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Israeli Strikes in Gaza Proving Part of 'Concerted Effort to Industrialize Genocide'

The Lavender system reportedly marked as many as 37,000 Palestinians as suspected militants and usually targeted their homes for possible air strikes rather than during the course of military activity.

According to a report published in +972 magazine, the Israeli army has marked tens of thousands of Gazans as suspects for assassination, using artificial intelligence (AI) targeting systems and “little human oversight.” The system being used is called “Lavender” and has “played a central role in the unprecedented bombing of Palestinians, especially during the early stages of the war,” the report notes, underscoring that Israeli officials treated outputs as if they were “human decision.”

Esteban Carrillo, a Beirut-based Ecuadorian journalist and current editor for The Cradle, joined Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Friday to discuss the current events unfolding in the Gaza Strip.

Asked about Lavender, which is designed to mark all “suspected operatives” in Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) as potential threats, Carrillo noted that genocide is a “time-consuming endeavor” and the technology used most likely came from the West. Sputnik’s Jamarl Thomas pointed out the technology is acting as a form of “industrialized killing.”

“It's not just the Lavender, they're also using facial recognition cameras in Gaza to pick out people who they consider to be Hamas," Carrillo said. "Because, if you go by the numbers provided by Tel Aviv, every man, adult male in Gaza who has been killed is a terrorist.”

“If you were killed in Gaza, you are a terrorist. This is what an Israeli reserve officer told Haaretz last week,” he added. “He said that a terrorist is anybody who gets killed in the field. They use these facial recognition cameras, they use AI to arrest, to kidnap Palestinian men, Palestinian women, I'm sure as well, children, to torture them, to keep them in detention.”

“And we need to really keep in mind that a lot of Western tech companies are helping Israel do this. Google, Microsoft, they have contracts with the Israeli army, with the Israeli government to provide them with this technology,” said Carrillo. “This is Western aid. Just like the weapons, just like the political cover.”

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 Israeli forces who had been given prior notice of their presence.

Following the fatal strike, US President Joe Biden warned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday that any future support from the US is dependent on the protection of civilians and aid workers in Gaza. It proved the first time the US threatened to pull support from Israel.

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To date, the killing of over 30,000 Palestinians has not influenced the Biden administration to take such action with Israel. However, the US tune changed as an American citizen was among those killed.

Not long after a highly-anticipated meeting between Biden and Netanyahu, the Israeli leader announced additional humanitarian aid corridors would be opened.

“Joe Biden, according to all of these reports, he gave Netanyahu an ultimatum,” said Carrillo. “There's no specificity about what the ultimatum actually said. Was he thinking about weapons? Was he talking about a political cover that the US has afforded Israel? We can only assume it might be the two things. Because as you said, one American gets killed, right? The reality is [a few] white, Europeans, Australians, Polish, get killed and all of a sudden the entire world decides that maybe Israel is actually doing crimes against humanity."

“Israel, today, said they would temporarily open another land crossing into Gaza, which is something we have been talking about for months. If you want more humanitarian aid into Gaza, open more crossings because hundreds of trucks are waiting to enter and protect humanitarian workers. So, yes, there's large condemnation about the deaths of these seven people,” he continued.

“But, because they are not Palestinian, because they are not Arab, all of a sudden their lives matter more? That, to me, is what is the biggest story here in the end.”

“Gaza, a media office this week updated the death toll to have already surpassed 33,000, including 7,000 missing over the past six months. So you're probably looking at a death toll of likely 40,000,” said Carrillo.

US media reported that the Biden administration recently authorized a thousand MK-82 bombs in the latest arms shipment to Israel. Though it's reported the shipment was approved before the Israeli strike on the aid convoy, Carrillo noted politicians are simply “clutching their pearls” and saying “all the right things" as weapons continue to flow.

“Following the attack,” said Carrillo. “There was a shipment of aid that was coming from Cyprus that was turned around in the Mediterranean Sea. Because this is the Israeli policy, it's like when they were laying siege to Al-Shifa hospital. You know, the question was, why Al-Shifa hospital? Why hospitals?”

“They want you to believe that the hospitals are these big military barracks. They're full of Hamas and PIJ and whoever else. And, in reality, the policy of what's happening in Israel, in Gaza is to make the Strip uninhabitable. Do not allow aid in, just create a catastrophe of such a degree that you're going to force the expulsion of 2 million Gazans.”

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NATO's 'Losing War' and an Empty Promise to Ukraine

Foreign ministers of NATO member states met in Brussels this week to mark the alliance’s seventh anniversary and prepare for their July summit in Washington. During the meeting, participants discussed plans to expand their support for Ukraine.

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US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated Thursday that Ukraine will eventually join NATO. It was the same message the US has been repeating since 2008, although the alliance has not revealed a concrete timeline for Ukraine's accession.

US Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (often referred to as MTG) and US Senator JD Vance took to social media to decry Blinken's comments as irresponsible and dangerous, saying inviting Ukraine to join NATO during a war is to "invite our nation to war."

KJ Noh, a scholar, educator and journalist and member of Veterans for Peace, joined Sputnik's Political Misfits on Friday to discuss these developments. Sputnik's Michelle Witte asked Noh what would happen if Republicans decided that opposing NATO expansion is a winning political message.

"I think it would signal the end of NATO," answered Noh. "I mean, it's an interesting situation because this entire war was provoked on the idea that Ukraine would eventually join NATO. So they can't, from this administration, can't abandon the concept completely."

"But let's come back to MTG and JD Vance. You know, they are not the most informed people in the political classes, they're clearly pandering to the base," he claimed. "And as I said if you recall on this show, the US public tends to reflexively support most US wars initiated by their elites until they start losing and then they stop supporting them."

"I think it has to do with the fact that they don't believe it's a winning proposition to be associated with NATO, which is currently losing a war, and this is a NATO war. And, of course, it also has to do with the fact that [former President Donald] Trump himself has a very mercantile, business view of NATO. He sees them as free riders on the American military, and he wants the quid pro quo."

"Clearly there is popular opposition to the Ukraine war. Clearly the US does not like to lose wars or to be associated with losing wars. And clearly they don't want to be associated with a losing war that Biden is responsible for," Noh concluded.

Former President Donald Trump said recently he would "100%" keep the US in NATO should he return to the Oval Office, as long as European countries pay their "fair share" and "play fair." The former president told British media the US pays for "90% of NATO," adding that it is the "most unfair thing."

NATO estimates that for 2023 Poland was actually the top spender and allocated 3.9% of its GDP to the alliance, which was more than twice the amount it had spent in 2022. In contrast, the US spent 3.5% of its GDP – about the same amount it has been spending for the last decade.

However, only 35% of NATO member states meet the alliance's spending targets on defense, prompting criticism from Trump and aligned "America First" conservatives. Proposals to resurrect European countries' weakened defense industries have been greeted with skepticism as the continent is rocked by protests over economic concerns.

Witte asked Noh if the NATO summit slated for July will include a concrete plan to incorporate Ukraine into NATO.

"I don't see it yet," answered Noh. "Anything is possible. But I think right now they're really in the process of damage control. Clearly NATO is losing. And this is, as I said, a NATO war. And they want to see if they can do a controlled demolition."

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“We've sunk these costs on. And so we have to keep on sinking into more costs. I don't think the European population will stand for it, [but] the ruling elite seems still to be stuck on this. So I think it is an incredible debacle," he added.
"I think they also want to pivot again to the Pacific, and they want NATO to be involved there. And so I think they're trying to do their best to see if they can get their hands off and wipe them clean of this tar baby that is rapidly showing diminishing returns.”

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US Uses Legislative Power to Punish Countries That Escaped Their ‘Imperialist’ Control

Cuban-American lawmakers sponsored a bill preventing the Biden administration from removing Cuba from a list of state sponsors of terrorism until they form a multi-party democracy.
Cuban-American members of the US House of Representatives Mario Díaz-Balart (R-FL) and María Elvira Salazar (R-FL) have proposed new sanctions against Cuba reaffirming the country's designation as an alleged state sponsor of terrorism.
According to a report published by Responsible Statecraft, the move would block assistance to the country’s private sector and penalize nations that host Cuban medical missions, accusing them of perpetuating “modern slavery.”
The legislation prohibits the Biden administration from supporting Cuba’s private sector, a US policy under Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden. Rep. Salazar called the private sector a “myth," arguing that relatives of government officials own some of the businesses.
"Díaz-Balart forced the Biden administration to abandon plans to assist the Cuban private sector last year by threatening to block aid for Ukraine," reported the article.
Pan-Africanist organizer Netfa Freeman and Yolian Ogbu, a member of the Black Alliance for Peace and Horn of Africa Pan-Africans for Liberation and Solidarity, joined Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program Friday to discuss the development. Sputnik’s Garland Nixon likened the US' actions against Cuba to its role Haiti, suggesting the US cannot forgive either country for escaping US imperialism.
“I would dare say that Cuba has been able to establish one of the most revolutionary socialist projects in the world, and have been able to exercise degrees of self-determination and popular democracy,” Freeman insisted. “A lot of people don't see Cuba because of the propaganda [as a] democracy. And I would venture to say that Cuba's one of the most democratic places on the face of the earth.”
“The [US] have sanctions now that are blocking assistance to Cuba's private sector, which they've always tried to buttress, on the grounds that there is no private sector, that everything is owned by Cuba,” he added.
“Where the US and the Western countries are always sending occupation forces and creating war, Cuba sends doctors and teachers for selfless missions.”
“The sanctions they're trying to impose, sanctions that affect other countries, say that they'd be aiding 'modern slavery,'" Freeman explained. "They're trying to say that their doctors are forced to do it, and... they constitute modern-day slaves, and anyone who aids this is aiding slavery.

