baltimore Bridge Collapse Could Pose Risks for US Economy in 2024 – Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – The collapse of a major bridge in Baltimore could pose some additional risks for the US economy due to the impact on shipping networks that appear to be adapting following the incident, US Federal Reserve Board Governor Adriana Kugler said in her remarks at Washington University in St. Louis.

"I am attentive to risks—both upside risks to my inflation outlook and downside risks to the outlook for economic activity. For upside risks, global developments such as the wars in Europe and the Middle East could spark an increase in commodity prices or further disruptions to shipping networks. The tragic recent bridge collapse in Baltimore and effects on the Port of Baltimore could also pose some risk, though it appears that shipping networks are adapting," Kugler said on Wednesday.

Another risk, according to Kugler, is that consumption growth could turn out to be stronger than expected mainly because of the wage gains across all income groups.

In the early hours of March 26, a commercial Singapore-flagged cargo ship hit the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore soon after it departed the port for Sri Lanka's Colombo. The bridge

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collapsed, sending at least eight people from a construction crew working on the bridge into the water. Ship traffic in the port of Baltimore was suspended until further notice following the bridge's collapse causing major supply chain disruptions.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) –
RUSSIA-FRANCE TALKS
* Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on Wednesday held a phone conversation with French Defense Minister Sebastien Lecornu at the urgent request of the French side, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* Readiness for a dialogue on the Ukraine conflict was noted during a phone conversation between Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and French Defense Minister Sebastien Lecornu on Wednesday, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* Shoigu told Lecornu that France will face problems if Paris decides to deploy troops in Ukraine, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
CROCUS CITY HALL TERRORIST ATTACK
* Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu told his French counterpart Sebastien Lecornu, that all those responsible for the March 22 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack will be punished, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* Lecornu told Shoigu that Paris is unaware of any links between the March 22 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack and Ukraine, the French Defense Ministry said.
* Media reports alleging that Washington warned Moscow about a preparation for a terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall concert venue is not true, a source in the relevant Russian authority told Sputnik.
* The Moscow City Court has ruled that the arrest of Isroil Islomov, one of the defendants in the Crocus terrorist attack case who appealed the court decision, is lawful, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the courtroom.
SITUATION IN SYRIA
* The Russian air force has destroyed two bases of militants in Syria who left the Al-Tanf zone and were hiding in Deir Ez-Zor and Homes provinces, Yurii Popov, the deputy head of the Russian Defense Ministry's Center for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria, said on Wednesday.
ISRAELI INVASION IN GAZA
* The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said on Wednesday that it has decided to draft more reserve soldiers to the military’s air defense units.
* The United States is unaware if US-supplied weapons were used in an Israeli strike on World Central Kitchen (WCK) aid workers in the Gaza Strip, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said.
CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

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* Volodymyr Zelenskyy's statement about the new wave of military mobilization in Russia is not true, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.
* NATO will hopefully overcome differences with Hungary over the alliance's role in the Ukrainian conflict in the next few weeks, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.
* NATO's new plans for Kiev will not make the alliance a participant in the Ukrainian conflict and it will remain as a defensive bloc, Stoltenberg said.
* NATO is not discussing the presence of combat units in Ukraine, and there are only talks about the supply of military aid, Stoltenberg said.
* White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said that the Biden administration will not speculate about reported discussions among NATO member states about transferring the Ukraine Defense Contact Group under the alliance's control.
* The Ukrainian military has lost up to 390 soldiers in the Donetsk direction in the past day, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

GLOBAL ENERGY

* The OPEC+ takes geopolitical factors into account in its decisions, and the tense situation in the Middle East affects the global oil market, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Wednesday.
* The global oil prices are on the rise due to the situation in the Middle East, among other reasons, Novak said.
* The OPEC+ Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee (JMMC) recommended keeping oil production quotas unchanged during a meeting on Wednesday, OPEC has said.

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Biden Admin. Fears Petrol Price Spike Despite Calm There Vs Crude Oil - Energy Think-Tank

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and his energy officials fear that Russia's vulnerable energy infrastructure and oil output cuts could lead to a spike in the pump price of US gasoline despite fuel markets going up at a relatively smaller scale now compared with crude oil, a Washington-based energy think-tank said Wednesday.

"Despite the current state of US petroleum product markets not showing any of the price spikes or volatility that it exhibited in 2022, key media reports indicate that the Biden administration is concerned that continuing attacks will drive up global prices," the Energy Policy Research Foundation said, referring to reported Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian oil refineries.

The pump price of gasoline, or petrol as it's known worldwide, was at $3.549 per gallon on average across the United States on Wednesday, according to the website of the AAA, or American Automobile Association. A month ago, the average price was $3.346 per gallon, meaning it had risen 6% in that span.

The price of US crude oil, benchmarked to the West Texas Intermediate, in comparison, rose from $78.74 on March 3 to $85.43 on April 3. That's up 8.5%. The so-called WTI benchmark had also rallied 16% between end-December and end-March while gasoline prices rose by a third of that.

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In June 2022, the pump price of gasoline hit record highs of above $5 a gallon, climbing from $2.78 in the first half of 2021.

The AAA, which keeps track of historical fuel numbers, cautioned readers in a blog not to be fooled by the relative calm of the gasoline market versus crude oil, citing Russia as a factor too.

Any break in gasoline's price surge may be temporary, with the rise likely to resume if tight supply concerns return, the blog said.

"Uncertainty of the impact of Ukraine's targeting of Russia's oil infrastructure likely spiked oil prices recently," Andrew Gross, an AAA spokesperson and author of the blog, said. "But those concerns have abated somewhat for now, and gas prices are settling into a pattern similar to last year when the usual seasonal increase was slow and steady."

At a time of weaker gasoline demand — exemplified by last week's drop in consumption and rise in stockpiles — would typically contribute to pushing pump prices lower or slowing increases, Gross said.

But rising crude oil prices have kept them elevated instead, he pointed out.

In another sign of an unfolding energy crisis, the Biden administration on Wednesday canceled a planned 3 million-barrel crude purchase that would have helped refill the heavily-drawn US Strategic Petroleum Reserve. The Energy Department gave "taxpayer's interest" as the reason.

