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4/4/24 Thursday

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'They Want Famine': Israeli Strike Against WCK Workers Intended as Message to Deter Aid for Gaza

Following a fatal strike on aid workers in Gaza, Biden warned Netanyahu on Thursday that any future support from the US is dependent on the protection of civilians and aid workers in Gaza. It is the first time the US has threatened to pull their support from Israel.
As calls are being made for a thorough investigation into the recent Israeli strikes on the World Central Kitchen's aid convoy, it's unlikely that a rigorous probe will be conducted in the coming weeks and months, an activist told Sputnik,
Seven employees with the World Central Kitchen (WCK) were killed on Monday by Israeli airstrikes. Chef José Andrés, the organization's founder, said his WCK team was deliberately targeted by the Israeli military, adding that his staff were in a deconfliction zone controlled by the Israeli forces and that they had been given prior notice of their presence.
Andrés is calling on Australia, Canada, Poland, the US and the UK, whose citizens were killed in the attack, to join the WCK in demanding an independent third party inquiry into the strikes. Monday's attack means that at least 196 aid employees have now been killed during the war in Gaza.
Speaking with Sputnik Radio's Political Misfits on Thursday, author and activist Yves Engler noted that the recent strike against the group of humanitarian aid workers was no accident, underscoring that a "proper investigation" into the fatal incident may not ultimately pass muster.
"No, I don't think it's going to be a proper investigation into the matter," said Engler. "And the idea that we even need investigation—I think it's all pretty straightforward. Israel knowingly killed them because they are trying to send a message that they don't want aid going into Gaza."
"And, I think there's a small chance that it's actually partly tied to—incredible as it may sound, trying to channel a little bit away from what they did in Syria in terms of blowing up the Iranian embassy," he continued. "Which I think means very clearly that Israel is looking for a full scale regional war. I think it's almost certain Iran is going to respond, and Israel would prefer to have it obscured that they did this very provocative move."
Israel earlier bombed a building that was part of the Iranian embassy complex in Damascus, Syria, killing seven people in the process. Iran has vowed to retaliate, which has raised the risk of a wider conflict in the region.
Show host Michelle Witte noted that using the strike as a distraction from Israel's bombing of the embassy proves a big gamble for Israel, as the WCK could be viewed as "an extension of American soft power" seeing as Andrés is part of the State Department's culinary corps.
But Engler says the probability that the attack on the WCK's convoy was a mistake is close to "zero."
"I would say it's approaching zero that this was a mistake. I mean, these are three different missiles, these are marked cars," said Engler. "So, this was on purpose and obviously it sends a

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very big message—they've killed about 170 UN workers already. So, they were pushing that message toward other forces bringing in food. This is upping the ante on that kind of front in a serious way."

"This is totally speculative on my part, but I think you can combine two things at once—they're really serious about the genocide, they want the famine, they're going to do everything they can to ensure a famine in Gaza, and there's a lot of evidence pointing in that direction," he continued.

"So, it seems to me that the Israeli government is trying to do everything it can to turn the sort of low mid-level war with Lebanon with Hezbollah into something full fledged and simultaneously draw the US into a war with Iran. I don't see how Iran doesn't respond with a pretty major attack on Israel after that considering the context in Gaza and considering what's going on in Lebanon," he added.

"Let's not forget [Netanyahu] has a personal self-interest to keep warfare going on as long as possible because when that ends, he will probably get ousted and possibly end up in jail. So, you put that together and, I think the chance that this was an accident is so small that we basically should rule that out and look at other explanations."

Asked if there will be any "change" after US President Joe Biden speaks with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Engler pointed out that US media reported on continued American arms shipments to Israel about the same time the aid convoy was attacked.

"[The Biden administration] seems to be continuing with more weapons. But there's got to be some point in which the Biden administration backs off. There's got to be some threshold," said Engler. "I think this may have been one step too far. And there's a long history of political forces being drunk on their own power and they get away with it, then they go one step too far and the whole thing comes crashing down on them."

"Is that where Israel and zionism is at? I don't know, but I think that's certainly possible, and at some point, you think elements in the Biden administration are going to question whether they are going to keep going down this pathway," he added.

Following condemnation from several of Israel's allies of the IDF strikes on the WCK convoy, Netanyahu has said Israel "deeply regrets the tragic incident."

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak told the Israeli leader that he was "appalled" by the killing of aid workers and urged a "thorough and transparent independent investigation" into the strikes. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also demanded "full accountability" from Israel. Biden has said he was "outraged and heartbroken," noting that Israel has not done enough to protect civilians in their fight against Hamas.

During a phone call on Thursday with Netanyahu, Biden demanded an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and signaled that any further fatalities of civilians or aid workers would affect the US support of Israel's military actions.

It is the first time that the US has signaled pulling support from the war which has resulted in the deaths of over 30,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's health ministry.

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The Trump-Proofing Checklist - Cartoon

Mainstream media has dubbed a new proposal a way to “Trump-proof” aid for Ukraine. Some foreign ministers, however, have made it clear that any funding that moves NATO closer to war will not be supported.

NATO foreign ministers met Wednesday to discuss a proposal by NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg for a €100 billion ($108 billion) five-year fund for Ukraine. The move comes as Europe fears the return of a Donald Trump presidency. The former US president has said he will not aid Ukraine in their conflict with Russia if he is elected, according to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

“What is obvious is that we need new and more money for Ukraine. And we need it over many years. And the whole idea of now discussing a framework, commitments and an institutionalized framework, for the support is to ensure more predictability and more confidence that the money will come every month, every year for the long haul,” said Stoltenberg before the meeting.

The Ukraine Defense Contact Group was first created in the early weeks of the conflict by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and then-Joint Chiefs Chair General Mark Milley. The US has used the group to funnel tens of billions of dollars in weapons and other equipment to Ukraine. But NATO may bring the group under its control should Ukraine lose US support.

"We need to shift the dynamics of our support," Stoltenberg said. "We must ensure reliable and predictable security assistance to Ukraine for the long haul... less on short-term offers and more on multi-year pledges."

But foreign ministers have reportedly warned that putting together such a fund would not be easy. Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto “firmly stated Hungary will not back any [NATO] proposals that might draw the alliance closer to war or shift it from a defensive to an offensive coalition," government spokesman Zoltan Kovacs said on X. Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares said he and others warned against duplicating efforts between bilateral, European Union and NATO aid.

In early March, former President Donald Trump met with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. According to Orban, Trump will “not give a penny into the Ukraine-Russia war and therefore the war will end” as its “obvious that Ukraine on its own cannot stand on its feet.”

Stoltenberg concluded at the end of the summit that NATO will make its final decision in July. A consensus between its 32 members will be required before they can move forward with such a decision. As NATO marks its 75th anniversary this week, Russia has accused the military alliance of returning to a Cold War mindset.

Late last year, US legislators passed a law requiring congressional approval should any US president attempt to pull the country out of NATO.

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Europe Being Forced to 'Self-Harm' in Pursuit of US Interests

As NATO marked the 75th anniversary of its foundation, the alliance gathered Wednesday to discuss a proposal by chief Jans Stoltenberg for a €100 billion ($108 billion) five-year fund for

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Ukraine. The proposal is in preparation for a possible future without US support should former President Trump return to the Oval Office.

In a recent article for Consortium News, journalist Patrick Lawrence writes that as “European leaders continue to import a version of US militarism, rearmament will cost the continent its postwar social contract.” Lawrence claims Europe has found itself in a crisis as a consequence of US imports including irrational Russophobia, a proxy war in Ukraine, and support of Israel’s siege in Gaza.

The journalist adds that since the mid-Cold War years, Europe has wavered between two contradictory impulses — ”asserting its sovereignty and succumbing to an undignified dependence on American power”.

Dr. Radhika Desai, author and professor at the University of Manitoba, Canada, spoke with Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program on the subject Thursday. Desai said Lawrence’s article exposes the “tension” between the US and Europe — specifically between what the US wants and what the European public wants.

“He exposes tension between the demands that the US is making and the incumbent governments in Europe's capitals are eagerly acceding to, on the one hand, and what the people want on the other,” said Desai. “Basically what the US is demanding from Europe is an enormous self-sacrifice. Essentially, it is almost like they are requiring Europe an enormous amount of self-harm.”

“The self-harm creates tension because anything that requires the other party to do things that are contrary to their own interests is going to be an unstable arrangement,” she continued. “And that means that while at the moment the incumbent governments seem to be playing by the US rulebook, it is not guaranteed. It is quite possible that the ordinary people of Europe, because they want welfare states, because they don't want war, because most of them would rather have decent relations with Russia, will vote in governments that will put this matter into question.”

Desai added that there is a “myth” that Europe has been able to afford a welfare state because it did not have to spend money on military concerns in the past. But there is no “contradiction between security and welfare,” she explains.

“This is a false [idea] which is being set up because what the Americans want is for Europe to persist on its neoliberal path to follow the US. And that means spending more on the military and using that as an excuse to reduce the welfare state,” she claimed.

Not only are Europeans going to lose their welfare state by following the US down a path of neoliberalism, but they are also going to lose it at a “very great rate,” she added.

“Their productive economy, particularly in Germany, but also in much of the rest of Europe [will be lost]," said Desai. "So I think all of these things are essentially part of the sacrifice that the US is demanding, and it is so great that we cannot expect this to be a stable situation.”