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The world can see that the US is the biggest supporter of terrorism with what they've done in Syria, in Libya, to overthrow that country, and Cuba has done nothing."
Ogbu agreed with the analysis, noting that hostility between the United States and the communist-ruled island goes back decades.
"Lawmakers and congressional members that already have a particular gripe against Cuba continue to put up these ridiculous bills through to Congress," the activist claimed. "And it goes back to a lot of this anti-communist rhetoric and consciousness and thinking in this country that is so easy because we're so propagandized to just believe many of the lies about Cuba."
"But as it relates to Haiti, Haiti is in a particular position where it has been fighting back for so long yet has been infiltrated at the same time and is going through such an incredible crisis in imperialism as well. So yes, for many of those reasons Cuba and Haiti are very similar, but Cuba has been able to withstand a lot of that pressure despite some of those embargo effects."
Haiti held democratic elections in 1990 but the US opposed Haitians' choice of populist leaders who wanted to make Haiti more equitable.
In 2011 — following Haiti's devastating earthquake the year prior — the US interfered in Haiti's presidential election by accusing their preferred candidate Michel Martelly's opponents of fraud. The US then backed Martelly's successor Jovenel Moïse until his assassination in 2021, after which they supported Ariel Henry, a chronically unpopular "acting" president.
Former US Representative Andy Levin writes that as the US supported Henry, Haiti descended first into "kleptocracy, then into systematic gangsterization and lawlessness, and finally into complete chaos — until the whole house of cards came crashing down last month. As gangs united against the government and prevented Henry's plane from landing at the Port-au-Prince airport, even the United States had to concede that its handpicked "leader" was no longer tenable."
The former US politician then described what a "real democracy" would look like — unsurprisingly, it resembles what US imperialists often lambast as "socialist propaganda."
"Real democracy in Haiti would mean the poor mass of Haitians who comprise the majority of the population would be in the driver's seat, electing governments that carry out things they want — like much higher wages, universal free education, and infrastructure development that assists small agricultural producers."

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Israel Claims to Open Erez Land Crossing Following Phone Call with Biden

The call marks the latest purported attempt by the Biden Administration to pressure Israel to reduce civilian casualties in Gaza. Nearly 33,000 Palestinians have been killed since hostilities began in October according to local health authorities.
Israel said the country will temporarily open its Erez land crossing into Gaza for humanitarian aid after a phone call between US President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week, but questions remain over the United States' willingness to seriously challenge its Middle Eastern ally.

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The US president reportedly threatened to withhold support during the call Thursday and "underscored that an immediate ceasefire is essential to stabilize and improve the humanitarian situation and protect innocent civilians," the White House said. "If we don't see the changes that we need to see, there'll be changes in our policy," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters.

Following Biden's call with Netanyahu, Israel also announced it would allow the Ashdod port to be used to process aid shipments through another land border crossing.

Despite the threat the White House has not yet stated it will cease supplying their ally with weapons.

When asked about the supply of lethal aid to Israel becoming "conditional," US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said the US wants to see some "real changes on the Israeli side" but insisted he would not "preview decisions that haven't been made yet".

Aaron David Miller, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said it is unlikely Biden will enforce any "red lines" regarding the supply of arms to Israel.

Biden's conversation with Netanyahu was prompted by the killing of seven humanitarian workers from the World Central Kitchen (WCK), a charity headquartered in Washington, DC.

One of the deceased aid workers was an American-Canadian citizen whose family members have reached out to media outlets to condemn his death as a murder and demand answersfrom Biden.

Among the other victims were three UK citizens, one Australian citizen, one Polish citizen, and a Palestinian driver.

José Andrés, the celebrity chef who founded WCK, accused Israel of deliberately targeting their convoy, claiming the vehicles were marked with their logo and the IDF was aware of the workers' whereabouts. He also said the number of strikes by the Israeli military matched the number of vehicles that were traveling over a distance of at least 1.5 kilometers.

"They were targeting us in a deconflicting zone, in an area controlled by the IDF. They knew that it was our teams moving on that road... with three cars," he added.

The Biden White House previously announced sanctions on a handful of Israeli West Bank settlers in a rare concrete measure against its Middle Eastern ally, but the policy was recently walked back amid opposition from Israel's treasury chief.

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Solar Eclipse May Be Eclipsed by Bad Weather As Cities Cash in on Celestial Show

On Monday, a total solar eclipse will stretch across North America. With the phenomenon not occurring again until summer 2044, those wishing to see the spectacle are willing to spend a large chunk of change to do so, even if the viewing time only last a little over four minutes.

Some US hotels are dramatically raising prices and they all have one thing in common: they're in the perfect position for viewing a total solar eclipse. But some guests may end up overpaying for an experience hampered by clouds and rain.

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According to a recent report, one “modest” hotel room in Saranac Lake, New York, is charging more than $600 for rooms even though their rates are normally as low as $99. A Super 8 motel in Illinois that usually charges $95 a night is charging $950 for a Sunday through Tuesday stay. Meanwhile, the cost of a two-night stay at a more prestigious hotel like the Ritz-Carlton in Dallas is currently $7,600 for April 7-9; a week later that cost will be just $1,329.

Another hotel in Carbondale, Illinois, has sold out its rooms for the dates the total eclipse will be visible (April 7 and 8). The hotel said they had been sold out for “months” and also bumped up their prices in view of the high demand.

And a travel agency said they had to rearrange lodging for more than 150 clients after hotel bookings they made two years earlier, at two Buffalo hotels, were canceled. Those rooms were $129 at the time and were canceled and resold for $450 or more. Chris Donnelly, the owner of Sugar Tours, said it was “total price gouging”.

“Of course this was all about the profits,” Donnelly said. “I have a feeling that they never even entered our rooms into the system and just sold them and waited until 30 days prior to let us know. Thirty years in the business, have never had this happen.”

Manga Hotel Group, which owns the Aloft Buffalo Airport and Hampton Inn & Suites Buffalo Airport said the room cancellations were due to a mistake of overbooking and that the canceled rooms were not resold as new reservations.

However, the region’s tourism bureau shot back at the hotel group and said it “does not condone this business practice of canceling room bookings”, adding that it is “shameful that longtime customers and new visitors are being treated this way."

“Putting greed before the visitor’s experience and the destination’s reputation is unacceptable,” said Patrick Kaler, president and CEO of the bureau Visit Buffalo Niagara.

According to an online legal forum, high prices do not always equate to price gouging. Retailers are allowed to raise the price of their products to match a supply and demand change. But price gouging is more specific to something that is an emergency, such as a pandemic or a natural disaster. US federal laws do not address price gouging, but some state laws do.

Airfare has also increased to astronomical levels, with flights to Dallas-Fort Worth landing on the day of the eclipse costing $1,900. With prices like these, as much as $1 billion could be pumped into the economies of small towns stretching from Texas to Maine as tourists pay up for the celestial event.

For viewing the solar eclipse, the path of totality will stretch across a 115-mile length of land that will cover the US cities of Dallas, Texas; Idabel, Oklahoma; Little Rock, Arkansas; Poplar Bluff, Missouri; Paducah, Kentucky; Carbondale, Illinois; Evansville, Indiana; Cleveland, Ohio; Erie, Pennsylvania; Buffalo, New York; Burlington, Vermont; and Caribou, Maine.

Montreal and the Mexican cities of Mazatlán and Torreón will also be briefly enshrouded in darkness.

However, poor weather could dampen the spirit of those hoping to view the total eclipse. For the cities of Dallas, Cleveland and Buffalo, cloudy skies are a possibility. But one meteorologist noted that clouds are “one of the most difficult weather parameters to forecast, even just a few days ahead of time.”

Parts of Maine have the best chance of viewing the event with rare April temperatures peaking in the high 50s (Fahrenheit) on Monday and plenty of sun exposure. But these parts of Northern

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New England are the most rural and least populated, so traveling and staying in the area could be difficult.

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Greta Thunberg Pads Arrest Record Twice in One Day at Protest in The Hague

The protest group Extinction Rebellion said they have blocked a highway in the Netherlands more than 35 times in protest of fossil-fuel subsidies.
Greta Thunberg, a 21-year-old climate activist, was reportedly detained twice by police after she helped block roads near the Dutch parliament Saturday. The Swedish activist was taking part in a demonstration in The Hague for several hours this weekend.
Thunberg was arrested the first time by local police and detained for a short time along with other protesters who tried to block a major highway. She was released and then joined another small group of protesters who were blocking a different road leading to the railway station. She was then detained a second time.
The protestors under the umbrella of the group Extinction Rebellion attempted to block the A12 highway. Police at first prevented the activists from blocking the thoroughfare, however a small group succeeded in breaking away and subsequently took part in a sit-in on a main road.
The group said they were planning to block the highway for the 37th time in an effort to put pressure on the Dutch government ahead of a planned debate on fossil fuels scheduled for June.
A video posted online shows Thunberg being detained by police.
“We are here because we’re facing an existential crisis,” Thunberg says in the video. “We are in a planetary emergency, and we are not going to stand by and let people lose their lives and livelihood and, of course, become climate refugees when we can do something.”
Thunberg’s popularity first grew in 2018 after she began staging weekly protests outside the Swedish parliament. She has been fined repeatedly in Sweden and the UK for civil disobedience in connection with protests.