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Maryland Governor Says No Danger in Patapsco River After Bridge Collapse in Baltimore

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) –Maryland Governor Wes Moore said on Wednesday that there is no danger in the Patapsco River near the site of the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapse in the US city of Baltimore.

"We know that we can report to the people of the state that there is no danger inside the water right now, but we continue to monitor," Moore told reporters.

He stressed that the authorities continue to examine the situation.

Other officials confirmed that they still do not know what cargo remains in the river. "We are not aware exactly of how many containers are in the water. But we continue to sample to ensure the safety and health of the Patapsco River," Maryland Deputy Secretary of the Environment Suzanne Dorsey said.

In the early hours of March 26, a commercial Singapore-flagged cargo ship hit the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore soon after it departed the port for Sri Lanka's Colombo. The bridge collapsed, sending at least eight people from a construction crew working on the bridge into the water. Ship traffic in the port of Baltimore was suspended until further notice following the bridge's collapse.

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Bird Flu Outbreak At Cal-Maine Texas Facility, Production Temporarily Ceased - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - Cal-Maine Foods, Inc. announced in a statement a halt in production at its Parmer County, Texas, facility due to highly pathogenic avian influenza ("HPAI") detection, leading to 1.6 million hens culled.

"Cal-Maine Foods, Inc. today reported that one of the Company's facilities located in Parmer County, Texas, tested positive for highly pathogenic avian influenza ("HPAI"), resulting in depopulation of approximately 1.6 million laying hens and 337,000 pullets...Production at the facility has temporarily ceased as the Company follows the protocols prescribed by the USDA," Cal-Maine Foods said in a statement on Tuesday.

According to the statement, the company remains committed to strong biosecurity efforts, yet acknowledges that no farm is fully protected against HPAI, which persists among wild birds, making future outbreaks unpredictable, especially during migration seasons.

"The Company continues to work closely with federal, state and local government officials and focused industry groups to mitigate the risk of future outbreaks and effectively manage the response," the statement added.

Furthermore, today, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre stated during a briefing that the administration is closely monitoring the situation to ensure community health and safety.

Earlier this week, a US citizen tested positive for the highly pathogenic avian influenza virus, known as bird flu.

The patient, who had direct contact with dairy cattle in Texas and was suspected to be infected with bird flu, experienced only eye redness. The individual is currently in recovery, self-isolating, and undergoing antiviral treatment.

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Apple in Early Stages of Developing Home Robots - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - US tech company Apple is in the early stages of developing robots for home use, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday.

Apple engineers are crafting a table-top home device with a robotically mobilized display, as well as a robot that follows users in their homes, the report said, citing people familiar with the projects.

The projects are in early stages and may not culminate in a public release, the report said. Nevertheless, Apple is exploring the idea of home robots in an effort to capitalize on the "next big things" in the tech world.

The projects are headed by Apple's hardware engineering and artificial intelligence teams, the report said. The robotic display is further along in development than the mobile robot, having been included and cut from Apple's product roadmap in recent years, the report said.

Engineers first imagined the robotic display as a device capable of mimicking head movements during video calls and locking on to a single video call participant in a crowd, the report said.

However, Apple is unsure whether consumers would want to pay the cost of such a product,

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the report said. The project's primary challenge has been division among Apple executives about whether to proceed with development, the report said.

Although Apple scrapped its efforts to bring a vehicle to market, some of the technologies and resources from the project have been put towards the robotic products. The vehicle operating system developed by Apple, known as safetyOS, could be repurposed for use in robots, the report said.

Apple also has robotics-related job positions listed on its website, which could indicate efforts to expand work in the area, the report said.

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Northrop Grumman, AI Firm Link Up to Boost Capabilities of Unmanned Drones

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman has launched a new collaboration with EpiSi to boost the artificial intelligence (AI)-enhanced capabilities of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), or drones, the aerospace giant announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"Northrop Grumman is collaborating with EpiSci to further develop advanced, trusted autonomous tactical solutions for the United States and its allies," the release said.

Northrop Grumman will integrate EpiSci's TacticalAI softeware into its aeronautics system architecture to speed up the delivery of advanced autonomous solutions, the release said.

The company said the collaboration would pave the way for the development of uncrewed drones that can adapt to changing mission requirements and provide military commanders with the flexibility to operate in complex environments.

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Biden Tells NASA to Set Cosmic Time Standards for Moon, Other Planets - Memorandum

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has instructed NASA in a new memorandum to within the next three years establish time standards integrating human activities on the Moon and other extra terrestrial bodies with US time.

"This memorandum outlines the Biden-Harris Administration's policy to establish time standards at and around celestial bodies other than Earth to advance the National Cislunar S&T Strategy," the memorandum dated April 2 said. "OSTP [Office of Science and Technology Policy] directs federal departments and agencies to align their planning and policies with this memorandum."

The approach to establish time standards will define, develop and implement a distinct reference time at each celestial body and its surrounding space environment, the White House required.

"Federal agencies will develop celestial time standardization with an initial focus on the lunar surface and missions operating in Cislunar space, with sufficient traceability to support missions to other celestial bodies," the memorandum said.

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NASA will, in coordination with the Departments of Commerce, Defense, State, and Transportation, provide a finalized strategy to the Executive Office of the President to implement lunar timing standardization no later than December 31, 2026, the White House said.

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US House Panel Requests Info on Immigration Cases Dismissed Due to DHS Inaction - Letter

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - The US House Judiciary Committee sent a letter to Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas on Wednesday, requesting information about the dismissal of hundreds of thousands of immigration cases due to the US Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) failure to file Notices to Appear (NTA) with immigration courts.

In March, Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse found that DHS dismissed approximately 200,000 immigration cases by failing to file NTAs with immigration courts under the Biden administration.

Generally, the filing of an NTA begins the process to potentially remove immigrants, including those encountered at the border, from the United States, the letter said.

"The Committee is concerned with DHS's inaction, which exacerbates the nation's already backlogged immigration courts and creates additional chaos in the Biden Administration's immigration crisis," the letter said.

The letter requests that Mayorkas provide information on the number of cases dismissed by the Executive Office for Immigration Review due to failure to prosecute by DHS, the number of such cases for which DHS eventually filed an NTA, and all reports on cases dismissed for failure to prosecute.