Sputnik’s Garland Nixon noted that in order for a country, or a nation, to maintain a balance between national security and economic interests, a “competent diplomacy” is required—especially one which acts in good faith. And right now, he explains, the US empire is not allowing that.

“You can have security by arming yourself to the teeth or you can have security by building good relations with your neighbors,” Desai explained. “But the US has now found itself in this sweet

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spot where most governments in Europe are willing to do its ludicrous bidding, even though it harms their own interests in a whole multitude of ways."

“The US itself is spinning out of control. And a lot of what's going on in terms of the pursuit of policies in all conflicts, whether it is in Israel, or Ukraine, or China or what have you, the decisions are being made by people who do not have an overall plan,” she added.

“NATO, insofar as it performed any kind of role whatsoever, it was that it provided some degree of coordination to the western side in the Cold War. But once the Cold War was over, NATO should have been bound up. The fact that it has been kept going has only meant that NATO is getting more and more incoherent,” concluded Desai.

Because the US is demanding that European countries spend more on their defense and military, the direct result will be of a greater European power in NATO. And the greater the power that Europe has, the more likely they will disagree with the US, the scholar suggested.

“Members of NATO will assist the party or parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other parties, such action as it deems necessary. So, if I decide if I'm the ruler of one of the countries of NATO and one of my fellow NATO members has been attacked, and in fact, if I decide that I want to send just 100 helmets as Germany did in the early phase of the Ukraine war, that is considered okay, that's all I'm going to contribute,” Desai explained.

“And I might, I may even decide that I do not wish to do anything. So this is the structure of NATO. The incoherence is continuously growing... The more members there will be, the more there will be dissension,” she added. “And the more self-harm the US demands from the Europeans, the more forces will arise, whether on the street or from the capitalist classes themselves which say, 'no, this is not working for us.'”

On Wednesday, NATO foreign ministers met to discuss a proposal for a $108 billion five-year fund for Ukraine. The proposal is in preparation for a future without US support should former President Donald Trump win the 2024 US presidential election.

In early March, former President Donald Trump met with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. According to Orban, Trump will “not give a penny to the Ukraine-Russia war and therefore the war will end” as its “obvious that Ukraine on its own cannot stand on its feet.”

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Ukraine's Military Has 'Collapsed' as NATO Marks 75th Anniversary

The US reaffirmed its commitment that Ukraine will eventually join NATO Thursday. But Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has voiced frustration that a timeline for Kiev to join the military alliance has not been set.

Sputnik’s John Kiriakou reported the Ukrainian military dropped their draft age from 27 to 25 as the government announced a draft registration for 17 to 24-year-olds. The report comes about a month after French lawmakers voted to support a 10-year security accord with Ukraine.

Speaking to labor lawyer and human rights activist Dan Kovalik on Sputnik's Political Misfits this week, Kiriakou asked if this could mark the beginning of the end of Ukraine’s resistance.

“I think we're past the beginning of the end,” said Kovalik.

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“They've been recruiting, forcibly recruiting elderly people off the streets to fight, pregnant women to fight. So, this is just another indication that their military is collapsed. It's not even collapsing. It has collapsed. I don't think there's much left for them. And that's why the French are... preparing to send in troops.”

NATO foreign ministers met to discuss a proposal by NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg Wednesday for a 100 billion euro ($108 billion) five-year fund for Ukraine. The move comes as Europe fears the return of a Donald Trump presidency. The former president has said he will not aid Ukraine in their fight against Russia if he is elected, according to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

“The Ukrainian military is done. It's over. And, frankly, without the French, they probably would surrender at this point,” added Kovalik. “Yes, I think it is a sign that it's over.”

The Ukraine Defense Contact Group was first created in the early weeks of the conflict by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and then-Joint Chiefs Chair General Mark Milley. The US has used the group to funnel tens of billions of dollars in weapons and other equipment to Ukraine. But NATO may bring the group under its own control should Ukraine lose US support.

Kiriakou asked Kovalik if US President Joe Biden would agree to such a decision in preparation of a Trump victory in November.

“He might,” said the author. "I think the question is: can Biden maintain support for Ukraine, support for Israel in Gaza, and double down on provoking China over Taiwan, which it appears he wants to do all at the same time? I don't think he can. So, I think Ukraine may be the thing that he's going to have to let loose.”

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Lack of Firepower, Manpower Dooms Ukraine as Zelensky May Seek ‘Escalation’ in Moldova

Russia is pressing forward in the Donbass conflict almost two weeks after a horrific terrorist attack outside Moscow left over 140 dead. Russian intelligence continues to study the incident, recently revealing they believe the Ukrainian regime played some role in its funding or planning. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky may attempt to “escalate” his way out of his current struggles on the battlefield by expanding the conflict to a third country, according to one observer.

“Moldova is probably the most immediate and likely place for the expansion of the conflict in Ukraine,” security analyst and international relations expert Mark Sleboda told Sputnik’s Fault Lines program Thursday.

“Indeed, there is since the 1990s a separatist region of Transnistria, it's a separatist region of Moldova. It's right up against the border with Ukraine and it's a very pro-Russian area and there are Russian peacekeepers there.”

“What's more, there is one of the largest arms and ammunition dumps of the Soviet Union still in Transnistria,” he added. “And there have been many suggestions in the last year that the Kiev regime could solve all of its ammunition problems, potentially for years, if it got its hand on this depot.”

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Ukraine's lack of firepower has become a major problem for its battlefield operations. A lack of recent funding from the United States initially slowed attempts to rearm the country, but its Western benefactors have struggled to keep up with Moscow's ability to rapidly produce large amounts of ammunition.

The shortfall has led some to propose manufacturing ammunition in Ukraine or resurrecting Europe's atrophied defense industry, although such efforts would likely require years to get off the ground.

"Just over a week ago there was a drone attack that hit Transnistria from Ukraine," Sleboda noted. "You could have said that that was perhaps a first salvo fired. And the current president of Moldova is a very pro-NATO, anti-Russian, pro-Ukrainian politician."

"One of the big possibilities for the expansion of this conflict is to teach Russia that NATO is going to expand no matter what by moving into Moldova and taking over the separatist region, which has been protected for decades now by Russia," the analyst concluded.

"Whether the people of Transnistria or other parts of Moldova want it or not, and it must be said that the majority of the Moldovan population is against the idea, according to the most recent polls I've seen… It is a big potential flashpoint because it borders the Black Sea."

Sleboda noted the Kiev regime has been launching kamikaze drone attacks on Russian amphibious landing ships of the Black Sea Fleet, perhaps as a way to stymie the country's ability to respond if the war does indeed expand to Moldova.

The expert said Zelensky may be seeking to "escalate" his way out of the country's declining fortunes on the battlefield by perhaps obliging NATO or other Western troops to become involved.

"Yes, it is insane, but that's where we are," he said.

Meanwhile, a recent article in US media suggested Ukraine's front lines are at risk of a catastrophic collapse. Observers have speculated the source of the claims could be elements in the Ukrainian armed forces loyal to former military chief Valery Zaluzhny; current commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrsky is reportedly highly unpopular among Kiev's troops.

The Russian military is learning quickly, Sleboda pointed out, stating Western weapons employed by Ukraine have a "one shot chance" of effectiveness before Moscow adapts to their usage.

"Whatever weapon that is sent by the West – all this wonder weapon nonsense – you got one shot to use it. The war of one chance they called it," he said. "Weapon systems become redundant very quickly because they're quickly countered by the Russians… The Russians are always studying. They don't give us a second chance."

Sleboda claimed Ukraine would likely continue to suffer a disadvantage in manpower as attempts to expand the draft have proven politically controversial.

"Russia for the first time in this conflict actually has a manpower advantage over the last half a year," he said. "A big part of that is the Kiev regime's truly egregious casualties and Russia's very low casualty rate and high volunteer contract soldier recruitment rate. Russia's recruiting over a thousand soldiers every day and, amazingly, the Kiev regime is losing over a thousand soldiers any day."

Zelensky recently signed a bill lowering the country's conscription age from 27 to 25. Attempts to draft younger soldiers have proven difficult given the realities of Ukraine's demographic situation since the 1990s, with the average age of troops being around 44. The country has

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taken to forcibly conscripting soldiers off the street, press ganging them into joining the failing military effort.

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Lack of firepower, manpower dooms Ukraine as Zelensky may seek 'escalation' in Moldova

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky may attempt to "escalate" his way out of his current struggles on the battlefield by expanding the conflict to a third country, according to security analyst Mark Sleboda on Sputnik's Fault Lines program Thursday.

"Moldova is probably the most immediate and likely place for the expansion of the conflict in Ukraine," said the international relations expert. "Indeed, there is since the 1990s a separatist region of Transnistria, it's a separatist region of Moldova… There is one of the largest arms and ammunition dumps of the Soviet Union still in Transnistria. And there have been many suggestions in the last year that the Kiev regime could solve all of its ammunition problems, potentially for years, if it got its hand on this depot."

Sleboda speculated an attack on the pro-Russia region could provide an opportunity for the Ukrainian leader to overcome his struggles in the Donbass. Moldova recently launched a drone attack on Transnistria, and the analyst suggested that attacks on Russian landing ships may be intended to stymie the country's efforts to respond to potential Ukrainian aggression in the region.