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Ukraine Reportedly Lobbying to Ban Russian Citizens From EU Flights

Reports have found cases since 2023 of Russian citizens being taken off connecting flights by European airlines without explanation. The cases reportedly involved Russian tourists traveling to Latin America over EU airspace, RT reported.
Ukraine is pushing the European Union (EU) to close its airspace to Russian and Belarusian nationals, the country’s Prime Minister Denis Shmigal said according to the news outlet Unian.

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Shmigal claimed the goal of doing so would be to disrupt Moscow's logistics while causing discomfort to Russian tourists.
"Our idea is that Russian businesses and Russian tourists shouldn't be able to comfortably use the EU's airspace," said Shmigal. "We have discussed with partners the closure of transit for any flights to Russia and from Russia."
Following Russia's military operation in Ukraine, governments in the US, Britain, Canada and Europe banned Russian aircraft from flying over their airspace.
The EU, US and other allies of Ukraine have also put in place sanctions affecting Russian carriers' ability to purchase new jets and spare parts for Western-made aircrafts already in use.
Russian President Vladimir Putin in turn banned the US and Ukrainian allies from flying over Russian skies.
US airlines have begun a lobbying campaign on Capitol Hill to address their major loss in business to foreign competitors who are able to transport passengers between the US and Asia more quickly and cheaply.

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US Prepares for Trillion Cicadas to Emerge, Some Carrying STD-Like Fungus

Luckily cicadas are harmless – they don't bite or sting, nor do they carry disease. But because they are terrible fliers and even worse at landing, they could end up creating a large amount of debris.
The US is preparing to experience trillions of cicadas surfacing across as many as 16 states in the country this year. These pudgy insects with bulging orange eyes are known for their extraordinary, highly synchronized life cycles. Unlike annual cicadas, periodical cicadas – of which there are just 10 species – spend most of their lives in larval form, buried beneath the soil and feeding on plant root fluid.
But this year their emergence will be a dramatic spectacle as two groups of cicadas are expected to erupt from the earth simultaneously for the first time in several hundred years. The broods are known as Brood XIX and Brood XII. Their joint appearance is rare as this concurrent event has not happened since 1803 and won't occur again for another 221 years.
Brood XIX is the largest of all periodical cicada groups and they emerge after being dormant for 13 years underground, while Brood XII is a smaller group that appears every 17 years. Trillions of cicadas are expected to burst out of the earth in as many as 16 states.
The cicadas will emerge in central North Carolina, eastern Tennessee, north Arkansas, southern Missouri, Southern Illinois and western Kentucky. The cicadas will then appear throughout central and northern Missouri and Illinois, northwestern Indiana, southern Wisconsin and eastern Iowa.
While the bugs are harmless, the collective sound of the males' persistent mating songs will create an extraordinary – and hard to ignore – noise.

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According to John Cooley, an entomologist at the University of Connecticut, the cacophony of cicada mating calls will create a loud, haunting mix of sizzling noise, buzz-click sounds and droning that "can be pushing 120 decibels if you're right inside that chorus."
"That's sort of like getting too close to a jet engine," he adds.
The cicada's swarm is predicted to begin in late April and will last as long as six weeks. In most cases the cicadas will only live about a month before dying near where they first emerged, said Floyd W. Shockley, an entomologist and collections manager at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. Shockley adds the cicadas' dead bodies will build up to such a point that they will have to be removed.
“In urban areas, there will be sufficient numbers to necessitate removal of their bodies,” Shockley said. “But rather than throwing in the trash or cleaning up with street sweepers, people should consider them basically free fertilizer for the plants in their gardens and natural areas.”
Live cicadas are also beneficial to the environment according to one report. They act as natural tree gardeners and the holes they leave behind when they emerge help aerate the soil and allow for rainwater to get underground.
“The forest is where they live,” explained Cooley. “They are a part of the forest. Don’t try to kill them. Don’t try to spray insecticide, all that kind of thing. That’s just going to end badly because there are more than you could possibly kill with insecticide. You’d end up killing everything.”
There is one other aspect of “cicada-geddon” worth noting: some of the bugs will be infected by a sexually transmitted fungus that makes them hypersexual. The fungal pathogen is called Massospora cicadina and it causes the backside of adult cicadas’ abdomens to open up. A chalky white plug erupts and takes over their bodies, making their genitals fall off.
"The cicada continues to participate in normal activities, like it would if it was healthy," said Matthew Kasson, an associate professor of Mycology and Forest Pathology at West Virginia University. "Like it tries to mate, it flies around, it walks on plants. Yet, a third of its body has been replaced by fungus. That's really kind of bizarre."
Kasson says the fungus acts as a type of amphetamine and gives the bugs their stamina.
"But there's also something else unusual about it," he said. "There's this hypersexualized behavior. So, males for example, they'll continue to try and mate with females – unsuccessfully, because again, their back end is a fungus. But they'll also pretend to be females to get males to come to them. And that doubles the number of cicadas that an infected individual comes in contact with."
While researchers believe the fungus is transmitted sexually, they aren’t sure of where the fungus originates. But they suspect that when the cicadas die the spores get into the soil and infect unhatched cicadas underground. For now just less than 5% of the cicadas are infected with the fungus.

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IAEA Chief Calls Attack on Zaporozhye Nuclear Plant Violation of Security Principles

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi characterized the recent drone attack on the Zaporozhye nuclear power plant (ZNPP) as a violation of nuclear security principles and called for an end to such "reckless attacks" Sunday.

The IAEA confirmed minor damage to the sixth power unit of the plant as a result of the drone attacks.

"This is a clear violation of the basic principles for protecting Europe's largest [nuclear power plant]. Such reckless attacks significantly increase the risk of a major nuclear accident and must cease immediately," Grossi was quoted as saying in the IAEA statement.

Earlier in the day, Ukrainian kamikaze drones attacked the territory of the power station immediately after an inspection carried out by IAEA experts, the plant's press service said. The attack left three of the facility's workers injured, with one of them sustaining serious injuries, Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom said.

The IAEA had previously confirmed damage to the plant in a separate statement. "IAEA experts confirmed physical impact of drone attacks at ZNPP today, incl. at 1 of its 6 reactors," the agency said. "One casualty reported. Damage at unit 6 has not compromised nuclear safety, but this is a serious incident with potential to undermine integrity of the reactor's containment system."

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the international community must respond to Ukraine's attack, calling it "an act of nuclear terrorism."

"The world community must realize and react to an act of nuclear terrorism on the part of the Kiev regime," Zakharova said on Telegram.

The Zaporozhye nuclear plant, constructed in the 1980s by the Soviet Union, is Europe's largest and one of the world's largest. The massive power station is reportedly now completely reliant on a single 750-kilowatt line for external power after previous attacks. A connection to outside electricity is necessary to ensure the plant is able to cool its reactors – an interruption in the delivery of power could precipitate a catastrophic meltdown.

Russia took control of the sensitive asset in March 2022 and it has endured Ukrainian fire ever since. Ukrainian drones, missiles, and artillery have all been used against the plant by Kiev, which has repeatedly attempted to reassert control.

Kiev claims Russia is storing weapons at the power station and using it as cover to attack Ukrainian troops. Observers worry Ukraine may create a disaster at the plant, blaming Russia and spoiling newly-Russian territory. Kiev has repeatedly employed US-provided cluster munitions during fighting in the Donbass, raising the prospect of unexploded bomblets creating a hazard for decades to come.

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FAA Investigating Boeing 737 That Lost Engine Cover During Takeoff

A Southwest Airlines flight had to return to Denver International Airport after it lost an engine cowling that struck a wing flap during take off, according to the US Federal Aviation Administration.

Flight 3695 was on its way to Houston's William P. Hobby Airport Sunday when it was forced to return to its gate at Denver, and did so safely at 8:15 AM local time, said the FAA. Customers then transferred to a different aircraft and arrived at their destination three hours late.

One passenger said the engine cowling "peeled off within the first 10 minutes" of the flight. Another person simply said of the plane part "it all blew away".

"We all felt kind of a bump, a jolt, and I looked out the window because I love window seats, and there it was," the passenger said.

"People in the exit row across from me started yelling up to the flight attendants and showed them the damage," another passenger said, adding that the experience was "frightening".

Southwest said its maintenance crew would review the aircraft, which had reached an altitude of about 10,000 feet when one of the engine cowlings peeled off. The FAA also said it will investigate the incident.

"We apologize for the inconvenience of their delay but place our highest priority on ultimate safety for our Customers and Employees," said Southwest in a statement. They added that no injuries were reported.

It's the latest incident in a series of mechanical issues creating a PR headache for Boeing. On January 5, a door plug panel tore off a new Alaska Airlines 737 MAX 9 at 16,000 feet. Though the situation could have been tragic, no one was seriously injured.

The FAA is also investigating a separate Southwest incident that occurred in March when one of its flights strayed off course and flew close to the air traffic control tower at LaGuardia Airport while attempting to land.

Boeing CEO Dave Calhoun announced last month that he would step down by the end of the year. Boeing also replaced its chairman and chief executive of its commercial plane unit.

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Strengthened Russia-DPRK Relations Signal New World Beyond US Hegemony

The two countries' cooperation is yet another sign of an emerging multipolar world order, says one analyst.

Russia and North Korea will develop mutually beneficial cooperation that will not be subject to illegal pressure from the West, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said last September.

During his visit to Pyongyang in October, Lavrov and his North Korean counterpart decided to intensify cooperation, particularly in turnover volume. The foreign ministers also exchanged views on the situation on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia and reaffirmed their determination to resist the hegemonic aspirations of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region.