The letter requests that Mayorkas provide the information as soon as possible but no later than 5:00 p.m. on April 17.

The letter is signed by House judiciary panel chairman Jim Jordan and immigration subcommittee chairman Tom McClintok.

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Palestine Hopes UNSC Will Allow It To Become Full UN Member - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 3 (Sputnik) - Palestine hopes that the UN Security Council will allow it to become a full member of the United Nations, Palestinian Ambassador to the UN Riyad Mansour said on Wednesday.

"We believe the time is now, we should be a full member. That is the decision of the Palestinian people and the international community," Mansour told reporters. "We hope the Security Council will allow us."

The issue is a matter for the Palestinian people and the international community, not Israel, to

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decide, he added.

The ambassador noted the progress made by Palestine at the UN in recent years, including when in 2012 the General Assembly upgraded its status from "entity" to "non-member observer state."

The non-member state status at the UN is also held, for example, by the Holy See.

Palestine on Tuesday sent a letter to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres seeking renewed consideration of its membership application, which was first submitted on September 23, 2011, according to a post on X.

"I have the honour to request that renewed consideration be given to this application by the Security Council during April 2024. I should be grateful if you would transmit this request to the Security Council as soon as possible," Mansour wrote in the letter.

Separately on Tuesday, the Arab Group, the OIC and the Non-Aligned Movement also sent a letter to Guterres expressing support for Palestine's bid to gain official membership status. Attached to the document is a list of 140 countries that have recognized the State of Palestine.

Approval of Palestine's bid would require at least nine votes in the Security Council and no vetoes by permanent members Russia, China, France, Britain and the United States.

However, the US has long opposed Palestine's effort to gain UN membership, saying that it should only be recognized as a state and join the world body after concluding a negotiated peace deal with Israel.

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US Warning of Terrorist Attack in Russia Had 'Urgent' Mark, Didn't Mention Crocus – Hersh

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) – The US warning about an imminent terrorist attack at a concert venue in Russia was marked "urgent," but contrary to media reports did not identify Crocus City Hall as the target, Pulitzer Prize-winning US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh wrote in his new article published on Wednesday, citing a US official familiar with the matter.

The CIA allegedly provided the warning to Russian intelligence before the concert at the Crocus City Hall marking it "urgent," meaning that the data in it "was credible and near term," Hersh quoted the official as saying.

"The highly secret report on the attack in Moscow was prepared by the Counterterrorism Center at CIA headquarters and delivered to the terrorism division of the Russian Federal Security Service located in the old KGB building in Moscow. Separate briefings were presented in person by the FBI officer at the embassy. This is an established relationship," the official said.

The warning, however, did not mention Crocus City Hall near Moscow and only said that an attack was being planned at some "public gathering," according to the official.

The information provided by the official is contrary to a Washington Post report published on Tuesday claiming that Crocus City Hall was specifically identified in the warning as the target of a terrorist attack.

On March 22, several armed men broke into Crocus City Hall, a major concert venue just outside Moscow, and started shooting at people. They also started a fire in one of the

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auditoriums, which was full of people ahead of a concert. The attack left 695 casualties, including 144 dead, according to the latest data from the Russian Emergencies Ministry.

The four main suspects in the case — all of them citizens of Tajikistan — tried to flee the scene in a car but were detained and charged with terrorism. Russian authorities believe the perpetrators planned to flee to Ukraine, where a safe haven had been arranged for them. An investigation is underway.

Later in March, The New York Times reported, citing European and US security officials, that the US intelligence agencies did not provide the Russian side with all the information they had about the threat of a terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall in the Moscow Region out of fear that Russian authorities might learn about their intelligence sources or methods of work.

Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov also said that the information transmitted by the United States on the preparation of a terrorist attack was of a general nature, and the Russian special services responded to it.

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US Sen. Sanders to Netanyahu: ‘Stop Murdering Innocent People’

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - Independent US Sen. Bernie Sanders said on Wednesday that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu must increase efforts to avoid civilian casualties in the course of military operations in the Gaza Strip.

"Netanyahu, stop murdering innocent people," Sanders said in a statement via social media platform X.

Sanders’ post also included a clip from an interview with US media. In the interview, Sanders called the situation in the Gaza Strip one of the worst humanitarian disasters in modern history.

Hundreds of thousands of children and others are starving to death in the Palestinian enclave, Sanders said.

Palestinian organization Hamas started the conflict but Israel is going to war against the entire Palestinian people, Sanders said.

The United States should not provide any more support to Israel to continue its military operation in the Gaza Strip, Sanders said.

On October 7, Hamas launched a large-scale attack against Israel, targeting both military bases and civilian neighborhoods. Nearly 1,200 in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted during the attack, prompting a military response by Israel in the Gaza Strip.

Israel launched strikes in the Palestinian enclave, ordered a blockade of the area and conducted a ground incursion with the goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing hostages. More than 32,700 people have been killed in the Gaza Strip, according to local authorities.

On Monday, Israel killed seven World Central Kitchen aid workers, including a US citizen, in a series of strikes on the humanitarian group’s marked vehicles, despite them having coordinated their movements with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

The IDF called the incident a "grave mistake" that occurred as a result of misidentification. The

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US State Department called the incident unacceptable and said that the IDF needs to put measures in place to ensure such an incident never happens again.

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Palestinian UN Membership Has to be Decided by Full UN Members - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 3 (Sputnik) - Palestine's membership in the United Nations has to be decided by the organization's member states, UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"As for particular membership into the United Nations, it is a question to be decided in accordance with the Charter which is in the hands of member states," Dujarric said during a briefing to journalists.

Most changes to the current UN structure involving member states have to be decided by member states, with the UN Secretariat playing only a limited role, if any at all, he said.

Palestine on Tuesday sent a letter to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres seeking renewed consideration of its membership application, which was first submitted on September 23, 2011, according to a post on X.

"I have the honour to request that renewed consideration be given to this application by the Security Council during April 2024. I should be grateful if you would transmit this request to the Security Council as soon as possible," Mansour wrote in the letter.