Ukraine continues to suffer from a shortage of both firepower and manpower compared to the better-equipped Russian military.

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US very concerned about possible full-scale war between Israel, Iran - White House

The United States is very concerned about a potential full-scale war between Israel and Iran following an Israeli strike on an Iranian diplomatic facility in Damascus, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said during an interview with Fox News.

"Yeah, we're very concerned," Kirby said Thursday regarding Iranian threats of retaliation against Israel. "In fact, one of the things that the [Israeli] prime minister and the president [Joe Biden] talked about today was this very public, very real threat by Iran to the state of Israel."

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Biden has publicly expressed anger over Israel's recent attack on a convoy of World Central Kitchen volunteers that killed seven, although the White House has clarified they will continue providing the ally with lethal aid. The death toll of Palestinians in Gaza stands at some 33,494 as Israel has continued its military operation in the enclave after a surprise attack by Hamas on October 7 last year.

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Houthis say 37 killed, 30 wounded in 3 months of US and UK strikes on Yemen

As many as 37 people have been killed and another 30 have been wounded in three months of strikes by the United States and the United Kingdom on Yemen, Ansar Allah leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi said.

"American and British aggressors have carried out 424 airstrikes and shelling from the sea in three months. As a result of the American-British aggression, 37 people have been killed and 30 have been wounded," the Houthi leader said in a televised appearance on the Al Masirah broadcaster.

He added that the US and the UK have demonstrated their "inability to prevent or limit operations, and the Yemeni armed forces have achieved very important results."

The Houthis vowed in November 2023 to attack any ships associated with Israel until it halts military actions in the besieged Gaza Strip. This in turn led the US, the UK and the European Union to announce a multinational operation to secure navigation in the Red Sea.

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NATO has no plans to send combat units to Ukraine - Stoltenberg

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the alliance has no plans to send combat units to Ukraine but called on member states to intensify the supply of weapons to Kiev.

"We do not intend to send any combat units to Ukraine," Stoltenberg told Polish broadcaster TVP Thursday. However, the NATO chief called for an increase in the supply of arms to Ukraine.

"NATO allies are sending substantial military support to Ukraine. We should intensify these activities and transfer even more, especially air defense systems," he said.

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Western countries have been providing military and financial aid to Kiev since the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it would lead to further escalation of the conflict. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that any cargo containing weapons for Ukraine would become a legitimate target for Russia.

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Man armed with machete intended to kill Argentina's president - Security Minister

Argentine police have detained a man armed with a machete and other sharp objects attempting to infiltrate the Casa Rosada presidential palace in Buenos Aires to kill President Javier Milei, Security Minister Patricia Bullrich said.

"He had approached the Casa Rosada with a machete and other sharp objects and PFA [Argentine Federal Police] officer Yanina Violante... stopped him," Bullrich said in a post on the X social media platform Thursday.

Citing the country's police, Argentine broadcaster TN reported that the attacker, age 29, decided to pass through a fence on the side of the government house that had been left open as an official was leaving the building.

"I am God and I will kill the president," the attacker shouted as he was detained by police.

He was found to be carrying a nearly 8-inch-long machete, five circular saw blades and a fork, the report said.

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Trump says he would have called Putin personally to warn about Crocus terror attack

Former US President Donald Trump said during a recent interview he would have called Russian President Vladimir Putin personally to warn him about the Islamic State terrorist group plotting to carry out a terrorist attack in Russia.

"I would have called him, I would have let him know," Trump said Thursday during an interview with conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt.

The White House said the United States had warned Russian authorities about the attack. Russian authorities confirmed they received the warning but said the information was too vague.

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A US official told Sputnik after the attack that President Joe Biden had no plans to talk with Putin on the matter.

On March 22, several armed men broke into Crocus City Hall and started shooting at people. They also started a fire in one of the auditoriums, which was full of people ahead of a concert. The attack left 144 people dead, according to the latest data from the Russian Emergencies Ministry.

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UN Chief Hopes Israeli Intentions to Increase Humanitarian Aid in Gaza Quickly Materialize

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres hopes that Israel's intentions to boost the flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza will quickly materialize because the Palestinian people are in desperate situation.

"The United Nations was informed by the Israeli government of its intention to allow a meaningful increase in humanitarian aid distributed in Gaza. I sincerely hope that these intentions are effectively and quickly materialized because the situation in Gaza is absolutely desperate," Guterres told journalists.

At the moment, children are dying due to the lack of food and water, he added.

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UN Chief Troubled by Israel's Reported Use of AI While Bombing Populated Areas in Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said on Friday that he is worried about reports that Israel is using artificial intelligence to identify targets in its bombing campaigns in populated areas in Gaza.

"I am also deeply troubled by reports that the Israeli military's bombing campaign includes Artificial Intelligence as a tool in the identification of targets, particularly in densely populated residential areas, resulting in a high level of civilian casualties," Guterres told journalists.

Decisions that result in life or death should not be delegated to algorithms, he added.

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WCK Demands Independent Probe, Says IDF Cannot Investigate Own 'Failure'

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WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – The World Central Kitchen (WCK) has called for an independent commission to investigate the killing of seven of its aid workers in a strike by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in Gaza, the humanitarian organization said on Friday, after the IDF dismissed two officers involved in the incident.

On Friday, the IDF said that it had dismissed two officers and reprimanded three others after completing its own investigation into the deadly strike. The inquiry found Israeli forces mistakenly believed they were attacking Hamas gunmen.

"We demand the creation of an independent commission to investigate the killings of our WCK colleagues. The IDF cannot credibly investigate its own failure in Gaza," WCK said in a statement.

Commenting on the disciplinary action taken by the IDF against officers involved in the deadly strike, the charity said it was "important steps forward."

However, it warned that if the IDF does not implement systemic changes, it will only lead to more military failures, more apologies and grieving for the families of the deceased.

The WCK further urged Israel to "dramatically increase" the flow of humanitarian assistance into the Palestinian enclave.

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 convoy had coordinated its movements with the IDF before traveling to the zone.

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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US Democrats Expected to Oppose Ukraine Supplemental if Israel Aid Included - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - A growing number of US Democrats in Congress are saying they will oppose any foreign aid supplemental that includes funds for Israel amid concerns about the war in Gaza, Politico reported on Friday.

The US Senate in February passed a $95 billion aid package that includes aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, but its passage in the US House could be slowed or completely scuttled due to Democrat demands to place strict conditions on assistance for Israel, the report said.

About 20 Democrats will likely oppose that bill altogether due to their concerns about the war in Gaza, the Wall Street Journal reported this week, citing House Democratic aides.

This could mean that the only way to pass a foreign aid bill in the House would be to separate the aid for Israel and Ukraine, Politico reported.

However, US House Speaker Mike Johnson faces stern opposition from his fellow Republicans to any effort to move forward with an aid package for Ukraine.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene told CNN in an interview on Wednesday that any effort to force a

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vote on a Ukraine aid bill would be one of "the most egregious things he could do."
Greene has filed a motion to oust Johnson as speaker, and during the interview hinted that she could bring the measure to the floor if he makes any moves on aid to Ukraine.
The Biden administration in October initially requested $106 billion in emergency funding to aid Ukraine and Israel, border security and US military efforts in the Indo-Pacific region.
But the legislation has remained gridlocked in Congress since then amid a stalemate over the crisis at the southern border and foreign aid priorities.

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CIA Chief to Head to Cairo for Gaza Hostage Talks This Weekend - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - CIA Director Bill Burns will meet with the Mossad chief and top Qatari and Egyptian officials this weekend as part of efforts to secure a deal with Hamas to release hostages, Axios reported on Friday, citing two sources familiar with the matter.
The meeting, slated for Sunday, comes amid what the White House admitted was President Joe Biden's "growing frustration" with Israel's handling the Gaza war that intensified in the wake of a deadly strike that killed seven World Central Kitchen workers.
In a phone call on Thursday, Biden urged Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to "empower his negotiators to conclude a deal without delay to bring the hostages home." He also stressed that an immediate ceasefire is essential to "stabilize and improve the humanitarian situation and protect innocent civilians."
Israel called its negotiations team back from Qatar last week, alleging that the Biden administration's decision not to veto a UN ceasefire resolution led to Hamas rejecting a compromise hostage deal.
The White House called the claim "inaccurate in almost every respect" and "unfair to the hostages and their families."
The Israeli negotiations team traveled to Cairo earlier this week and demonstrated more readiness for flexibility with regard to Hamas' demand for the return of Palestinian civilians to the northern Gaza Strip, the report said.

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US Employers Add 303,000 Jobs in March, Unemployment Rate at 3.8% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States added 303,000 jobs in March, the Labor Department reported Friday, publishing a number more than 40% above Wall Street expectations and making it seemingly harder for the Federal Reserve to consider quicker rate cuts.
"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 303,000 in March, and the unemployment rate

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changed little at 3.8 percent," the department's Bureau of Labor Statistics said in a press release.

Wall Street economists polled by US media, on the average, had expected 214,000 new jobs for last month. The Labor Department meanwhile revised down February's jobs growth to 270,000 from a previously published 275,000. That put the net change in job creation between February and March at 28,000.