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Last fall, Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met at the Vostochny cosmodrome to discuss possible joint space projects, options for cooperation in the space sector, namely in satellite construction. Korean state media reported that Putin and Kim Jong Un "outlined points of further cooperation to jointly protect sovereignty and develop interests of both countries, regional and global peace and security, and international justice."
"The Biden administration is starting to come to grips with the fact that the rules-based international order that they had been using to control what was a singularity, the American hegemony, is collapsing around them," said former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter this week, claiming the enhanced relations between the two countries are yet another sign of an emerging multipolar world order. Ritter appeared on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program to discuss the development with host Garland Nixon.
"This goes beyond simply bilateral relations between Russia and North Korea," said the former US Marine Corps intelligence officer. "Russia together with China, they're putting down a marker that says that which was normal in the past is no longer normal today. That the rules-based international order that was used to constrain North Korea, to punish North Korea, to weaken North Korea is not a viable system and that Russia is not going to play that game anymore."
Ritter claimed one indication of this new reality is Russia's refusal to help enforce economic pressure against the DPRK. Moscow recently vetoed an extension of a UN enforcement body set up to monitor Pyongyang's compliance with US-backed sanctions.
Russian UN ambassador Vassily Nebenzia criticized the mechanism at the time, claiming it was subject to US political pressure. "Its work is increasingly being reduced to playing into the hands of Western approaches, reprinting biased information and analyzing newspaper headlines and poor quality photos," said Nebenzia.
Member states could still pursue individual efforts to enforce the sanctions, said Ritter, but such action could be more easily blocked, leading to "the death of sanctions."
"Russia will not participate in the sanctioning regime and nor will China," he added. "This has opened up relations between Russia and North Korea, but it's more than that because Russia now is part of this new economic reality in the post-sanctioning of Russian environment that has Russia part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and part of the BRICS forum."
"This represents the end of North Korea's isolation," the expert concluded.

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Slovakia Committed to Humanitarian Aid, Not Bombs, for Ukraine - Foreign Minister

BRATISLAVA (Sputnik) - The government of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico continued to chart an independent course on the Donbass Crisis Friday by insisting the country would not contribute towards arms provisions in a proposed NATO fund for Ukraine.
Slovakian Foreign Minister Juraj Blanar said the initiative to create a Ukraine aid fund requires detailed study, but if the republic supports it, it will be in areas not related to arms supply.
Previously NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg proposed creating a contribution fund to finance Ukraine over five years in the amount of $100 billion as part of a package of documents

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that will be signed at the alliance's July summit in Washington. The move is seen as a hedge against the prospect of a second Donald Trump presidency in the United States; observers speculate Trump would end US support for Ukraine and possibly reduce funding for NATO.

"A proposal was presented. These were three very important areas, but they are still at an early stage and it would be premature to express any position on them," Blanar told reporters. "At the end of the discussion, the [NATO] Secretary General stated that despite the enormous support from partners in the form of lethal and non-lethal systems, this is not enough, Ukraine needs more [support]."

"It is premature to talk about details, but our position, which we will certainly promote, is that even if we support these initiatives, [the support] will not relate to arms supplies, because we have specifically indicated that we will not support arms supplies from the Slovak army depots or from the republic's budget," he added.

Blanar said Slovakia will continue to assist Ukraine in the humanitarian sphere by supplying mine clearance systems, as well as partnering with Kiev on the implementation of joint civilian projects.

Russia previously issued a statement to NATO over arms supplies to Ukraine, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov saying any cargo containing weapons for the country would become a legitimate target for Russia. The Kremlin said propping up Ukraine with weapons from the West does not contribute to the success of Russia-Ukraine talks.

Lavrov said the United States and NATO are directly involved in the conflict in the Donbass, "not only through supplying weapons, but also by training personnel... in the territory of Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and other countries."

Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico rejected European interference in the Donbass conflict recently, urging Slovakia's congress to pass a resolution against the sending of troops to Ukraine.

"Some European politicians talk about the need to directly participate in the war in Ukraine against Russia with such intensity that I am beginning to take it as a reality," said the leader in an apparent reference to French President Emmanuel Macron. "And that's why I would consider it right if the National Council takes a decision as quickly as possible that it does not agree with such a military adventure."

Fico, often considered a voice of dissent against the increasingly Russophobic tilt of the European Union, took the opportunity to criticize the tenor of debate surrounding the subject. "If you are in favor of peace and stopping the killing of Slavs, you are Putin's man," Fico observed, responding to frequent characterizations of himself as an ally of the Russian president. "If you are in favor of killing and involving the EU and NATO in the war in Ukraine, you are in the right place."

The Prime Minister claimed there is no military solution to the Donbass conflict and urged negotiations for a peaceful settlement. He also promised the cooperation of Slovakia in efforts to provide Ukraine with humanitarian aid at the time.

"I refuse to have an iron curtain built between the EU and the Russian Federation," said Fico in separate remarks previously.

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Israeli Strikes in Gaza Proving Part of 'Concerted Effort to Industrialize Genocide'

The Lavender system reportedly marked as many as 37,000 Palestinians as suspected militants and usually targeted their homes for possible air strikes rather than during the course of military activity.

According to a report published in +972 magazine, the Israeli army has marked tens of thousands of Gazans as suspects for assassination, using artificial intelligence (AI) targeting systems and “little human oversight.” The system being used is called “Lavender” and has “played a central role in the unprecedented bombing of Palestinians, especially during the early stages of the war,” the report notes, underscoring that Israeli officials treated outputs as if they were “human decision.”

Esteban Carrillo, a Beirut-based Ecuadorian journalist and current editor for The Cradle, joined Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Friday to discuss the current events unfolding in the Gaza Strip.

Asked about Lavender, which is designed to mark all “suspected operatives” in Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) as potential threats, Carrillo noted that genocide is a “time-consuming endeavor” and the technology used most likely came from the West. Sputnik’s Jamarl Thomas pointed out the technology is acting as a form of “industrialized killing.”

“It's not just the Lavender, they're also using facial recognition cameras in Gaza to pick out people who they consider to be Hamas," Carrillo said. "Because, if you go by the numbers provided by Tel Aviv, every man, adult male in Gaza who has been killed is a terrorist.”

“If you were killed in Gaza, you are a terrorist. This is what an Israeli reserve officer told Haaretz last week,” he added. “He said that a terrorist is anybody who gets killed in the field. They use these facial recognition cameras, they use AI to arrest, to kidnap Palestinian men, Palestinian women, I'm sure as well, children, to torture them, to keep them in detention.”

“And we need to really keep in mind that a lot of Western tech companies are helping Israel do this. Google, Microsoft, they have contracts with the Israeli army, with the Israeli government to provide them with this technology,” said Carrillo. “This is Western aid. Just like the weapons, just like the political cover.”

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 Israeli forces who had been given prior notice of their presence.

Following the fatal strike, US President Joe Biden warned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday that any future support from the US is dependent on the protection of civilians and aid workers in Gaza. It proved the first time the US threatened to pull support from Israel.

To date, the killing of over 30,000 Palestinians has not influenced the Biden administration to take such action with Israel. However, the US tune changed as an American citizen was among those killed.

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Not long after a highly-anticipated meeting between Biden and Netanyahu, the Israeli leader announced additional humanitarian aid corridors would be opened.

“Joe Biden, according to all of these reports, he gave Netanyahu an ultimatum,” said Carrillo. “There's no specificity about what the ultimatum actually said. Was he thinking about weapons? Was he talking about a political cover that the US has afforded Israel? We can only assume it might be the two things. Because as you said, one American gets killed, right? The reality is [a few] white, Europeans, Australians, Polish, get killed and all of a sudden the entire world decides that maybe Israel is actually doing crimes against humanity."

“Israel, today, said they would temporarily open another land crossing into Gaza, which is something we have been talking about for months. If you want more humanitarian aid into Gaza, open more crossings because hundreds of trucks are waiting to enter and protect humanitarian workers. So, yes, there's large condemnation about the deaths of these seven people,” he continued.

“But, because they are not Palestinian, because they are not Arab, all of a sudden their lives matter more? That, to me, is what is the biggest story here in the end.”

“Gaza, a media office this week updated the death toll to have already surpassed 33,000, including 7,000 missing over the past six months. So you're probably looking at a death toll of likely 40,000,” said Carrillo.

US media reported that the Biden administration recently authorized a thousand MK-82 bombs in the latest arms shipment to Israel. Though it's reported the shipment was approved before the Israeli strike on the aid convoy, Carrillo noted politicians are simply “clutching their pearls” and saying “all the right things" as weapons continue to flow.

“Following the attack,” said Carrillo. “There was a shipment of aid that was coming from Cyprus that was turned around in the Mediterranean Sea. Because this is the Israeli policy, it's like when they were laying siege to Al-Shifa hospital. You know, the question was, why Al-Shifa hospital? Why hospitals?”

“They want you to believe that the hospitals are these big military barracks. They're full of Hamas and PIJ and whoever else. And, in reality, the policy of what's happening in Israel, in Gaza is to make the Strip uninhabitable. Do not allow aid in, just create a catastrophe of such a degree that you're going to force the expulsion of 2 million Gazans.”

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NATO's 'Losing War' and an Empty Promise to Ukraine

Foreign ministers of NATO member states met in Brussels this week to mark the alliance’s seventh anniversary and prepare for their July summit in Washington. During the meeting, participants discussed plans to expand their support for Ukraine.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated Thursday that Ukraine will eventually join NATO. It was the same message the US has been repeating since 2008, although the alliance has not revealed a concrete timeline for Ukraine's accession.