Separately on Tuesday, the Arab Group, the OIC and the Non-Aligned Movement also sent a letter to Guterres expressing support for Palestine's bid to gain official membership status. Attached to the document is a list of 140 countries that have recognized the State of Palestine.

Approval of Palestine's bid would require at least nine votes in the Security Council and no vetoes by permanent members Russia, China, France, Britain and the United States.

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Powell Insists Fed Won't Be Drawn Into Climate Debate in US Election Year

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Wednesday the central bank will not be drawn into the debate on climate in its policy-making.

"We are not, nor do we seek to be, climate policymakers," Powell said in a speech at the Stanford Graduate School of Business in California.

Since 2024 began, the Fed chair has become more vocal in disassociating the central bank and himself from climate-related discussions.

This comes ahead of November's presidential election and amid lobbying of the Fed by both the pro-climate Biden administration and its Republican rivals who are opposed to Wall Street's use of the so-called ESG — environmental, social and governance — elements in business and

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investment decision making.

In January, Powell notably pushed back on pressure to use the Fed's powers to fight climate change, arguing that it's up to the president and the US Congress to take the lead.

"Decisions about policies to directly address climate change should be made by the elected branches of government and thus reflect the public's will as expressed through elections," Powell said during a panel discussion in Sweden on how and why central banks are shielded from political interference.

The Fed, as everyone knew, was only entrusted with ensuring "maximum employment" and stable inflation for Americans, he added.

On Wednesday, Powell expounded his commitment to those two mandates, and expressed his fear about unrelated responsibilities that some expected the central bank to take up as its mission too.

"We also need to avoid 'mission creep'," the Fed chair said. "Our nation faces many challenges, some of which directly or indirectly involve the economy. Fed policymakers are often pressed to take a position on issues that are arguably relevant to the economy but are not within our mandate, such as particular tax and spending policies, immigration policy, and trade policy. Climate change is another current example."

Taking a page from his January speech in Sweden, Powell said policies to address climate change were the business of elected officials and agencies specifically assigned that responsibility.

"The Fed has received no such charge," he said. "We do, however, have a narrow role that relates to our responsibilities as a bank supervisor. The public will expect that the institutions we regulate and supervise will understand and be able to manage the material risks that they face, which, over time, are likely to include climate-related financial risks."

While the Fed will be alert to such risks, it will not expand its role beyond the set parameters, he said.

"Transparency and accountability are fundamental for any government agency in a democracy but are especially important for one granted policy independence," Powell added. "The Fed has a special obligation to explain ourselves clearly — to describe what we are doing and why we are doing it. We are always striving to improve on this communication, and it is a job that is never complete. But we have come a long way."

For months, the Fed and other regulators such as the Securities and Exchange Commission have come under scrutiny for their role in counteracting global warming.

Environmental groups and green-energy friendly Democrats aligned with Biden have pushed the Fed to make it more expensive for banks to lend to the fossil fuel industry.

Republicans working with former president Donald Trump, who is attempting to recapture the White House from Biden in the November election, have tried to cow the Fed away from making pro-ESG banking policies.

The Fed has chosen to take a middle path — it is conducting a pilot program where a group of big banks will be required to test the effects of climate-related scenarios on their books. But it remains a preliminary exercise that will have no formal bearing on regulations, the central bank says.

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UPDATE - Palestine Hopes UNSC Will Allow It To Become Full UN Member - Envoy

(Adds details about request and support for Palestine's bid in paras 6-8, US veto threat in paras 9-10)

UNITED NATIONS, April 3 (Sputnik) - Palestine hopes that the UN Security Council will allow it to become a full member of the United Nations, Palestinian Ambassador to the UN Riyad Mansour said on Wednesday.

“We believe the time is now, we should be a full member. That is the decision of the Palestinian people and the international community,” Mansour told reporters. “We hope the Security Council will allow us.”

The issue is a matter for the Palestinian people and the international community, not Israel, to decide, he added.

The ambassador noted the progress made by Palestine at the UN in recent years, including when in 2012 the General Assembly upgraded its status from "entity" to "non-member observer state."

The non-member state status at the UN is also held, for example, by the Holy See.

Palestine on Tuesday sent a letter to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres seeking renewed consideration of its membership application, which was first submitted on September 23, 2011, according to a post on X.

"I have the honour to request that renewed consideration be given to this application by the Security Council during April 2024. I should be grateful if you would transmit this request to the Security Council as soon as possible,” Mansour wrote in the letter.

Separately on Tuesday, the Arab Group, the OIC and the Non-Aligned Movement also sent a letter to Guterres expressing support for Palestine's bid to gain official membership status. Attached to the document is a list of 140 countries that have recognized the State of Palestine.

Approval of Palestine's bid would require at least nine votes in the Security Council and no vetoes by permanent members Russia, China, France, Britain and the United States.

However, the US has long opposed Palestine's effort to gain UN membership, saying that it should only be recognized as a state and join the world body after concluding a negotiated peace deal with Israel.

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IDF Needs to Do Better to Prevent Tragedies Like Strike on Gaza Aid Workers - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - Israel needs to put better measures in place to prevent incidents such as the one that led to the death of seven World Central Kitchen aid workers in Gaza, the US State Department said on Wednesday.

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"At the end of the day, you have seven aid workers who were trying to deliver humanitarian assistance. So whatever the reason was that led to this tragedy, whatever the mistake that happened inside the IDF, it's unacceptable, and they need to do better, and they need to put measures in place to ensure that it doesn't happen again," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said during a press briefing.

The comment comes a day after US President Biden called on Israel to conduct a swift probe into the incident and urged the IDF to do more to protect civilians.

"It should not happen again," Miller added.

On Monday, WCK staff were traveling "in a deconflicted zone" in two armored cars branded with the organization's logo, and a soft skin vehicle, the NGO said. The humanitarian convoy was attacked as it left the Deir al Balah warehouse, where the team had unloaded more than 100 tonnes of food aid brought to Gaza by sea. The organization said that its convoy had coordinated its movements with the IDF.

The Israeli strike against the staff of the WCK killed seven employees from Australia, Poland, the United Kingdom, and Palestine, as well as a dual citizen of the United States and Canada. The organization suspended its operations in the Gaza Strip after the deadly incident.