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US Very Concerned About Possible Full-Scale War Between Israel, Iran - White House

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is very concerned about a potential full-scale war between Israel and Iran following an Israeli strike on an Iranian diplomatic facility in Damascus, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said during an interview with Fox News.

"Yeah, we're very concerned," Kirby said on Thursday regarding Iranian threats of retaliation against Israel. "In fact, one of the things that the [Israeli] prime minister and the President [Joe Biden] talked about today was this very public, very real threat by Iran to the state of Israel."

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

WASHINGTON, April 5 (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 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,

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

WASHINGTON, April 5 (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 this week. 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 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

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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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Continuous Military Pressure Makes US Stance on Ukraine 'Unclear' Even Under Trump- Sachs

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - It remains unclear, whether the US stance towards NATO's enlargement and the position on Ukraine will change following the US elections in November - even if Trump is re-elected, there is continuous pressure from the military industry, world-renowned economics Professor, Jeffrey Sachs, told Sputnik.

"Trump, it seems, is much less interested [in NATO enlargement], so maybe he'd abandon that failed approach if elected in November. Yet with the US, one never knows. The pressures from the military-industrial complex are always present," director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University Sachs said when asked if anything could change about the US stance on Ukraine following the Presidential Elections in November.

US media previously reported that NATO was considering plans to take control of the multinational Ukraine aid group, to ensure the continued flow of aid to Kiev should Donald Trump retake the White House in November.

On Thursday, Blinken said that the upcoming NATO summit in July will unveil the role the military bloc should play in supporting Ukraine in the longer term.

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Trump Says Doubts Biden Agrees to Debate, Calls for Drug Testing

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump, in an interview with Hugh Hewitt, expressed skepticism over President Biden's willingness to debate and suggested that candidates should undergo drug testing.

"I don't think so, but I hope he does... I want to debate. And I think debates, with him, at least, should be drug tested. I want a drug test," Trump said on Thursday when asked if President Biden would agree to debate.

Trump said he doesn't know what Biden is using, but criticized his State of the Union address as the worst ever, suggesting it didn't accurately represent the nation and implied Biden's unusually high energy might indicate he's receiving some form of assistance.

"I don't think he could stand up. I don't know. I would hope that he could, but hey, look, I would rather have him be a great president and not even be doing this," Trump added when asked whether he believes Biden would need to sit or could stand through a 3-hour debate.

Biden and Trump are on track to win their respective parties' presidential nominations. However, there are still numerous nominating contests before the party conventions this summer.

Trump leads Biden by five percentage points in a hypothetical, head-to-head matchup, according to an NBC News poll released on Sunday.

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Trump Says Chinese Migrants Entering US Illegally Could Be Building Army Within Country

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said during an interview that Chinese migrants illegally entering the United States along the US southern border could potentially be building an army inside the country.

"No, they're probably building an army," Trump said on Thursday during an interview with conservative radio show host Hugh Hewitt. "They're probably building an army from within...because they're very healthy young men for the most part."

Media reported that there have been more than 30,000 Chinese migrants who have been encountered on the US southern border under President Joe Biden.

There have been three consecutive records for yearly illegal border crossings on the US southern border since Biden came into the White House in January 2021.

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US Diplomacy 'Utterly Failed' in Ukraine, Washington Should Seek Negotiations -Sachs

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WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik)- The US policy in Ukraine has failed, instead of encouraging Ukraine's NATO membership bid, Washington should seek peace negotiations with Russia, world-renowned economics professor Jeffrey Sachs told Sputnik.

While in Brussels, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that Ukraine would become a member of NATO but did not specify the timeline. He also added that the 2024 NATO summit in Washington will help build a bridge for Ukraine to join the alliance.

"Secretary Blinken's statement is another disaster for Ukraine … American diplomacy has utterly failed and indeed collapsed," the Director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University, Sachs said. "Secretary Blinken should be sitting down in negotiations with his counterpart Foreign Minister Lavrov rather than reiterating the utterly failed foreign policy that has brought on this war."

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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Trump Says Would Have Called Putin Personally to Warn About Crocus Terror Attack

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said during a recent interview that he would have called Russian President Vladimir Putin personally to warn him about the Islamic State terrorist group (IS, outlawed in Russia) plotting to carry out a terrorist attack in Russia.

"I would have called him, I would have let him know," Trump said on Thursday during an interview with conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt.

The White House said the United States had warned Russian authorities about the attack. Russian authorities confirmed they received the warning but said the information was too general.

A US official told Sputnik after the attack that President Joe Biden had no plans to talk with Putin on this matter.

On March 22, several armed men broke into Crocus City Hall and started shooting at people. They also started a fire in one of the auditoriums, which was full of people ahead of a concert. The attack left 144 people 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 their plan was to flee to Ukraine, where the masterminds of the attack had arranged a safe haven for them. An investigation is underway.

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US Welcomes Steps Announced By Israel to Increase Aid Flow to Gaza - White House

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes Israel's announcement to increase the flow of humanitarian assistance allowed into Gaza to assist Palestinian civilians displaced by Israel's military operation, the White House said in a press release.

"We welcome the steps announced by the Israeli government tonight at the President's request following his call with Prime Minister Netanyahu," the release said on Thursday. "These steps, including a commitment to open the Ashdod port for the direct delivery of assistance into Gaza, to open the Erez crossing for a new route for assistance to reach north Gaza, and to significantly increase deliveries from Jordan directly into Gaza, must now be fully and rapidly implemented."

Earlier on Thursday, President Joe Biden told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a telephone call that Israel must take concrete steps in the coming hours to protect civilians or else the United States' policy on Gaza will change. Kirby declined to comment on whether the United States would withdraw military aid to Israel if it does not see meaningful progress on efforts to protect civilians.

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US Very Concerned About Possible Full-Scale War Between Israel, Iran - White House

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is very concerned about a potential full-scale war between Israel and Iran following an Israeli strike on an Iranian diplomatic facility in Damascus, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said during an interview with Fox News.

"Yeah, we're very concerned," Kirby said on Thursday regarding Iranian threats of retaliation against Israel. "In fact, one of the things that the [Israeli] prime minister and the President [Joe Biden] talked about today was this very public, very real threat by Iran to the state of Israel."

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PREVIEW - Biden to Visit Site of Collapsed Bridge in Baltimore

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik)—US President Joe Biden will travel to Baltimore, the largest industrial city in the national capital area, on Friday to visit the site of the collapsed Francis Scott Key Bridge.

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.

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

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following the bridge's collapse.

"The President is going to be traveling to Baltimore, where he will receive an operational update on response efforts from the unified command," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday previewing Biden's trip. "Leaders from the Coast Guard and the Army Corps of Engineers will share updates on the assistance they are providing to state officials in surveying and removing the wreckage in the channel, and allowing the Port of Baltimore to reopen as soon as humanly possible."

Biden will also meet with Maryland Governor Wes Moore and family members of the victims of the incident, Jean-Pierre noted.

Biden directed his administration to "move heaven and earth" to reopen the Baltimore port and rebuild the bridge as soon as possible.

Biden tried to draw on personal experience about the bridge during his remarks, as he often does after tragic events. He recalled how he used the collapsed bridge by car and by railroad.

However, many social network users did not appreciate his desire to share his personal thoughts and criticized him for trying to attach himself to what happened.

Many people also have been reminded that it is difficult to say which specific train Biden used because there never was a railroad on the collapsed bridge.

Maryland authorities launched a special website with actual information about traffic and road closures related to the bridge collapse.

"Motorists should plan for increased traffic on roadways throughout Baltimore as a result of the I-695 Key Bridge collapse. The southeast corridor of I-695 is closed on the Outer Loop at MD 173 (exit 1) and Inner Loop at MD 157/Peninsula Expressway (exit 43)," they said in a notice.

The authorities urge drivers to add extra time for their travels through alternative routes and to use public transportation.

Maryland's governor reassured people earlier this week that there is no danger in the Patapsco River near the site of the collapsed bridge.

"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 said.

He stressed that the authorities continue to examine the situation. However, his colleagues confirmed they still do not know what cargo remains in the river.

"We are not aware exactly of how many containers are in the water," Maryland Deputy Secretary of the Environment Suzanne Dorsey said.

Ecologists continue to take water samples to ensure the safety and health of the Patapsco River, she added.

Construction on the Francis Scott Key Bridge began in 1972, and the bridge opened to traffic on March 23, 1977. Including its connecting approaches, the bridge project was 10.9 miles in length, according to the official website.

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Senator Lee Says US Should Leave NATO if Ukraine Becomes Member

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WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – US Senator Mike Lee suggested in an X post that the United States should leave NATO if Ukraine is admitted into the military bloc as a 33rd member.

"NATO can have Ukraine. Or the US. But not both," the post said on Thursday.

Earlier on Thursday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that Ukraine will become a member of NATO. He said later in the day that the NATO summit in Washington in July will unveil the role the military bloc should play in supporting Ukraine in the longer term.

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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UK Billionaire Lewis Will Not Serve Time in US Prison for Insider-Trading Scheme - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – A US court ruled that 87-year-old British billionaire Joe Lewis will not serve a prison term for his role in an insider-trading scheme, the Wall Street Journal.