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US Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (often referred to as MTG) and US Senator JD Vance took to social media to decry Blinken's comments as irresponsible and dangerous, saying inviting Ukraine to join NATO during a war is to "invite our nation to war."

KJ Noh, a scholar, educator and journalist and member of Veterans for Peace, joined Sputnik's Political Misfits on Friday to discuss these developments. Sputnik's Michelle Witte asked Noh what would happen if Republicans decided that opposing NATO expansion is a winning political message.

"I think it would signal the end of NATO," answered Noh. "I mean, it's an interesting situation because this entire war was provoked on the idea that Ukraine would eventually join NATO. So they can't, from this administration, can't abandon the concept completely."

"But let's come back to MTG and JD Vance. You know, they are not the most informed people in the political classes, they're clearly pandering to the base," he claimed. "And as I said if you recall on this show, the US public tends to reflexively support most US wars initiated by their elites until they start losing and then they stop supporting them."

"I think it has to do with the fact that they don't believe it's a winning proposition to be associated with NATO, which is currently losing a war, and this is a NATO war. And, of course, it also has to do with the fact that [former President Donald] Trump himself has a very mercantile, business view of NATO. He sees them as free riders on the American military, and he wants the quid pro quo."

"Clearly there is popular opposition to the Ukraine war. Clearly the US does not like to lose wars or to be associated with losing wars. And clearly they don't want to be associated with a losing war that Biden is responsible for," Noh concluded.

Former President Donald Trump said recently he would "100%" keep the US in NATO should he return to the Oval Office, as long as European countries pay their "fair share" and "play fair." The former president told British media the US pays for "90% of NATO," adding that it is the "most unfair thing."

NATO estimates that for 2023 Poland was actually the top spender and allocated 3.9% of its GDP to the alliance, which was more than twice the amount it had spent in 2022. In contrast, the US spent 3.5% of its GDP – about the same amount it has been spending for the last decade.

However, only 35% of NATO member states meet the alliance's spending targets on defense, prompting criticism from Trump and aligned "America First" conservatives. Proposals to resurrect European countries' weakened defense industries have been greeted with skepticism as the continent is rocked by protests over economic concerns.

Witte asked Noh if the NATO summit slated for July will include a concrete plan to incorporate Ukraine into NATO.

"I don't see it yet," answered Noh. "Anything is possible. But I think right now they're really in the process of damage control. Clearly NATO is losing. And this is, as I said, a NATO war. And they want to see if they can do a controlled demolition."

"We've sunk these costs on. And so we have to keep on sinking into more costs. I don't think the European population will stand for it, [but] the ruling elite seems still to be stuck on this. So I think it is an incredible debacle," he added.

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"I think they also want to pivot again to the Pacific, and they want NATO to be involved there. And so I think they're trying to do their best to see if they can get their hands off and wipe them clean of this tar baby that is rapidly showing diminishing returns."

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Iraqi Shia Groups Take Credit for Attack on Israeli Oil Refineries in Haifa

Observers expect the Iranian-backed Axis of Resistance to step up attacks in the Middle East after an Israeli strike hit Iran's consulate in Syria this week.

DOHA (Sputnik) - Shia armed groups forming part of the self-proclaimed Islamic Resistance in Iraq took credit for an attack on oil refineries in the northern Israeli city of Haifa Saturday.

"Today at dawn, Saturday, April 6, 2024, the Mujahideen of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq attacked oil refineries in Haifa in our occupied territories with drones," read a statement posted to Telegram.

The Iraqi armed groups said they "will continue to destroy enemy strongholds during operations to resist the occupation and support our people in the Gaza Strip, as well as in response to the Zionist massacre of unarmed Palestinian civilians."

Observers expect the Iranian-backed Axis of Resistance to step up attacks in the Middle East after an Israeli strike hit Iran's consulate in Syria this week. Seven Iranian military advisors were killed in the attack, including two generals.

Armed groups largely paused attacks on US installations in the Middle East earlier this year after a strike on a base near the Syria-Jordan border killed 3 American Army soldiers. Iran reportedly urged the groups to stand down after the provocative incident, but the bombing of the Iranian consulate marks a re-escalation of tensions.

Public opinion throughout the region has been inflamed since Israel began its military operation in the Gaza Strip last October, which has killed more than 33,000.

Iran has warned it will launch a retaliatory attack against Israel imminently, with analysts suggesting the country may strike within Israeli territory.

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Nicaragua Cuts Diplomatic Ties with Ecuador Amid Fallout from Mexican Embassy Invasion

Ecuador's highly provocative move has elicited condemnation across Latin America, with an Organization of American States (OAS) meeting scheduled to discuss the issue.

MEXICO CITY (Sputnik) - Nicaragua announced it had completely severed diplomatic relations with Ecuador Saturday over the storming of the Mexican embassy in Quito by Ecuadorian police.

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Armed security forces stormed the Mexican embassy Friday to arrest former Ecuadorian Vice President Jorge Glas, who had taken refuge in the diplomatic mission. Mexico immediately suspended diplomatic relations with Quito, claiming Mexican diplomats had sustained injuries as a result of the incident.

"Following the unthinkable and reprehensible acts committed... in Quito by forces that are supposed to protect the order and security of Ecuadorian citizens and their lives, our strong and irrevocable condemnation is transformed into a sovereign decision to sever all diplomatic relations with the Government of Ecuador," the Nicaraguan government said in a statement published on El 19 Digital news portal.

Managua had previously withdrawn its embassy from Quito in 2020 over hostile statements by Ecuadorian authorities.

The highly provocative invasion of the embassy, considered sovereign Mexican territory under international law, provoked condemnation across Latin America. Chile, Cuba, Bolivia, and Venezuela issued statements expressing anger over the incident. Honduras proposed an emergency meeting of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), a regional body promoted as an alternative to the controversialOAS.

Brazilian President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva declared his "solidarity" with Mexico, criticizing the violation of the embassy in "the strongest possible terms."

Glas had been sheltering in the Mexican embassy since shortly after Ecuador issued a warrant for his arrest in December. Ecuador's government has been engaged in a persecution campaign against supporters of former President Rafael Correa for several years. The country has been on a downward economic spiral since the populist leader left office, with the security situation in the country also deteriorating.

Observers had hoped current leader Daniel Noboa would pursue a change in policy after narrowly winning the country's presidential election last year, but the arrest of Glas suggests Noboa is likewise committed to undermining Correa's "Citizens' Revolution" movement.

Ecuadoreans believed the populist movement was in safe hands when former Correa ally Lenin Moreno was elected president in 2017. But Moreno radically altered government policy and legally persecuted Correa’s supporters.

Moreno’s dramatic 180 caused many, including the country’s former foreign minister, to conclude Moreno had become an asset of the US Central Intelligence Agency.

“Moreno became a CIA insider due to blackmailing,” said ex-Foreign Minister Ricardo Patiño to Sputnik in 2019. “We are absolutely sure that while Moreno was in Geneva [working as a UN envoy] he established a very close relationship with the CIA and the US administration because they may have found his secret bank accounts in Panama, opened by his brother to save money from corruption.”

The discovery of Moreno’s hidden assets with the release of the Panama Papers solidified the impression the former president was being extorted.

Economic instability has created an environment for organized crime to thrive in Ecuador, as in other Latin American countries where US-backed neoliberal policy has resulted in similar consequences.

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Security Council to Discuss Palestine's Request for Full UN Membership Monday

MOSCOW (Sputnik) - The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) will consider Palestine's request for full membership at the UN and its transfer to the UNSC Committee on the Admission of New Members on April 8, a schedule of meetings for next week revealed.
The presidency of the UNSC will hold consultations to discuss further actions on Palestine's request at 10:00 am local time (14:00 GMT) Monday, the schedule read. At 12:00 noon local time the presidency will convene the council's closed meeting to confirm receipt of Palestine's letter and transfer it to the relevant committee.
UNSC members are not expected to make any statements at the meeting.
Currently Palestine has only observer status at the UN, a recognition it has been granted since 2012.

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Israel Claims to Open Erez Land Crossing Following Phone Call with Biden

The call marks the latest purported attempt by the Biden Administration to pressure Israel to reduce civilian casualties in Gaza. Nearly 33,000 Palestinians have been killed since hostilities began in October according to local health authorities.
Israel said the country will temporarily open its Erez land crossing into Gaza for humanitarian aid after a phone call between US President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week, but questions remain over the United States' willingness to seriously challenge its Middle Eastern ally.
The US president reportedly threatened to withhold support during the call Thursday and "underscored that an immediate ceasefire is essential to stabilize and improve the humanitarian situation and protect innocent civilians," the White House said. "If we don't see the changes that we need to see, there'll be changes in our policy," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters.
Following Biden's call with Netanyahu, Israel also announced it would allow the Ashdod port to be used to process aid shipments through another land border crossing.
Despite the threat the White House has not yet stated it will cease supplying their ally with weapons.
When asked about the supply of lethal aid to Israel becoming "conditional," US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said the US wants to see some "real changes on the Israeli side" but insisted he would not "preview decisions that haven't been made yet".
Aaron David Miller, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said it is unlikely Biden will enforce any "red lines" regarding the supply of arms to Israel.

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Biden's conversation with Netanyahu was prompted by the killing of seven humanitarian workers from the World Central Kitchen (WCK), a charity headquartered in Washington, DC. One of the deceased aid workers was an American-Canadian citizen whose family members have reached out to media outlets to condemn his death as a murder and demand answersfrom Biden.

Among the other victims were three UK citizens, one Australian citizen, one Polish citizen, and a Palestinian driver.