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Blinken, Aliyev Discuss Advancing Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Process -State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken held talks with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, focusing on the significance of promoting the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia to yield regional economic benefits, the State Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev...Secretary Blinken and President Aliyev discussed the importance of advancing the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which would bring economic benefits to the entire region," the statement said.

According to the statement, the Secretary emphasized that there's no reason for heightened tension along the border and warned that aggressive actions and rhetoric from any party could harm the chances for peace.

"The Secretary reiterated the need for Azerbaijan to adhere to its international obligations and commitments regarding human rights and fundamental freedoms and urged the release of those unjustly detained," the statement added.

Earlier today, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev called the accusations that Azerbaijan intends to invade Armenia groundless.

The South Caucasus is considered one of the most conflict-ridden regions of the globe, primarily due to the long-standing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region. In September 2023, Azerbaijan took control over the region, populated mainly by ethnic Armenians, prompting almost all local residents to flee to Armenia.

The Nagorno-Karabakh authorities declared that the unrecognized state would cease to exist

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/04/2024 11:05:49 AM

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from January 1, 2024. On February 1, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said a peace treaty between the two countries could be signed only after the constitution of Armenia, which has a provision calling for unification of the country with the Nagorno-Karabakh region, is amended.

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White House Says Respects Muslim Leaders' Decision to Decline Biden's Iftar Invite

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - The White House respects the decision of some Arab American community leaders to decline its invitation to attend an iftar dinner and understands that it is a "very painful time," Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

"We understand it's a very painful time, we understand that, and we respect that ... I can't speak to individuals who didn't want to attend," Jean-Pierre said during a White House press briefing.

The remarks were in response to a reporter's question about how troubling it is to the White House that prominent Arab American leaders are declining to attend White House events.

On Tuesday, President Joe Biden hosted an iftar dinner at the White House for fewer than a dozen representatives from the Muslim community. Vice President Kamala Harris, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and senior White House officials were also in attendance.

Several Arab American community leaders who were invited to the White House dinner reportedly declined to attend due to frustration with the administration's stance on Israel amid the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

On October 7, 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 32,700 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, local authorities say.

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White House Declines to Confirm Reports of Biden-Netanyahu Call on Thursday

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) -White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre declined to confirm reports on Wednesday that US President Joe Biden will hold a call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu later this week.

“I don’t have a call to confirm at this time,” Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing when asked about the reports.

Earlier on Wednesday, Israeli media reported that Biden and Netanyahu are scheduled to speak on Thursday, citing a diplomatic source.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/04/2024 11:05:49 AM

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Biden and Netanyahu have spoken more than two dozen times since Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel, Jean-Pierre said. US and Israeli officials also speak to one another every day, Jean-Pierre said.

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US Assesses Russia Almost Completely Reconstituted Military Over Past 2 Months - Campbell

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) –Russia has managed to almost completely reconstitute and retool its military despite the initial setbacks on the battlefield in Ukraine, US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell.

"I think we have assessed over the course of last couple of months, that Russia has an almost completely reconstituted military and after the initial setbacks on the battlefield … with the support of China, in particular, [in terms of] dual-use capabilities, variety of other efforts… Russia has retooled and now poses a threat to Ukraine," Campbell said during a discussion hosted by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS).

Moreover, Campbell believes that Russia's "newfound capabilities" allegedly pose a longer-term challenge to stability in Europe and threaten NATO.

Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said on several occasions that Moscow is not going to attack NATO countries. Russia does not threaten anyone, but will not ignore actions that are potentially dangerous to its interests, the Kremlin has said.

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Global Oil Price Practically Hits $90 a Barrel Despite Rising US Crude Stocks

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - US crude stockpiles rose substantially for a second week in a row but that did not stop the global price of oil from reaching five-month highs and virtually touching $90 a barrel as energy traders focused instead on declining fuel inventories and the potential for global energy outages.

US crude balances grew by 3.21 million barrels during the week ended March 29, building on the 3.165 million increase noted in the week to March 22, the Energy Information Administration said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report released Wednesday.

Prior to that, crude stockpiles fell by around 5 million barrels over three weeks — after a break from an earlier build of around 28 million barrels over a six-week period that began in late January.

Higher US crude stockpiles typically dampen the global price of oil since such inventories are a gauge of the supply situation in the United States, the world's largest oil consumer.

What's complicating this dynamic now are falling balances for gasoline, or petroleum as it's

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known worldwide, and distillates — a proponent of the energy mix that is processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses and ships, and which also goes into making airline fuel.

Gasoline balances fell by 4.256 million barrels during the week to March 29, wiping out the 1.299 million-barrel build seen in the week to March 22. Even before that rise, gasoline stockpiles fell almost 19 million barrels for seven weeks beginning February 1.

Distillate stockpiles slid by 1.268 million barrels after a 1.185-million decline the prior week. Before that, distillates rose by 1.5 million barrels in total over two weeks. Still, that was dwarfed by an approximate inventory loss of 13.5 million barrels over seven weeks beginning January 19.

A continued squeeze in world crude supply is, meanwhile, keeping the pressure up on global oil prices, Phil Flynn, analyst at the Price Futures Group in Chicago, said.

In Wednesday's New York trading, crude prices came within a whisker of hitting $90 a barrel in a rally that could send a new frisson of worry down the backs of inflation watchers at the Federal Reserve who have just started taking comfort that price growth in the United States may be coming under control.

Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil, reached $89.99 per barrel, a level not seen since its October 30 high of $90.15. Last week, Brent finished the first quarter of this year up 13%.

West Texas Intermediate, the benchmark for US crude, reached $86.20 on Wednesday, a peak unseen since the $86.30 high scaled on October 24. Last week, the so-called WTI benchmark finished the first quarter up 16%.

Wednesday's rally in oil, the third in as many days, came after recent threats to Russian energy facilities from Ukrainian drones and as the conflict in the Middle East appeared to escalate. Both events have a bearing on oil, with Russia being one of the largest exporters of the commodity and the Gaza conflict zone for the Israeli-Hamas war being in the proximity of some of the biggest energy producers in the 23-nation OPEC+ alliance.