Lewis faced the possibility of up to two years in prison. However, US District Judge Jessica Clarke, during a sentencing hearing, said that imprisonment may negatively impact Lewis' declining health, the report said on Thursday.

"Mr. Lewis's life would be at serious risk if he were to be incarcerated," Clarke said, as quoted by the report. While the judge stressed that the British businessman committed serious crimes, she ordered him to serve three years probation and pay a fine of $5 million.

In January, Lewis pleaded guilty to securities-fraud charges, admitting that he provided insider information regarding the companies he invested in for his partners and the pilots of his private jet, according to the Justice Department.

Lewis, whose fortune is estimated at $6.2 billion, apologized for his misconduct.

"What days, months, or years I have left, I assure you will be fully committed to making amends, rebuilding the trust I squandered, and proving to the court and my loved ones that I am an honest, caring, and giving person of this world," he wrote in a letter to the judge before the hearing, according to the report.

The US Department of Justice did not respond immediately to Sputnik's request for comment on the sentence.

Lewis has been a majority shareholder of English football club Tottenham Hotspur for more than two decades. He also founded Tavistock Group, which owns various assets, including investments in more than 200 companies, real estate, agriculture and artworks.

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Israel Doesn't Need Free Weapons, US Cannot Afford to Send More - Congressman

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States cannot afford to send further military aid to Israel, which does not need more weapons, US Congressman Thomas Massie said in a statement via social media platform X.

"This coming week Congress will vote to send an additional $14 billion to Israel," Massie said on Thursday. "I'll be voting NO on billions of additional taxpayer dollars to Israel. They don't need free weapons and we can't afford them."

The aid is primarily a handout to the US military-industrial complex, Massie said.

The US House of Representatives is also set to consider aid for Ukraine, which could take the form of loans or frozen Russian assets, House Speaker Mike Johnson said earlier this week.

On Wednesday, Massie said that Johnson's main priority is funding Ukraine as soon as lawmakers return from a district work period. The so-called "deep state" is writing the legislation, which will be put to a passage vote under suspension of the rules, Massie said.

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Judge Denies Trump's Bid to Dismiss Mar-a-Lago Classified Documents Case - Order

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - US District Court Judge Aileen Cannon has rejected Donald Trump's attempt to dismiss the Mar-a-Lago classified documents case on the basis of the Presidential Records Act, according to a court order published Thursday.

"This matter comes before the Court upon the Motion to Dismiss Superseding Indictment Based on the Presidential Records Act, filed by Defendant Trump ... the Motion is denied," the order said.

Cannon in the order said the Presidential Records Act does not provide a basis to throw out the case now in the pre-trial phase, leaving open the possibility that the case could be dismissed at a later stage.

Earlier on Thursday, Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee rejected Trump's attempt to dismiss the Georgia election subversion case based on free speech.

According to that order, the Court found no evidence or authority to suggest that Trump's alleged speech and conduct were protected as political speech.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) –

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (ZNPP) is facing "real dangers" after the facility lost connection to the last remaining backup power line on Thursday, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi said.

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the NATO summit in Washington in July will unveil the role the military bloc should play in supporting Ukraine in the longer term.

* Ukraine is not asking for the deployment of NATO combat troops in the conflict zone, but instead Kiev requests to increase military assistance from the alliance, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

* The Russian Defense Ministry deals with the issue of the possibility of holding negotiations on Ukraine based on Istanbul agreements, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

DRONE ATTACK IN RUSSIA'S KURSK REGION

*Fire erupted in Russia's Kursk near the city's central market after a drone was shot down on Thursday, Kursk Region Governor Roman Starovoit said.

* A residential building in the Kursk Region was hit after three more drones were shot down above the city, Starovoit said.

MIDDLE EAST

* Media reports alleging that Israel temporarily closed a number of embassies abroad due to Iranian threats are not true, a spokesperson of the Israeli Foreign Ministry told Sputnik.

* Israel is able to defend itself and will respond to any attacks on its security, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Thursday when commenting on tensions with Iran.

* US President Joe Biden told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during their phone conversation on Thursday that he will have to reconsider his Gaza policy if he does not see changes in the way the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is treating civilians, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said.

IMF ON UKRAINE

* The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has no plans to consider the possibility of restructuring Ukraine's debt to the organization, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

* The economic outlook for Ukraine remains uncertain due to the ongoing conflict and delays in external financing, Kozack said.

CROCUS CITY HALL TERRORIST ATTACK

* A suspect in the March 22 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack case from Omsk will face trial in Moscow, a source in law enforcement told Sputnik on Thursday.

* France has "useful information" about the organization of the terrorist attack in Crocus City Hall, French President Emmanuel Macron said.

* One Russian citizen and two foreigners have been detained in the Russian cities of Moscow, Yekaterinburg, and Omsk for their alleged involvement in the terrorist attack in the Crocus City Hall, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) said.

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

US Says Expects Israel to Announce Changes Aimed at Protecting Gaza Aid Workers,Civilians

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - The United States expects Israel to announce in the coming hours changes aimed at protecting aid workers and civilians in the Gaza Strip, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said.

"Our policy with respect to Gaza in general is very much going to be dependent on our assessment of the changes that Israel makes about the protections for aid workers, the additional volume of humanitarian assistance that needs to get in and out first to stem civilian casualties," Kirby said in an interview with Fox News. "We expect that in coming hours and days they will make some announcements of changes that they are going to make."

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Ukraine's Military Draft Causing Labor Shortages in Agriculture, Industry - Officials

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - Ukraine's expanded military draft is having a devastating impact on the country's industrial and agricultural sectors, Ukrainian officials told Politico on Thursday.

Ukraine could face a historically large labor deficit of workers able to operate tractors and other heavy machinery, Ukrainian Agricultural Minister Mykola Solskyi said.

The longer Ukraine's conflict with Russia continues, the more difficult it will be for the country's agricultural sector to recover, deputy agriculture minister Markiyan Dmytrasevych told Politico.

It could take Ukraine up to 20 years at this point to restore the country's agricultural sector, Dmytrasevych said.

Earlier on Thursday, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said that nearly 43 million acres of land in Ukraine may have explosive hazards, including more than six million acres of farmland.

The explosive hazards hinder productive use of the land and prevent the flow of Ukrainian agricultural products to markets around the world, Jenkins said.

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Pentagon Says Expects US Military Gaza Aid Pier to Begin Work by Early May

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday that a temporary US military pier to deliver aid to the Gaza Strip, known as a Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore (JLOTS) capability, is on track to begin operations by early May.

"We are expecting JLOTS to be online by the end of the month, early May," Ryder said during a

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press briefing.

Last month, the United States announced their intention to deploy the JLOTS capability off the coast of the Gaza Strip to help facilitate the flow of humanitarian aid into the Palestinian enclave.

On Tuesday, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said that US troops would not deploy on the ground in the Gaza Strip as part of the operation. The US is working with partners on logistics flow and protection of the project, Kirby said.

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Trump Defends Truth Social as Analysts, Traders Predict More Losses

NEW YORK, April 4 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump on Thursday defended his social media company Truth Social, after the company's stock tanked this week and its management said it could not see any chance of turning a profit in the foreseeable future.

Shares of Truth Social, owned by Trump Media & Technology Group, went public on March 26 with a 60% premium that took its price as high as $76.20. Just five sessions later, the stock, with the DJT trading symbol that takes after Trump's initials, fell 21% to $45.30. It has recovered partially since, trading at under $47 at the time of writing.

But the ex-president, campaigning for a White House comeback this November, said in a Truth Social post that what mattered to him was the fun he was having with the site, and urged its other users, as well as investors, to share his enthusiasm.

“Look, using TRUTH, I became the Republican Nominee for President of the United States, and in record time!" Trump wrote. "When I ENDORSE a politician on TRUTH, they almost ALWAYS WIN. If it didn’t work, or properly get the word out, I wouldn’t use it – But it does work, and work really well – And the fun is just getting started!!!”

DJT's plunge came on the back of a net loss of $58.2 million on a revenue of $4.1 million for 2023 announced by Trump Media in a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Trump, who owns roughly 60% of the stock, lost about $1 billion himself from the swoon in the share price.

In its SEC filing, the company said it “expects to continue to incur operating losses and negative cash flows from operating activities for the foreseeable future, as it works to expand its user base, attracting more platform partners and advertisers.”

Experts who study market behavior and the trading fortunes of companies with little track record for performance are advising serious buyers to stay away from DJT, which they say has all the makings of a meme stock.

Meanwhile, short sellers are betting that DJT will fall further, with the financial data company S3 Partners saying that it has become the most expensive stock in the US to sell short.

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Biden Will Have to Alter Gaza Policy If No Changes in IDF Treatment of Civilians - Kirby

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during their phone conversation on Thursday that he will have to reconsider his Gaza policy if he does not see changes in the way the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is treating civilians, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said.

"The President has made it clear today that if we don't see changes to the way the IDF is treating innocent civilians and aid workers and flowing humanitarian assistance that he's gonna have to reconsider our Gaza policy," Kirby told reporters.

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US to Seek Vote Next Week on UN Resolution to Ban Nuclear Weapons in Space - White House

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - The United States early next week will request a vote on a United Nations Security Council resolution to ban nuclear weapons in space, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Thursday.