José Andrés, the celebrity chef who founded WCK, accused Israel of deliberately targeting their convoy, claiming the vehicles were marked with their logo and the IDF was aware of the workers' whereabouts. He also said the number of strikes by the Israeli military matched the number of vehicles that were traveling over a distance of at least 1.5 kilometers.

"They were targeting us in a deconflicting zone, in an area controlled by the IDF. They knew that it was our teams moving on that road... with three cars," he added.

The Biden White House previously announced sanctions on a handful of Israeli West Bank settlers in a rare concrete measure against its Middle Eastern ally, but the policy was recently walked back amid opposition from Israel's treasury chief.

Strengthened Russia-DPRK relations signal new world beyond US hegemony

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Renewed military and economic cooperation between Russia and North Korea is yet another sign of an emerging multipolar world order, said former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program this week.

"This goes beyond simply bilateral relations between Russia and North Korea," said the former US Marine Corps intelligence officer. "Russia together with China, they're putting down a marker that says that which was normal in the past is no longer normal today. That the rules-based international order that was used to constrain North Korea, to punish North Korea, to weaken North Korea is not a viable system and that Russia is not going to play that game anymore."

The DPRK has helped Russia replenish supplies of ammunition in its war in the Donbass while Russia has, in turn, helped North Korea develop satellites and hypersonic missiles. The United States has yet to perfect hypersonic missile technology, giving the DPRK an effective new deterrent short of a nuclear strike.

The new relationship was on display recently as Russia vetoed the continuation of a UN body responsible for monitoring North Korean compliance with western-backed sanctions, effectively helping the country overcome US-led economic warfare.

"The Biden administration is starting to come to grips with the fact that the rules-based international order that they had been using to control what was a singularity, the American hegemony, is collapsing around them," said Ritter.

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Slovakia committed to humanitarian aid, not bombs, for Ukraine - foreign minister

Slovakian Foreign Minister Juraj Blanar said a NATO initiative to create a Ukraine aid fund requires detailed study, but if the republic supports it, it will be in areas not related to arms supply.

"It is premature to talk about details, but our position, which we will certainly promote, is that even if we support these initiatives, [the support] will not relate to arms supplies, because we have specifically indicated that we will not support arms supplies from the Slovak army depots or from the republic's budget," Blanar told reporters.

Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico rejected European interference in the Donbass conflict recently, urging Slovakia's congress to pass a resolution against the sending of troops to Ukraine. The prime minister claimed there is no military solution to the Donbass conflict and urged negotiations for a peaceful settlement. He also promised the cooperation of Slovakia in efforts to provide Ukraine with humanitarian aid at the time.

"I refuse to have an iron curtain built between the EU and the Russian Federation," said Fico in separate remarks previously.

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Israeli strikes in Gaza proving part of 'concerted effort to industrialize genocide'

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"And we need to really keep in mind that a lot of Western tech companies are helping Israel do this. Google, Microsoft, they have contracts with the Israeli army, with the Israeli government to provide them with this technology," said Carrillo. "This is Western aid. Just like the weapons, just like the political cover."

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NATO's “losing war” and an empty promise to Ukraine

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated Thursday that Ukraine will eventually join NATO. US Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene and US Senator JD Vance took to social media to decry Blinken’s comments as irresponsible and dangerous, saying inviting Ukraine to join NATO during a war is to “invite our nation to war.”

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Former President Donald Trump said recently he would “100%” keep the US in NATO should he return to the Oval Office, as long as European countries pay their “fair share” and “play fair.” The former president told British media the US pays for “90% of NATO,” adding that it is the “most unfair thing.”

“Clearly NATO is losing,” said Noh of the US-backed conflict in the Donbass. “And this is, as I said, a NATO war. And they want to see if they can do a controlled demolition.”

“We've sunk these costs on. And so we have to keep on sinking into more costs. I don't think the European population will stand for it, [but] the ruling elite seems still to be stuck on this. So I think it is an incredible debacle.”

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Iraqi Shia groups take credit for attack on Israeli oil refineries

Shia armed groups forming part of the so-called Islamic Resistance in Iraq took credit for an attack on oil refineries in the northern Israeli city of Haifa Saturday.

“Today at dawn, Saturday, April 6, 2024, the Mujahideen of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq attacked oil refineries in Haifa in our occupied territories with drones,” read a statement posted to Telegram.

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The Iraqi armed groups said they "will continue to destroy enemy strongholds during operations to resist the occupation and support our people in the Gaza Strip, as well as in response to the Zionist massacre of unarmed Palestinian civilians."

Observers expect the Iranian-backed Axis of Resistance to step up attacks in the Middle East after an Israeli strike hit Iran's consulate in Syria this week. Seven Iranian military advisors were killed in the attack, including two generals.

Iran has warned it will launch a retaliatory attack against Israel imminently, with analysts suggesting the country may strike within Israeli territory.

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Nicaragua cuts diplomatic ties with Ecuador amid fallout from Mexican embassy invasion

Nicaragua announced it had completely severed diplomatic relations with Ecuador Saturday over the storming of the Mexican embassy in Quito by Ecuadorian police.

"Following the unthinkable and reprehensible acts committed... in Quito by forces that are supposed to protect the order and security of Ecuadorian citizens and their lives, our strong and irrevocable condemnation is transformed into a sovereign decision to sever all diplomatic relations with the Government of Ecuador," read a statement by the Nicaraguan government.

The highly provocative violation of the embassy, considered sovereign Mexican territory under international law, provoked condemnation across Latin America. Chile, Cuba, Bolivia, Venezuela, Honduras, and Brazil issued statements expressing anger over the incident.

Glas had been sheltering in the Mexican embassy since shortly after Ecuador issued a warrant for his arrest in December. Ecuador's government has been engaged in a persecution campaign against supporters of former President Rafael Correa for several years. The country has been on a downward economic spiral since the populist leader left office, with the security situation in the country also deteriorating.

Economic instability has created an environment for organized crime to thrive in Ecuador, as in other Latin American countries where Western-backed neoliberal policy has resulted in similar consequences.

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Security Council to discuss Palestine's request for full UN membership Monday

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) will consider Palestine's request for full membership in the organization and its transfer to the UNSC Committee on the Admission of New Members on April 8, a schedule of meetings for next week revealed.

The presidency of the UNSC will hold consultations to discuss further actions on Palestine's request at 10:00 am local time (14:00 GMT) Monday, the schedule read. At 12:00 noon local time the presidency will convene the council's closed meeting to confirm receipt of Palestine's letter and transfer it to the relevant committee.

Currently Palestine has only observer status at the UN, a recognition it has been granted since 2012.

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Israel claims to open Erez land crossing following phone call with Biden

Israel said the country will temporarily open its Erez land crossing into Gaza for humanitarian aid after a phone call between US President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week, but questions remain over the United States' willingness to seriously challenge its Middle Eastern ally.

The US president reportedly threatened to withhold support during the call Thursday and "underscored that an immediate ceasefire is essential to stabilize and improve the humanitarian situation and protect innocent civilians."

Despite the threat the White House has not yet stated it will cease supplying their ally with weapons. When asked about the supply of lethal aid to Israel becoming "conditional," US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby insisted he would not "preview decisions that haven't been made yet".

The Biden White House previously announced sanctions on a handful of West Bank settlers in a rare concrete measure against Israel, but the policy was recently walked back amid opposition from Israel's treasury chief.

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Russia repels 9 Ukrainian attacks toward Donetsk in past 24 hours

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Russian armed forces repelled nine Ukrainian attacks in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, allowing them to take up more advantageous positions in the area, the Russian Defense Ministry said Sunday.

"[Russian troops] repelled nine counterattacks by groups of the 10th mountain assault, 92nd airborne assault, 33rd and 67th mechanized brigades of the Ukrainian army in the areas of the towns of Berestove, Bohdanivka and Novomykhailivka of the Donetsk People's Republic," the ministry said.

Russian armed forces also repelled Ukrainian troops in the directions of Kupyansk, Avdeyevka, and Kherson.

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Iranian Consulate in Damascus Resumes Work After Israeli Attack - Reports

Iran's consulate in Damascus has resumed its work in a new building after a hiatus caused by Israel's deadly missile strike, Iranian media reported Sunday.

On Monday, Israel carried out an airstrike on the consular annex of the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, destroying the building. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps said seven of its members had been killed in the attack, including two commanders. On Tuesday the Syrian Health Ministry said the attack had also killed four Syrians and injured 13 more.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry said it "reserves the right" to respond to the Israeli attack and "punish the aggressor." Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi also vowed that Israel would pay a "heavy price" for the strike.

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Former Pentagon adviser Macgregor urges US to stop 'marching' into foreign countries

Former Pentagon Adviser Col. Douglas Macgregor said Sunday the United States should stop "marching" into foreign nations to expand their political influence.

"We need to stop marching into other peoples [sic] countries and trying to force people to become like us," Macgregor said on the X social media platform.

Earlier this week US Secretary of State Antony Blinken claimed the US-led NATO alliance is a defensive organization that has "no designs" to seize the territory of any other country in the

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world. NATO has carried out bombings and interventions in countries including Libya, Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan over its 75-year history.

The alliance also partnered with the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to sponsor Operation Gladio, a covert program that backed far-right paramilitaries throughout Europe.

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Americans' Interest in Buying Electric Vehicles Declines – Poll

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – Americans' interest in buying electric vehicles has declined over the past year, according to a Gallup poll released Monday.