"It is becoming clear to almost everybody that we are on the precipice of a global oil supply deficit," Flynn, the analyst at Price Futures Group, said.

In another sign of an unfolding energy crisis, the Biden administration on Wednesday reportedly canceled a planned 3 million-barrel crude purchase that would have helped refill the heavily-drawn US Strategic Petroleum Reserve. The Energy Department gave "taxpayer's interest" as the reason, Bloomberg reported.

In prior purchase announcements for the so-called SPR, the department often touted its ability to get a "good deal" for taxpayers.

For instance, in a 3.25 million-barrel purchase announced on February 28, the department said the average of $77.43 it paid for a barrel was "well below" the $95 average it got for selling SPR crude in 2022 during an oil rally then.

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US, Japan Summit to Unveil Steps on Potential Military Equipment Co-production -State Dept

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WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - The upcoming summit between the United States and Japan next week will unveil steps for the two countries' collaboration and potential co-production of military equipment, Kurt Campbell, Deputy Secretary of State said on Wednesday.

"One of the things that I think you'll see next week are steps for the first time that will allow the United States and Japan to work more collaboratively on joint development and potentially co-production of vital military and defense equipment," Campbell said during an event at the Center for a New American Security.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and US President Joe Biden are scheduled to meet on April 10 in what will be the first state visit by a Japanese prime minister to the US since 2015. On April 11, the Japanese prime minister will also address a joint session of the US Congress and participate in a trilateral summit with Biden and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

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Campbell Confirms US-Japan-Philippines Summit to Boost Coordination in South China Sea

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell confirmed on Wednesday that one of the deliverables of the upcoming US-Japan-Philippines summit in Washington D.C. will be increased coordination in the South China Sea amid tensions with China there.

"I don't want to get ahead of ourselves, but I think it is fair to say that we will see commitments of all three nations that involve closer coordination and engagement in the South China Sea and elsewhere," Campbell said during a discussion hosted by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) when asked to preview the outcomes of the summit.

On April 11, the United States will host a first-ever trilateral summit with the Philippines and Japan that Campbell has called historic.

In late March, Politico reported that the three partners will announce their plans to launch joint maritime patrols in the South China Sea following a series of incidents involving Chinese and Philippines ships around disputable parts of the sea.

Also in March, the Philippine armed forces said the China Coast Guard had used water cannons against a Philippine supply vessel in the South China Sea. On Sunday, Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman Wu Qian called on Manila to stop violations and provocations near the Second Thomas Shoal, also known as Ren'ai Jiao. He said the incident was caused "exclusively by Philippine provocation," while Chinese actions were "rational, legal and professional."

The territorial affiliation of some islands and reefs in the South China Sea, including the Philippine-controlled Second Thomas Shoal, has been the subject of disputes between China, the Philippines, and several other Asia-Pacific countries for decades.

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North Korea Says 'Appreciates' Russia's UNSC Veto of Sanctions Committee Against Country

UNITED NATIONS, April 3 (Sputnik) - North Korea appreciates Russia's veto last week on the draft UN Security Council resolution blocking the continuation of the UN sanctions committee against the country, the North Korean Ambassador to the UN Kim Son said on Wednesday.

"We highly appreciate the Russian Federation's veto on …the draft resolution," Son told journalists. "We highly appreciate it."

Pyongyang had not recognized the sanctions resolution, he added.

Last week, Russia vetoed a US-drafted UN Security Council resolution to extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts overseeing sanctions on North Korea for one year. Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said that the process of updating the sanctions regime against North Korea is long overdue in the UN Security Council, but Western countries do not want to move away from their "destructive and punitive rhetoric" in relation to the country.

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Blinken Says NATO Has 'No Designs' on Territory of Any Other Country

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated that NATO is a defensive alliance that has "no designs" to seize the territory of any other country in the world.

"[NATO is] the most successful [alliance] in history, a defensive alliance with no designs on the territory of any other country, but with a determination to protect the territory of each of its members," Blinken said following a NATO foreign ministers meeting in Brussels, Belgium.

On April 4, NATO will celebrate the 75th anniversary of its creation on the same date in 1949. In July, Washington D.C. will host a NATO summit as well to celebrate the anniversary.

Despite the claims of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and US officials, NATO is by no means a defense alliance. Over its 75-year history, NATO has carried out many aggressive interventions in other countries, including the most recent ones in Yugoslavia, Libya, and Iraq, grossly violating their sovereignty and causing thousands of unnecessary civilian casualties and infrastructure destruction, which was not preceded by an attack on the military bloc.

Today, NATO continues to expand, with Sweden and Finland hastily joining the military bloc over the past year citing an alleged Russian threat as an excuse to allow US military equipment to be stationed on their territory.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that NATO's expansion to include Ukraine would create a direct national security threat to Russia and that Moscow considers the non-aligned status of Ukraine to be extremely important to put an end to the years-long conflict.

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US Justice Dept. to Invest $78Mln in Community Violence Intervention - Garland

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department announced on Wednesday a $78 million investment in community violence intervention programs and research.

"Today, I am announcing that the department will be making a $78 million investment in community violence intervention programs and research," US Attorney General Merrick Garland said during the second annual Community Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative Grantee Conference.

Garland said that the funds would be allocated directly to organizations making significant progress in reducing violent crime and enhancing community trust nationwide.

Beyond funding programs to prevent violence, the Justice Department is also collaborating with community intervention programs nationwide, Garland added.

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Biden Admin. Cancels Oil Purchase For US Reserve As Crude Prices Jump

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - Surging crude prices have forced the Biden administration to postpone the refilling of the US oil reserve, with the Energy Department reportedly saying on Wednesday that it will not pursue a 3-million barrel purchase in “taxpayers' interest” and analysts adding that the situation would likely continue.

The Energy Department began buying crude oil to refill the Strategic Petroleum Reserve in May 2023, after drawing about 200 million barrels or more from the reserve since the end of 2021 to tamp down spiraling oil prices caused by supply outages.

The Energy Department’s last announced purchase for the so-called SPR was at the end of February this year, when it said it bought 3.25 million barrels to be delivered through August.

Now, the department says it had shelved its intent to acquire 3 million barrels for the SPR site in Bayou Choctaw, Louisiana. The intent to buy was announced in mid-March, with delivery scheduled through September.