Last month, the United States and Japan proposed a UN Security Council resolution urging member states against developing any nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction that are specifically designed to be placed in space.

"We will be bringing this resolution to a vote in New York early next week ... we look forward to Russia voting in favor of this resolution, there should be no reason why not to," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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Biden Increasingly Frustrated With Netanyahu's Handling of Gaza Conflict - White House

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has felt growing frustration with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's handling of the conflict in Gaza, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Thursday

"Yes, there has been growing frustration," Kirby said when asked whether Biden has become more frustrated with Netanyahu's handling of the Gaza war.

Earlier on Thursday, Biden told Netanyahu in a telephone call that Israel must take concrete steps in the coming days to protect civilians or else the United States' policy on Gaza will change. Kirby declined to comment on whether the United States would withdraw military aid to Israel if it does not see meaningful progress on efforts to protect civilians.

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UPDATE - Nearly 43Mln Acres of Ukrainian Land Impacted by Explosive Hazards - US State Dept.

(Adds details in paras 6-7)
WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - Some 43 million acres of land in Ukraine contain explosive hazards, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said on Thursday.
"As of September 2023, the government of Ukraine has estimated that nearly 43 million acres of its territory may have explosive hazards," Jenkins said in a press briefing on a State Department report on conventional weapons destruction efforts.
The hazardous territory is larger than the state of Illinois and includes more than 6 million acres of farmland, Jenkins said.
The explosive hazards hinder productive use of the land, preventing the flow of Ukrainian agricultural products to markets around the world, Jenkins said.
The United States has invested more than $263.5 million in humanitarian demining and battle-area clearance in Ukraine in recent years, Jenkins said.
The US holds Russia entirely responsible for explosive contamination in Ukraine, acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Programs and Operations in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs Karen R. Chandler said.
However, Ukraine has used US-provided cluster munitions in the conflict, which can leave unexploded ordinance that endangers civilian populations. The UN has long spoken out against the use of cluster munitions in any conflict.

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UPDATE - NATO to Outline Its Role in Supporting Ukraine During July Summit in Washington – Blinken

(Updates with additional details in para 3, background in paras 4-5)
WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that the NATO summit in Washington in July will unveil the role the military bloc should play in supporting Ukraine in the longer term.
"We're also looking at the role that NATO can and should play over time in supporting Ukraine, and this is an ongoing discussion that we'll have in the weeks ahead, and I imagine that you'll see something at the summit when we come together in Washington in July," Blinken said during a press briefing in Brussels, Belgium.
During the meeting of the NATO foreign ministers which concluded earlier in the day in Brussels, top diplomats had a chance to discuss outcomes for the upcoming Washington

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summit in July, including increasing military support for Ukraine and deepening cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific, Blinken added.

On April 4, NATO celebrates the 75th anniversary of its creation on the same day in 1949 as a counter-force to the Soviet Union. On July 9-11, Washington D.C. will host a NATO summit to celebrate the anniversary.

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Pentagon Delays TR-3 Tech Upgrades for 149 F-35s Amid Software, Supply Chain Issues

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Defense has postponed installing the long-awaited Technology Refresh 3 upgrade package on 149 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters due to software and supply chain issues, the F-35 Joint Program Office said.

"The Program is working closely with F-35 customers to establish a new start date for those modifications based on a number of factors including software and supply chains," JPO spokesperson Russ Goemaere told Breaking Defense.

The F-35 program was slated to begin the TR-3 retrofits in April 2024 in order to upgrade 149 aircraft over the following year, Goemaere said.

"Very capable" TR-2 jets will continue to fly operational missions while awaiting the start of TR-3 upgrades, Goemaere said.

Since July 2023, the Pentagon has refused to accept newly built F-35s because of software issues with the TR-3 upgrade, Breaking Defense said.

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Nearly 43Mln Acres of Ukrainian Land Impacted by Explosive Hazards - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - Some 43 million acres of land in Ukraine contain explosive hazards, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said on Thursday.

"As of September 2023, the government of Ukraine has estimated that nearly 43 million acres of its territory may have explosive hazards," Jenkins said in a press briefing on a State Department report on conventional weapons destruction efforts.

The hazardous territory is larger than the state of Illinois and includes more than 6 million acres of farmland, Jenkins said.

The explosive hazards hinder productive use of the land, preventing the flow of Ukrainian agricultural products to markets around the world, Jenkins said.

The United States has invested more than $263.5 million in humanitarian demining and battle-area clearance in Ukraine in recent years, Jenkins said.

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Blinken Warns US Will Alter Gaza Policy if Israel Does Not Change Approach

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned on Thursday that should Israel continue its military operation in Gaza without regard to civilian harm resulting from it, the United States will make changes to its policy.

"With regard to our policy in Gaza, if we don't see the changes that we need to see, there'll be changes in our policy," Blinken said during a press briefing in Brussels, Belgium.

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Judge McAfee Denies Trump's Motion to Dismiss Georgia Case on Free Speech Grounds - Order

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee on Thursday rejected Trump's attempt to dismiss the Georgia election subversion case based on free speech.

"After considering the extensive briefing, the argument of counsel, and the indictment, the Court finds these vital constitutional protections do not reach the actions and statements alleged by the State. Nor do the statutes themselves facially violate the First Amendment. The Defendants' motions are therefore denied," McAfee said in a court order.

According to the order, the Court found no evidence or authority to suggest that the alleged speech and conduct were protected as political speech.

"The Court finds that the Defendants' expressions and speech are alleged to have been made in furtherance of criminal activity and constitute false statements knowingly and willfully made in matters within a government agency's jurisdiction which threaten to deceive and harm the government," the order added.

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

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NATO to Outline Its Role in Supporting Ukraine During July Summit in Washington - Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that the NATO summit in Washington in July will unveil the role the military bloc should play in

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supporting Ukraine in the longer term.
"We're also looking at the role that NATO can and should play over time in supporting Ukraine, and this is an ongoing discussion that we'll have in the weeks ahead, and I imagine that you'll see something at the summit when we come together in Washington in July," Blinken said during a press briefing in Brussels, Belgium.

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Blinken Says Israel Strike on World Central Kitchen Workers Must Mark Last Such Incident

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - Israel's strike on World Central Kitchen (WCK) aid workers in the Gaza Strip must mark its last civilian casualty incident, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.
"This week's horrific attack on the World Central Kitchen was not the first such incident; it must be the last," Blinken said during a press conference in Brussels.
On Monday, Israel killed seven WCK 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 US State Department called the incident unacceptable and said that the IDF must impose measures to ensure such an incident never happens again.

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Biden Tells Netanyahu US Gaza Policy to Depend on Israel Minimizing Civilian Harm

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday that the US policy on Gaza would depend on Israel's steps to mitigate civilian harm in the enclave, according to a readout of the call that happened in the wake of the Israeli strike on World Central Kitchen workers.
"President Biden emphasized that the strikes on humanitarian workers and the overall humanitarian situation are unacceptable. He made clear the need for Israel to announce and implement a series of specific, concrete, and measurable steps to address civilian harm, humanitarian suffering, and the safety of aid workers. He made clear that U.S. policy with respect to Gaza will be determined by our assessment of Israel's immediate action on these steps," the readout said.

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Georgieva Only Candidate for Position of Next IMF Managing Director - Executive Board

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva is the only candidate for the position of the next fund's chief, the IMF Executive Board said on Thursday.

"The period for submitting nominations for the position of the next Managing Director closed on Wednesday, April 3, 2024. One candidate, the current Managing Director of the IMF, Kristalina Georgieva, has been nominated," the statement said.

The board will proceed with the routine selection processes and plans to complete them by the end of April, according to the statement.

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Battle Command System Intercepts Missile Surrogate in Test Success - Northrop Grumman

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman's Integrated Battle Command System (ICBS) successfully tracked and intercepted a flying target functioning as a cruise missile in a test at White Sands Missile Range, the company announced in a press release on Thursday.

"Northrop Grumman Corporation's Integrated Battle Command System (IBCS) seamlessly fused data from a Lower Tier Air and Missile Defense Sensor (LTAMDS) to acquire, track, engage and intercept a long-range cruise missile surrogate with a PAC-3 Missile Segment Enhancement during a recent test event held at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico," the release said.

The exercise follows the success of similar live fire tests of the system last year and confirmed its ability to integrate any sensor or effector, Northrop Grumman said.

"The integration of LTAMDS and Patriot into IBCS is a crucial element in modernizing integrated air and missile defense. ... IBCS is the cornerstone of the globally connected battlespace to defeat increasingly complex threats," Northrop Grumman Vice President and General Manager for Global Battle Management and Readiness Rebecca Torzone said in the release.

IBCS has proven its ability to integrate with a wide range of sensors and shooters, including Patriot, Sentinel, F-35, CAMM, Giraffe, PAC 2 (GEM-T) and PAC 3, the release said.

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Trudeau Criticizes Netanyahu's Remarks Over IDF Strike on WCK

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday that it "doesn't just happen" for humanitarian organizations such as the World Central Kitchen

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(WCK) to become the target of military strikes.

Trudeau made the remarks as he took issue with comments made by Netanyahu on Wednesday in the wake of the attack that incidents such as that involving the Israel Defense Force (IDF) and the death of WCK aid workers are part of conflicts.