Compared to results taken last year, the poll found that Americans who "would not buy" an electric vehicle increased by seven percentage points to 48%, those who "might consider" buying one decreased by eight percentage points to 35%, and those who are "seriously considering" buying one decreased by three percentage points to 9%.

The percentage of Americans who currently own an electric vehicle only increased three points to 7%.

The latest poll was taken from March 1-20.

The US government has been hoping that 60% of new vehicle production will be electric by 2030, but this appears unlikely to happen given weak consumer demand.

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Biden Announces New Student Debt Relief Policies - White House

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – The White House proposed new student debt relief policies on Monday that are projected to impact more than 30 million Americans, according to a release.

"In total, these plans would fully eliminate accrued interest for 23 million borrowers, would cancel the full amount of student debt for over 4 million borrowers, and provide more than 10 million borrowers with at least $5,000 in debt relief or more," the release stated.

If finalized as proposed, the plans would cancel up to $20,000 of the amount a borrower's balance has grown due to unpaid interest after entering repayment, regardless of income levels.

The White House is also proposing automatically canceling debt for borrowers otherwise eligible for relief through the SAVE plan, Public Service Loan Forgiveness, or other forgiveness opportunities but who have not successfully applied for that assistance.

It would cancel student debt for borrowers who first entered repayment 20 or more years ago. It would also cancel student debt for loans associated with institutions or programs that lost their eligibility to participate in the federal student aid program or were denied recertification because they cheated or took advantage of students.

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The White House plans to release proposed rules on these plans over the coming months.

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NATO to Have Concrete Deliverable for Ukraine at July Summit - US Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – The NATO summit in July will produce a concrete deliverable regarding the prospects of Ukraine's membership in the military bloc, US Permanent Representative to NATO Julianne Smith said on Monday.

"We will have a concrete deliverable for Ukraine [at the July summit]. I can't get into the full details of that at this juncture, but we are working on a way to get them on what we're calling a bridge to membership by deepening NATO's work with the Ukrainians on questions of interoperability, modernization, providing additional resources to our friends in Ukraine," Smith said during a discussion hosted by Georgetown University in Washington.

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NATO Has No Plans to Become Global Alliance, Add New Members in Indo-Pacific – US Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – NATO does not plan to become a global alliance or add new members from the Indo-Pacific region, but will work with its partners from the region to resolve a range of security challenges, US Permanent Representative to NATO Julianne Smith said on Monday.

"Does it [NATO] have aspirations to become a global alliance and add new members in the Indo-Pacific? Absolutely not. That's not the plan. Our Indo-Pacific partners don't have an interest in joining the alliance and the alliance is not looking to go global. But what we see is increased utility in working together with our friends in the Indo-Pacific on a number of shared security challenges," Smith said during a discussion hosted by Georgetown University in Washington.

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nato to have concrete deliverable for Ukraine at July summit - us envoy

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PREVIEW: Congress Reconvenes With No Clear Path for Approving Ukraine Aid Funding

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Congress of the United States is returning to work after a two-week Easter recess with no clear plan on how it will get new funding approved for Ukraine aid.

In February, the Senate passed a $95 billion foreign aid bill that includes some $60 billion for Ukraine, but it was held up in the House by Speaker Mike Johnson, who prioritized working on budget legislation and exploring other routes for Ukraine funding.

Johnson recently said that the US House of Representatives will work on the national security supplemental package "right after" recess on April 9, noting that it will have "some important innovations."

Among the potential innovations that Johnson mentioned was the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians Act, also known as the REPO Act, which would authorize the United States to seize frozen Russian assets that can be used to fund new aid for Ukraine. US Senator Rand Paul opposed the measure, warning that it would be an "act of economic war" against Russia.

Republicans have also discussed possibly loaning the money to Ukraine, expecting it to pay back whenever possible.

The US Senate, which reconvenes on Monday, is reportedly prepared to accept any legislation the Republican-majority House might send to the upper chamber to support Ukraine if it decides to make changes to the Senate-passed foreign aid bill.

A congressional source has told Sputnik that the prospect of the House of Representatives renewing Ukraine aid was uncertain as Republican support for it dwindles.

Bloomberg News reported, citing Republican party leadership officials, that a vote in the House on Ukraine aid was not likely until at least mid-April or possibly later as Johnson tries to gain support from Republican hardliners who oppose the effort.

Moreover, the congressional source told Sputnik that Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene's motion to remove Johnson might block efforts to approve new Ukraine aid. Greene has threatened to request a vote to oust Johnson if he moves forward with plans to pass the supplemental bill relying on Democratic support.

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Republican Congressman Paul Gosar told Sputnik he opposes additional US assistance for Ukraine considering the United States has yet to address the crisis on the US southern border.

"I will not support spending another penny on a war in which the United States has no business being in, particularly when our southern border is being invaded every single day by thousands of illegal aliens," Gosar said. "Fentanyl is destroying families, violent crime is ruining communities and parents must choose whether to fill up their car with gasoline or feed their children because of record high inflation caused from [US President Joe] Biden's reckless spending. Congress must focus on taking care of America first."

Ukraine is desperate for additional funding from the United States, which has provided more than $75 billion since Russia's special military operation started in February 2022. However, since US funds for Ukraine ran out in December, the United States has only been able to provide a $200 million aid package in March.

A Pentagon spokesperson in response to Ukraine aid funding stalled in Congress told Sputnik that it is vital for both the US Defense Department and Ukraine that Congress pass the supplemental bill as soon as possible. The supplemental bill would replenish US weapon stockpiles that have been depleted for Ukraine's military assistance.

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Space Foundation, NOAA to Accommodate Solar Eclipse Watching in Colorado - Vice President

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Space Foundation and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) will provide the opportunity to observe the rare event of a full solar eclipse at the Space Symposium in Colorado Springs on April 8, Space Foundation Vice President for Strategic Communications and Outreach Rich Cooper told Sputnik.

"Starting at around 1:00 p.m. ET [17:00 GMT] … we will have the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration at the lake around the Broadmoor. They are going to have glasses and there will be a display, and experts out there to talk to people about the eclipse," Cooper said. "We're hoping the weather works for us. This is happening at the largest space gathering in the world. The stars have aligned for us."

He noted that Colorado is not going to get the total eclipse but there will be a partial one.

"I think we are getting 70% here," Cooper added. "So we're hoping to get a day like today where it's clear, but it's Colorado and the weather could be anything."

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

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US Space Foundation Calls Yuri Gagarin’s Flight Cutting-Edge Achievement

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COLORADO SPRINGS, April 8 (Sputnik) -The flight of Soviet pilot Yuri Gagarin was absolutely cutting-edge at that time and other astronauts followed his first courageous step, Space Foundation Vice President for Strategic Communications and Outreach Rich Cooper told Sputnik.

"What Yuri did at that time was state-of-the-art technology, was the absolute cutting-edge," Cooper said on Sunday during the Yuri's Night celebration in Colorado Springs. "Yuri's flight was more than - if there's a measure beyond earth-shattering, it's that; when one person takes that first step into the unknown, it takes tremendous courage, it takes tremendous talent. Every person that has gone after Yuri has followed those steps."

Cooper stressed that amid so many things happening in space right now, they are committed to sharing the history with people of all ages.

"We are seeing more and more young people recognizing 'I may be able to do something like that [Gagarin's flight]," he noted. "But every story has a beginning. It's great to be able to tell the story about what Yuri did."

Cooper went on to say that today more and more people are taking those steps, but underscored that Gagarin was the first.

"He's not the last, there are new generations of Yuris that are happening around the world for countries. There are more countries that are entering that pipeline, but any time they're all following Yuri," he added.

The Space Foundation's Yuri's Night is part of the global celebration, held on April 12, to honor the first manned spaceflight and the first space shuttle flight. Yuri's Night serves as a platform to promote science education, teacher development, family engagement, and personal exploration of space-related interests. This year's Yuri Night has brought the largest number of guests ever to come together to celebrate the first human space flight.

The guests took part in Sphero Racing and a silent auction. Five astronauts, including Frank Culbertson, Ron Sega, Kathryn Thornton, Duane Carey, and Livingston Holder were taking pictures with attendees and signing their photos. The event's participants were also enjoying the company of the characters of the Star Wars movies. The guests could also indulge in history slides and enjoy the live music played by Spinphony.

On April 12, 1961, Gagarin became the first person to travel into space aboard the Vostok spacecraft. In recognition of Gagarin's historic achievement, the UN General Assembly proclaimed April 12 as the International Day of Human Space Flight on April 7, 2011, with the support of over 60 UN member states.

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Massive Explosion Occurs on Oil Platform Off Mexican Coast - Petroleum Company

MOSCOW, April 7 (Sputnik) - A fire followed by a massive explosion has occurred at the Akal Bravo maritime oil platform, part of the Cantarell production complex in Mexico's Bay of Campeche, causing harm to local workers, Mexican state-owned petroleum company Pemex said on Sunday.

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"At 4:48 p.m. [22:48 GMT on Saturday], a fire broke out on one of the platforms of the Akal-B Process Center (Akal-B1), in the area where the pipes supplying fuel gas for turbomachinery are located. The Emergency Response Plan (PRE) was immediately activated at the facility," the company said in a statement.

Two Pemex workers and seven employees of partner companies Diavaz and Cotemar suffered non-serious injuries as a result of the fire and explosion, the company said, adding that information was being updated. Meanwhile, a number of media outlets reported that 11 people, including eight Pemex employees, had allegedly died in the incident.