“We will not award the current solicitations for the Bayou Choctaw SPR site and will solicit available capacity as market conditions allow,” the department was quoted saying by Bloomberg.

Given the current state of oil prices, the department indicated that it will adopt a wait-and-see stance on refilling the SPR. “We will continue to monitor market dynamics,” the release added.

The department will likely remain in that situation until oil markets begin easing from their present highs, said Phil Flynn, an energy analyst at Chicago's Price Futures Group.

US crude prices, tied to the West Texas Intermediate benchmark, have risen gradually from the end of December and are up about 17% since in a surge caused by a supply squeeze created by the Israeli-Hamas war and output reductions by oil producing countries in the OPEC+ group.

With both WTI and Brent advancing towards $90, the Biden administration, which has canceled

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/04/2024 11:05:49 AM

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some high-profile oil drilling projects in the United States, "may have to cancel something else," Flynn, the Price Futures analyst said, referring to the SPR,

In prior SPR purchase announcements, the Energy Department often touted its ability to get a "good deal" for US taxpayers.

For instance, with the 3.25 million-barrel purchase it announced on February 28, the department said the average of $77.43 it paid for a barrel was "well below" $95 per barrel average it got for selling SPR crude in 2022 at the height of an oil price rally then.

To the department's and the administration's credit, the sale of some 200 million barrels from the SPR succeeded in tamping the market price of crude down from more than $100 at one point in mid-2022 to just above $70 six months later.

The administration's use of the SPR has, however, been a highly-charged matter for proponents of high oil prices and Biden's political opponents. Both sides accuse him of turning the SPR into a political tool to subdue crude prices and shore up his political standing with American voters when the reserve is meant for emergency use — i.e. to boost the availability of oil in times of critically short supply.

Biden, in his defense, had said he was only acting to reduce record high pump prices of fuel, which stood at above $5 per gallon in June 2022 and has stabilized since at below $3.50. The administration had also blamed high crude oil prices for US inflation getting to four-decade highs of above 9% in June 2022.

Biden is up for reelection in November and high oil prices could weigh on the president's campaign, analysts note.

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Palestine Hopes UNSC Will Allow It To Become Full UN Member - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 3 (Sputnik) - Palestine hopes that the UN Security Council will allow it to become a full member of the United Nations, Palestinian Ambassador to the UN Riyad Mansour said on Wednesday.

"We believe the time is now, we should be a full member. That is the decision of the Palestinian people and the international community," Mansour told reporters. "We hope the Security Council will allow us."

The issue is a matter for the Palestinian people and the international community, not Israel, to decide, he added.

The ambassador noted the progress made by Palestine at the UN in recent years, including when in 2012 the General Assembly upgraded its status from "entity" to "non-member observer state."

The non-member state status at the UN is also held, for example, by the Holy See.

Palestine on Tuesday sent a letter to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres seeking renewed consideration of its membership application, according to a post on X.

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US Will Not Decide on Future Military Presence in Iraq During PM Visit – White House

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) – The White House said Wednesday that it does not expect it will reach a decision on the future US military posture in Iraq during Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani upcoming visit to Washington.

"We very much see this as a great opportunity to continue discussions with him and his team about the counter-ISIS [terrorist group, banned in Russia] efforts in Iraq and what that needs to look like going forward. I would not expect coming out of this visit that it will be a decisional meeting in terms of there'll be some sort of final conclusion about what that posture looks like going forward," White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said at a press briefing.

Kirby confirmed that the US would discuss its military presence in Iraq with Al-Sudani during his visit, given ISIS' ongoing threat in Iraq and Syria.

The Iraqi PM is scheduled to meet with Biden on April 15 in what will be the first visit between the two leaders.

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White House Denies Lack of Israeli Accountability in Gaza War – National Security Council

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) – The White House dismissed on Wednesday the suggestion that the US was not holding Israel to account for any documented Israeli killings of civilians in Gaza, including the latest Monday airstrike that killed an American citizen.

"I don't think you can look at what we've been saying, what we've been doing, or even the President's statement last night, and say that we've somehow gone easy on Israel in every regard," White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said at a press briefing.

A reporter had asked for an example in which an Israeli investigation, which US spokespeople typically defer to, had led to any accountability into the numerous documented atrocities throughout Israel's nearly six-month war on Gaza, which has resulted in an official Palestinian casualty toll of nearly 33,000 dead and more than 75,000 injured.

The past few days have seen unusual international outrage toward Israel's conduct in Gaza after seven World Central Kitchen aid workers – six of whom were foreign nationals – were killed on Monday after an Israeli strike hit their convoy. Its movements had been coordinated with the Israeli Defense Forces.

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US, EU Plan to Find New Semiconductor Manufacturing Chemicals Using AI - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - The United States and the European Union intend to utilize artificial intelligence (AI) technology to find replacements for chemicals used in semiconductor manufacturing, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday.

Following a US-EU Trade and Technology Council meeting in Belgium, the group drafted a statement outlining their intention to use AI to accelerate the discovery of materials to replace per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), dubbed "forever chemicals" due to their slow breakdown, in semiconductor manufacturing, the report said, citing the draft statement.

In February, the US Environmental Protection Agency proposed regulatory modifications to classify some PFAS as hazardous.

The draft statement also indicated that the US and EU intend to review security risks linked to so-called legacy chips in their supply chains. China has invested in legacy chip manufacturing, prompting concerns about market distortion or dependencies, according to the report.

The US and EU will consult and develop joint measures to address distortionary effects on the global semiconductor supply chain, the draft statement said.

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US Has Contacted Family of US Aid Worker Killed in Israeli Strike – White House

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) – The White House said Wednesday that the State Department had contacted the family of the American citizen killed in the Israeli strike on a foreign aid convoy in Gaza.

"The State Department has made initial contact with the family. I think you can understand this is a delicate moment for them, and they did express a desire for some time to process the news," White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said at a press briefing.

Jacob Flickinger, 33, a dual US-Canadian citizen, was among the workers killed in the strike.