"No, it doesn't just happen, and it shouldn't just happen when you have aid workers for an extraordinary organization like World Central Kitchen, risking their lives every day in an incredibly dangerous place to deliver food to people who are experiencing a horrific humanitarian catastrophe. That is not okay, that they get that they get hit by targeted missiles," Trudeau told reporters.

The Premier had said on Wednesday that the strike by the IDF on the WCK was "absolutely unacceptable" and expressed his expectation for accountability over the tragic incident, which left a dual Canadian-US citizen dead.

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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US, NATO Discussed Benefits of Closer Security Ties With Russia in 1990's - Archive

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - Top NATO and Russian officials discussed the benefits of developing closer ties during meetings in the 1990s, according to previously secret documents published by George Washington University's National Security Archive on Thursday.

The archive released several documents, including a transcript of a February 1992 conversation between then-NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner and Chairman of the Russian parliament Ruslan Khasbulatov.

"Mr. Chairman, we have one very strong, very powerful, common interest between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance, more precisely a few common interests. I believe that we have a solid base for building relations with your country," Woerner said in the meeting.

NATO was interested and seeking to ensure that Russia "flourishes" in an effort to maintain stability, Woerner said. NATO wanted to build a new European security environment from the Ural Mountains to the Atlantic Ocean, Woerner said.

The archive also released an October 1995 memorandum to then-US President Bill Clinton from US Defense Secretary William Perry, in which the defense chief details a "breakthrough experience" with Russian Defense Secretary Pavel Grachev.

Grachev and Perry visited a joint US-Russia peacekeeping exercise in Kansas — the first such exercise in the continental United States. Grachev spoke to troops about the need to avoid a

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return to Cold War conditions and encouraged the soldiers to maintain friendships. The event was a “smashing success,” Perry said.

In February, Russian President Vladimir Putin told US journalist Tucker Carlson that Russia may have eventually joined NATO if US officials under the Clinton administration had not rejected the idea.

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Father of Canada-US Citizen Slain in Israel's WCK Attack Says It Was ‘Targeted Kill’

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – The Israeli strike that killed seven World Central Kitchen (WCK) workers including dual Canadian and US citizen Jacob Flickinger was a "targeted kill," his father told CBC News in an interview published on Thursday.

"In my mind, this was a targeted killing of aid workers who happened to be foreign," Flickinger's father was quoted as saying.

On Monday, the WCK workers were traveling "in a deconflicted zone" in two armored cars bearing 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 Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

The Israeli strike killed seven WCK workers from Australia, Poland, the United Kingdom and Palestine, along with Flickinger. The organization suspended its operations in the Gaza Strip after the deadly incident.

“Their convoy was clearly marked and they were on a well-used humanitarian route. So in my opinion it was a targeted kill,” his father John told the CBC on Wednesday.

Flickinger, who was a former member of the Canadian Armed Forces left for Gaza to join the WCK in early March where he was conducting volunteering work, the report said.

The aid worker and his wife had recently chosen to settle down in Costa-Rica, the report said. Flickinger leaves behind an 18-month-old-son, it added.

Flickinger’s mother Sylvie Labrecque further noted that her son held the strong belief that the work in which he was taking part was of an important nature, the report said, particularly because he knew of the starvation facing Gazans.

On Wednesday, in wake of the news, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that the IDF strike on the WCK was “absolutely unacceptable” and expressed his expectation for accountability over the tragic incident.

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Impact of Ukraine Conflict on Food, Energy Prices Has Eased - IMF

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WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – The impact of the Ukraine conflict on global food and energy prices has eased after an initial spike, International Monetary Fund (IMF) spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"We have seen an easing of these very significant inflation pressures globally, as central banks have responded," Kozack told reporters.

She stressed that the initial spike in food and energy prices led to a cost-of-living crisis globally. Particularly, high food prices affected low-income countries, Kozack said.

The IMF, however, still sees some impacts on the global economy, the spokesperson added.

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IMF to Discuss Ukraine Budget Support During Spring Meetings This Month - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) will hold a ministerial-level discussion on budget support for Ukraine during its upcoming Spring Meetings in Washington, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"We do expect discussions during the Spring Meetings to discuss the situation facing Ukraine and the criticality of timely disbursements of budget support for Ukraine. We expect these discussions to take place during a ministerial round-table," Kozack told reporters.

The IMF looks forward to the fund's continued engagement with Ukraine on preserving macroeconomic and financial stability, she added.

The fund also plans to cooperate with Kiev on implementing an ambitious reform program and further building foundation for a strong economy with sustainable growth, Kozack said.

The key ministerial events as part of the IMF and the World Bank Spring Meetings will take place in Washington from April 17-19.

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Russia Condemns Western Attempts to Politicize Myanmar Dossier at UNSC - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 4 (Sputnik) - Russia condemns Western attempts to politicize the Myanmar file at the UN Security Council, Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

"We condemn the attempts by Western delegations to politicize Myanmar's dossier, including through the human rights issue," Nebenzia said during the Security Council meeting on Myanmar to the members.

Nebenzia also added that if these countries wish to discuss it, they should choose more appropriate UN forums - such as the UN General Assembly's Third UN Committee which focuses on human rights, or the Human Rights Council.

Last month, Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin said that the armed forces of

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Russia and Myanmar plan to hold more than 50 military cooperation events this year, including joint operational and combat training projects.

At the beginning of the year, Myanmar authorities extended the country's state of emergency for six months, citing ongoing terrorist attacks and drug trafficking.

The extension of the state of emergency is the fifth one since the coup in February 2021, when the country's military seized power by using a constitutional mechanism of transferring powers in emergencies.

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UPDATE: US Imposes Iran-Related Sanctions on Oceanlink Maritime, Vessels – Treasury

(Updates para 2 to quote; adds paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury sanctioned on Thursday Dubai-based Iranian-linked Oceanlink Maritime DMCC and thirteen vessels affiliated with the company, according to a registry notice.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is taking additional action against Iranian military revenue generation, targeting Oceanlink Maritime DMCC for facilitating the shipment of Iranian commodities on behalf of Iran's Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) and Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL). OFAC is also identifying 13 vessels managed by Oceanlink Maritime DMCC as blocked property," the release stated.

Brian Nelson, Treasury undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, said the department was aiming to "disrupt Iran's ability to finance its terrorist proxy and partner groups and support Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine."

The Treasury alleged that Oceanlink Maritime DMCC operates a fleet of more than a dozen vessels that are deeply involved in the shipment of Iranian commodities, including on behalf of Iran's military.

The new sanctions cover 13 Oceanlink vessels, including the Anthea; Baxter; Boreas; Calypso Gas; Cape Gas; Demeter; Elsa; Glaucus; Hebe; Hecate; Meraki; Oceanus Gas; and Ourea.

Hecate recently loaded Iranian commodities valued at over $100 million via a ship-to-ship transfer from another sanctioned tanker, the Dover, on behalf of Iran's Sepehr Energy Jahan Nama Pars. The Treasury sanctioned Sepehr Energy last November for acting as a front company for the AFGS and MODAFL to sell commodities to foreign buyers.

OFAC is also updating its sanctions list to reflect that the sanctioned vessel Young Yong has been changed to Saint Light, potentially to obfuscate its identity. Saint Light also operates under the name Stellar Oracle and conducted a ship-to-ship transfer of Iranian commodities valued at over $100 million dollars on March 27 with sanctioned vessel Hawk.

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

US Trade Deficit Widens 3rd Month in Row, Largest Since April 2023

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - The US trade deficit came in just under $69 billion in February, growing for a third straight month and reaching its highest since April 2023, the Commerce Department said in a news release Thursday.

"The deficit increased from $67.6 billion in January (revised) to $68.9 billion in February, as imports increased more than exports, " the release said .

Exports rose 2.3% to $263 billion in February, data within the release showed.

While imports rose by a smaller percentage — 2.2% — their overall value was higher than exports at $331.9 billion.

That resulted in February's overall deficit being 1.9% higher than January's.

Economists on Wall Street polled by US media had predicted a deficit of $67.7 billion on the average for February — some $1.2 billion lower than what the Commerce Department reported.

The higher trending imports could be a drag on US economic growth in the first-quarter, economists said.

Gross Domestic Product growth for the January-March period has been forecast by the Atlanta Federal Reserve at 2.5%, after an official 3.4% in the fourth quarter of 2023.

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US Officials to Pressure Netherlands on Chips Equipment for China Later in April – Reports

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – Senior US officials will head to the Netherlands later in April to dissuade the Dutch government from providing sensitive chip technology to China amid a hi-tech race between Washington and Beijing, Bloomberg reported on Thursday, citing people with the knowledge of the matter.

The US delegation to the Netherlands will include Under Secretary of Commerce for Industry and Security Alan Estevez, who oversees export controls, and officials from the White House National Security Council, the report said.

In January, Bloomberg reported that the Biden administration pressured the largest Dutch semiconductor manufacturer, ASML, to block shipments of its advanced systems to China in another attempt to prevent Beijing from getting an upper hand in the semiconductor race.

At the start of 2023, the United States, the Netherlands and Japan agreed to tighten their export controls concerning the shipment of high-end chips to China in support of the Washington-led strategy to cut Beijing off from access to high-tech equipment.