Seven World Central Kitchen aid workers – six of whom were foreign nationals – were killed on Monday after an Israeli strike hit their convoy in Gaza. World Central Kitchen CEO Erin Gore called the strike "unforgiveable," noting that its movements had been coordinated with the Israel Defense Forces and food was "being used as a weapon of war."

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Canada Stands Ready to Support Taiwan After Deadly Earthquake – Trudeau

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/04/2024 11:05:49 AM

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WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) – Canada conveyed to Taiwanese officials its readiness to provide the island with assistance in the wake of a major earthquake, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday.

"I want to address the devastating news we woke up to, about the earthquake in Taiwan. Canada stands ready to provide support and we have reached out to Taiwanese officials to engage and to make sure affected Canadians have the support they need," Trudeau told reporters.

Earlier in the day, a 7.3-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Taiwan, becoming the strongest to hit the island in 25 years, Wu Chien-fu, the director of the Taipei Central Weather Administration's Seismology Center, said.

As of 16:30 local time (8:30 GMT), the death toll stands at nine, another 821 are injured and at least 127 have been trapped, the Taiwanese broadcaster Sanlih reported.

About 1,000 people are believed to be trapped in the mountains of Taiwan's Taroko National Park as a rescue team is attempting to get in touch with climber groups, the island's Central News Agency reported on Wednesday.

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White House Says Won't Speculate About Plans to Place Ukraine Aid Group Under NATO Control

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Wednesday that the Biden administration will not speculate about reported discussions among NATO member states about transferring the Ukraine Defense Contact Group under the alliance's control.

"I'm not going to speculate about some hypothetical conversations that some NATO allies may or may not be having," Kirby said, when asked about the reported talks.

On Tuesday, US media reported that NATO is considering plans to take control of the multinational Ukraine aid group, in an effort to ensure the continued flow of aid to the regime in Kiev if former US President Donald Trump retakes the White House in November.

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White House Says Unaware if US Arms Used in Israeli Strike on Aid Workers

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is unaware if US-supplied weapons were used in an Israeli strike on World Central Kitchen (WCK) aid workers in the Gaza Strip, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"I do not know the answer to that question," Kirby said, when asked whether US-supplied weapons or resources were involved in the strike.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/04/2024 11:05:49 AM

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On Monday, seven WCK aid workers, including a US citizen, died as the result of a series of Israeli strikes on their marked vehicles, despite the group having coordinated their movements with the Israel Defense Forces.

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IMF Raises Concern Over Debt Load in Low-Income Countries – Georgieva

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) – IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said Wednesday that she was particularly concerned about low-income countries catching up on growth while weighed down by heavy debt.

"What I'm particularly worried is that with growth being slow, the chances to catch up are actually worsened," Georgieva said at a joint IMF-World Bank conference in Washington.

She noted that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict in Ukraine, and high inflation were more severe in low-income countries than the IMF expected.

They left low-income countries currently 10% below their GDP from their pre-pandemic projection, while at the same time, their average debt service used up 13% of GDP.

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American Voters See Trump as Better Overall Leader than Biden – Poll

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) – US presidential candidate Donald Trump has a slight edge over US President Joe Biden in overall ratings, with voter impressions of Biden down several points in all eight criteria, according to a Gallup poll released Wednesday.

While their overall ratings are very close, Trump's current 42% rating is three percentage points lower than his 45% rating in 2020, while Biden's current rating of 41% is down eight points from 2020.

The percentage of respondents who responded in the affirmative when it came to Biden fell in every criterion, including whether he could manage the government effectively; was likable; displayed good judgement in a crisis; was a strong and decisive leader; cared about the needs of people like them; and was honest and trustworthy.

The largest decline, of 13 percentage points, was seen in whether Biden could manage the government effectively. Trump also led Biden by 10 percentage points in terms of this criterion and by 19 points on being a strong and decisive leader.

On the other hand, Biden led Trump by 20 percentage points when it came to likeability and by 11 points on being honest and trustworthy.

The poll was conducted from March 1 to 20.

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US Monitoring Reports of Earthquake in Taiwan, Ready to Provide Assistance - White House

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) – The United States is monitoring reports of an earthquake in Taiwan and stands ready to provide any necessary assistance, National Security Council Spokesperson Adrienne Watson said on Wednesday.

"We are monitoring reports of the earthquake impacting Taiwan and continue to monitor its potential impact on Japan. The United States stands ready to provide any necessary assistance," Watson said in a statement.

On Wednesday morning, a series of powerful earthquakes were recorded off Taiwan. A spokesperson for the Japan Meteorological Agency said the strongest earthquake had a magnitude of 7.7. It was followed by a 6.6-magnitude earthquake and a 6.3-magnitude earth tremor, according to data from the Japan Meteorological Agency. Social media users posted videos on X showing that several buildings in Taiwan tilted and were partially destroyed.

Ten people were killed and 943 others injured by the earthquake, China Central Television reported.

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US Wants to Get Back to Peace Process in Yemen - Special Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 3 (Sputnik) - The United States wants to see a return to a peace process in Yemen, but the effort is being hampered by Houthi attacks on commercial navigation in the Red Sea, US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking said on Wednesday.

"My focus is particularly on the ways that we can move beyond the current crisis in the Red Sea and get back to the Yemen peace effort," Lenderking said during a digital press conference.

A very important foundation for this is a roadmap that was agreed to by the Yemeni government and the Houthis in December after more than a year of talks, the envoy stated.

This gives some hope that this moment can be used to get beyond the current tensions and refocus on ways to end the nine-year conflict, Lenderking said.

Despite Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, the truce is still being observed in Yemen, the diplomat recalled. The de-escalation allowed more humanitarian supplies to reach Yemenis and Yemenis can now travel abroad on their own airline, he added.

The US and the international community are working for a durable ceasefire in Yemen, he said.

It is, however, "very difficult" to use the momentum given the Houthi attacks on international shipping in response to Israel's war in Gaza, Lenderking said.

He suggested that the Houthis could show "good faith" to the international community by releasing the crew of the Galaxy Leader cargo ship that they hijacked in November.

The Houthis, also known as the Ansar Allah movement, have been striking what they say are

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Israel-linked ships in the Red Sea since November in response to the war in Gaza. The Houthis said they had handed over the decision about the release of the Galaxy Leader vessel to Hamas.

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