In October 2022, the US imposed curbs on the export of equipment and components for producing advanced microchips to Chinese-based companies. The restrictions were expanded in October 2023, as the US Department of Commerce redefined artificial intelligence chips and introduced additional licensing requirements for their supply to more than 40 countries to avoid their resale to China.

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In March, a spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in the Philippines said that the US-imposed restrictions on exports of semiconductors to China violate the rules of the market, undermine trade orders and deal a blow to the stability of international production and supply chains, which is a "clear case of economic bullying."

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Ukraine's Economic Outlook Remains Extremely Uncertain Amid Conflict - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – The economic outlook for Ukraine remains uncertain due to the ongoing conflict and delays in external financing, International Monetary Fund (IMF) spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"Risks related to the ongoing war and delays in external financing remain exceptionally high. Timely and predictable financing is critical to sustaining hard-earned economic gains," Kozack told reporters.

She added that authorities in Kiev have made good progress toward their commitments under the IMF program.

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IMF Does Not Plan to Consider Restructuring Ukraine's Debt - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has no plans to consider the possibility of restructuring Ukraine's debt to the organization, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"Importantly, the perimeter of debt restructuring encompasses official bilateral debt and external commercial debt. It does not include multilateral debts, including, of course, those of the IMF," Kozack told reporters.

She stressed that the IMF is not considering restructuring Ukraine's debt.

Kozack pointed out that the IMF regularly analyzes Ukraine's debt structure under its financing program.

"Ukraine's debt was deemed to be sustainable on a forward-looking basis," she said.

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US State Department Official Says Afghanistan Evacuation Plans Made 'From Scratch'

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WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - US State Department official James DeHart told lawmakers that diplomats created Afghanistan evacuation plans from scratch after the collapse of the country's government in Kabul in August 2021, according to a transcribed interview released Thursday.

DeHart, who previously served as US Assistant Chief of Mission to Afghanistan and assisted in evacuation efforts, told the US House Foreign Affairs Committee that the State Department was not following any pre-planned protocols during its efforts to evacuate people from Afghanistan.

"For the part of the evacuation that the State Department was so heavily involved in, we had to, I would say, create from scratch tactical operations that would get our priority people into the airport," DeHart said in the June 2023 interview.

DeHart said he could not speak for whether the US military was following a specific evacuation plan.

Nobody predicted the situation that Afghanistan faced in August 2021, when the Taliban (under UN sanctions) took over the country, DeHart said.

The United States' military withdrawal and evacuation from Afghanistan culminated in airlifts out of Kabul International Airport. During the evacuations, a terrorist attack by the Islamic State-Khorasan terror group (banned in Russia) resulted in the deaths of 13 US soldiers and 170 Afghan civilians.

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US Approved Sale of Thousands of Bombs to Israel on Day IDF Killed WCK Workers – Reports

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration approved the sale of new weapons to Israel, including thousands of powerful bombs, on the same day the US ally killed seven World Central Kitchen (WCK) aid workers in a strike, The Washington Post reported on Thursday, citing three US officials.

The State Department confirmed the approval but noted that it came before the IDF strike on the charity organization workers, the report said.

The reported transaction gives new insight into US President Joe Biden's emotional statement that he was "outraged and heartbroken" by the tragedy, the report added.

Last week, the newspaper reported that the United States greenlighted the provision of more than 1,800 MK84 2,000-pound bombs and 500 MK82 500-pound bombs to Israel despite the continued growth of the civilian death toll in Gaza.

The United States continues to deny that Israel has violated any norms of international humanitarian law during its military operation in Gaza, and also refuses to limit the arms supply to its closest ally in the Middle East.

Monday's Israeli strike against the staff of 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 NGO said that its convoy had coordinated its movements with the IDF. The organization suspended its operations in the Gaza Strip after the deadly incident.

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US Imposes Iran-Related Sanctions on Oceanlink Maritime, Vessels – Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury sanctioned on Thursday Dubai-based Iranian-linked Oceanlink Maritime DMCC and 13 vessels affiliated with the company, according to a notice on its website.

Oceanlink Maritime DMCC is linked to Iran's Sepehr Energy Jahan Nama Pars Company, which was sanctioned last November for acting as a front company for the Iranian Armed Forces General Staff to facilitate commodities sales to foreign buyers.

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NASA Says Investigating Origins of Object That Struck Florida House

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - NASA is investigating the origins of an object that purportedly struck a home in Florida after falling from space, NASA Deputy News Chief Jennifer Dooren said in a statement shared with Sputnik.

"NASA collected an item in cooperation with the homeowner on March 28 and is analyzing the object as NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida to determine its origin. More information will be available once the analysis is complete," the statement said.

Last month, Florida resident Alejandro Otero reached out to NASA for help, claiming that a jettisoned piece of the International Space Station may have struck his home. Otero said that the object went through his roof and two floors, nearly hitting his son.

Otero also shared pictures of the object and damage to his home to social media.

The apparent near-miss incident is a warning sign for the space community, Otero said in a statement to US media.

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Elon Musk Says He'll Pay Tesla Engineers More as AI Talent War Hottens

NEW YORK CITY, April 4 (Sputnik) - Elon Musk, the billionaire technology entrepreneur and boss of electric carmaker Tesla, says he will pay his artificial intelligence engineers more to prevent them from being poached by rival companies.

"The talent war for AI is the craziest talent war I've ever seen!" Musk said in a post on X. "Tesla is increasing comp (contingent on progress milestones) of our AI engineering team."

Musk's announcement came as he lamented losing valuable talent to OpenAI — a

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groundbreaking startup he helped found but with whose pioneers he has since fallen out with.

OpenAI is "aggressively recruiting Tesla engineers with massive compensation offers," the 52-year-old billionaire ranted on X.

A user of the platform then took the opportunity to ask: "Is Tesla matching these compensation offers? Or is it more [that it is unhappy] these employees just want to switch things up, so matching [compensation] wouldn't matter?" That's when Musk responded that he will fight back with higher remuneration.

The billionaire weighed in on the war over technology talent after reports that Ethan Knight, a prominent engineer at Tesla, had decided to join xAI, another Musk company, after being approached by OpenAI.

"Ethan was going to join OpenAI, so it was either xAI or them," Musk wrote. "They have been aggressively recruiting Tesla engineers with massive compensation offers and have unfortunately been successful in a few cases."

But the trademark condescension with which Musk treated his employees also surfaced when he played down Knight's value to Tesla, after the engineer was described as a "vision chief" at the carmaker.

"Ethan is very talented, but 'vision chief' would be overstating things," Musk wrote. "There are over 200 excellent engineers in the Tesla AI/Autonomy team. Tesla's pace of progress with autonomy is accelerating."

According to an industry report from 2023, OpenAI provides the highest salaries for new PhD-holding graduates at $865,000 per annum. Tesla came in at fourth on the list with $780,000.

Musk and OpenAI boss Sam Altman were once partners and pals. They split in 2008 when Altman refused to back Musk to head the company to take on Google. Since then, tensions have been growing between them, especially after OpenAI began dominating industry attention with its powerful GPT chatbot and started an alliance with Microsoft.

Earlier this year, Musk announced his intentions to sue OpenAI and Altman for violation of commitments made when they formed the company together. OpenAI responded with claims that some of Musk's allegations were "incoherent". The countersuit also expressed concerns that a so-called discovery phase cited by Musk in his court filing could be exploited to access proprietary information on OpenAI.

OpenAI released its GPT-4 language model in March 2023, but Musk claimed "GPT-4's internal design was kept and remains a complete secret except to OpenAI—and, on information and belief, Microsoft."

Musk then decided to open-source — or make available for free use — xAI's chatbot Grok in response to decisions by OpenAI he disagreed with.

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Biden Admin Issues Rule to Protect Civil Servants as Trump Threatens Mass Firings

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WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) – The US chief federal human resources agency issued a final rule on Thursday to reinforce protections for career civil servants, making it more difficult for Donald Trump to move forward with his threat of sweeping firings if he wins the presidency in November.

"The US Office of Personnel Management (OPM) today announced a final rule that clarifies and reinforces long-standing protections and merit system principles for career civil servants," according to a release.

OPM Director Kiran Ahuja said the rule helped ensured protections for the 2.2 million career civil servants, with hirings and firings based on merit, and duties carried out based on expertise rather than political loyalty.

Among various policies, the final rule clarifies that status and civil service protections that a federal employee has accrued cannot be taken away by an involuntary reclassification of their roles.

In 2020, then-President Trump issued an executive order that sought to allow reclassifying federal employees in order to reduce their job security protections. Biden repealed the order on his third day in office.

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US Imports From Russia Increased to $287.9Mln in February - Census Bureau

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - US imported $287.9 million worth of goods from Russia in February, up from $244 million in January, according to US Census Bureau data published on Thursday.

US exports to Russia also grew from $30 million in January to $36 million in February.

The country's trade deficit with Russia totaled $465.9 million for the first two months of this year.

US-Russian trade ties have shrunk in recent years due to sanctions and export controls imposed on Moscow. The bilateral trade plummeted from $38.2 billion in 2013 to $5.2 billion in 2023, the US Trade Representative's Office said in a report last month.

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