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Musk Expresses Hope 5th SpaceX Starship Flight to Land Back on Tower

FORT WORTH, Texas, April 7 (Sputnik) - US entrepreneur and SpaceX founder Elon Musk would like to see the fifth SpaceX starship booster flight be coordinated and land back on a tower, estimating the probability of this working out at 80-90%.

"If the landing on the virtual tower with the booster works (with flight four) then we will actually try with the flight five to land on the tower," Musk told SpaceX employees in Boca Chica, Texas. "It is in the realm of possibility… the odds of us being to catch the booster ... probably like 80 - 90% this year."

We have made tremendous progress with the flights, and flight four should happen in about a month or so, he added.

In mid-March, SpaceX launched its third test flight of the Starship rocket from the Starbase facility in Boca Chica, Texas, with the rocket reaching orbital speed for the first time.

The Starship is the centerpiece of SpaceX's efforts to develop a fully reusable transportation system designed to carry humans to the Moon and on long-duration flights to Mars and beyond. The system is designed for in-space refueling and the ability to land at destinations across the solar system and return to Earth.

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US Continues to Engage with Russia Directly On Alleged Anti-Satellite Capability -Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to engage with Russia directly to address its concerns over Moscow's alleged effort to develop a space-based anti-satellite capability, a US Defense Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

“We continue to monitor the development of a concerning Russian anti-satellite capability," the spokesperson said on Friday. "We’ve taken a series of actions in response to this development, including coordinating with our allies and partners, and directly engaging with Russia on their irresponsible plan.”

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In February, the United States claimed that Russia is developing a space-based anti-satellite weapon that poses a serious US national security threat. The Kremlin in response to US claims said the White House is trying to encourage Congress to vote for a bill to allocate money to Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation. Russian President Vladimir Putin had clarified that he told government officials that space projects, including setting up a nuclear power unit in space, should be a priority.

The United States is also exploring nuclear-powered space missions.

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Trump Files Motion to Recuse Judge Juan Merchan in Hush Money Case

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump filed another motion to recuse Judge Juan Merchan in the upcoming trial concerning Trump's alleged hush money payments, citing conflict of interest and due process concerns.

"President Trump respectfully submits this memorandum and accompanying affirmation in support of his motion for recusal based on due process under the state and federal constitutions," the motion said on Friday.

Trump's legal team argued the judge's daughter has a direct financial interest in his case, pointing out that President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris are clients of her digital agency Authentic.

Trump's lawyers explained that personal political views may not be a basis for recusal but profiting from the promotion of a political agenda that is hostile to Trump, and has included fundraising solicitations based on this case, must be, the motion said.

Last month, Merchan filed an order to gag Trump, limiting his public statements about witnesses, legal counsel, court staff and their families to prevent interference with the case.

The trial in the case is set to begin on April 15. The case involves alleged hush-money payments to pornography actress Stormy Daniels during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.

Trump has denied any wrongdoing and said that holding the trial is not only unfair but was envisioned to preclude or limit his chances in the 2024 presidential election.

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US Geological Survey Says Detected Magnitude 4.0 Earthquake in New Jersey

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The US Geological Survey (USGS) said it detected a magnitude 4.0 earthquake in New Jersey — an apparent aftershock of a magnitude 4.8 earthquake that rattled the New York City area earlier on Friday.

USGS's earthquake tracker logged a magnitude 4.0 earthquake at approximately 5:59 EDT time (21:59 UTC) seven kilometers southwest of Gladstone, New Jersey.

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The magnitude 4.8 earthquake earlier on Friday impacted airport operations in the area and prompted responses from local, state, and federal officials.

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KBR Wyle Wins $99Mln Contract to Integrate US Air Force Command System - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - KBR Wyle Services has won a $99 million US Air Force contract to integrate mission-critical space domain awareness and battle management command and control systems, the US Defense Department announced.

"KBR Wyle Services [of] Lexington Park, Maryland was awarded a ... contract with the ceiling of $99 million," the Defense Department said in a release on Friday.

The contract will pay for supporting the transition and integration of mission-critical space domain awareness, battle management command and control as well as space enterprise capabilities to support the Air Force Space Vehicles Directorate, the release said.

Work on the contract is scheduled to take five years and is expected to be completed by April 2029, the release added.

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UN Space Office Must Quadruple Staff Level to Meet Demands Placed On It - UNOOSA Chief

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The staff of the United Nations Office on Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) needs to quadruple within the next year or two to meet the expectations and challenges imposed upon it, the organization's new director Aarti Holla Maini told a meeting at The Atlantic Council.

"For me, this office has to be 100 people within one to two years because it's simply not sustainable [at current manpower levels]," Holla-Maini said on Friday. "We must put our money where our mouth is."

UNOOSA is based in Vienna, Austria, and has a permanent staff of only 25 with another 10 seconded on a temporary basis from other UN agencies, Holla-Maini said.

"The vision is [that] this office very much needs to grow if we are going to deliver on the expectations of the member states and on the expectations of the secretary-general himself. ...We have the brains but we need the resources as well," she said.

UNOOSA has been the primary custodian of the peaceful use of outer space since the adoption of the Outer Space Treaty in 1967.

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US Army Pays General Dynamics $518Mln for Stryker Vehicles Support Services - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The US Army has ordered more than half a billion dollars from General Dynamics for technical support for its Stryker land vehicles fleet, the Defense Department announced.

"General Dynamics Land Systems [of] Sterling Heights, Michigan was awarded a $518,828,362 ... contract for Stryker system technical support," the Defense Department said in a release on Friday.

Work on the contract is scheduled to take five years with an estimated completion date of March 31, 2029, the release added.

The Stryker is a family of eight-wheeled armored fighting vehicles that was developed from the Canadian LAV III. Stryker vehicles are manufactured by General Dynamics Land Systems-Canada for the US Army in a plant in London, Ontario.

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Nations in Moon Projects Need to Coordinate to Avoid Accidents - UN Space Affairs Chief

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - Nations engaged in activities on the surface of the Moon or in its space environment needed to make agreements to ensure their communications systems and other activities avoid accidents, collisions and confusion, United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs Director Aarti Holla-Maini said.

"Lunar coordination: That's a big one! ... How do we ensure cooperation? How do we make sure missions don't crash with each other?" Holla-Maini asked. "How do we ensure we don't put multiple navigation systems around the Moon because the Moon is [only] one sixth the size of the Earth?" Holla-Maini told a meeting at The Atlantic Council on Friday.

Nations had slowly started to move forward to initiate diplomatic discussions on the issues of ensuring effective lunar communications without overlaps of effort, competing agendas, or different systems interfering with each other, Holla-Maini said.

"We've seen at the last ITU [International Telecommunications Union] World Radio Conference last year in Dubai that the ITU is moving forward with an agenda on lunar communications," Holla-Maini also said, adding that the development is "absolutely vital."

The United States is pushing ahead with an agenda to send repeated manned missions and eventually maintain a sustained human settlement on the Moon in the region of the lunar South Pole with its Artemis program.

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Canadian Government to Conduct Last Assisted Departure from Haiti on April 7 - Joly

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) – The Canadian Government plans to hold the last round of assisted departures for Canadian nationals and permanent residents wishing to leave Haiti on Sunday, April 7, Canada's Foreign Minister Melanie Joly said on Friday.

According to Joly, over 250 individuals have received help in departing the country in tight cooperation with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and the Canada Border Services Agency.

"Now that many have left, the number of Canadian citizens, permanent residents, and their eligible family members, who can or want to leave Haiti on assisted departure flights has decreased significantly," Joly said in a statement.

That is why Ottawa has made a decision to hold the last round of assisted departures out of Port-au-Prince on April 7, Joly added.

In late March, Canada announced that it would begin conducting small-scale assisted departures from Port-au-Prince toward the neighboring Dominican Republic in an operation that only allowed for the evacuation of the most vulnerable Canadians. In April, Ottawa expanded the operations' scope to include all Canadian nationals and permanent residents wishing to leave.

On February 29, gang violence erupted in the downtown area of Port-au-Prince while Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry was visiting Kenya to seek an agreement for the deployment of foreign forces in Haiti to fight organized crime. The gangs said their goal was to prevent the prime minister from returning to Haiti. They took control over many parts of the city and stormed Haiti's largest prison, freeing an unconfirmed number of inmates. The Haitian government declared a state of emergency in the capital region. On March 11, Henry announced that he would resign once a transitional presidential council was created.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) -

NATO

* Romania will host NATO's multinational naval exercise Sea Shield in the Black Sea and the Danube Delta from April 8–21, the Romanian Defense Ministry said on Friday.

* About 220 members of the UK air force will be deployed in Romania for four months to assist in defensing the country's airspace, the Romanian Defense Ministry said on Friday.

* Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide said sending Western troops to Ukraine could not be ruled out in the long term.

US-CHINA RELATIONS

* Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng on Friday hosted US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in

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Guangzhou for discussions on economic cooperation.
* Yellen said the conversation was frank and substantive and emphasized that it is crucial for world's two largest economies to seek progress on global challenges and closely communicate on areas of concern.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN TENSIONS
* Armenia and Azerbaijan on Friday exchanged accusations of shelling each other's military positions in their border area.
* The Armenian Defense Ministry said that Azerbaijan forces had shelled positions in Tavush and Gegharkunik provinces.
* The Azerbaijan Defense Ministry said that Armenian forces had opened fire on positions in the direction of Munjuglu settlement of Tovuz region.

JAPAN EXPANDS SANCTIONS ON RUSSIA
* Japan has banned the export of 164 types of goods to Russia, including motor oil, pipes for gas and oil pipelines and lithium-ion batteries, the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry said on Friday.
* Japan has taken an unfriendly position toward Russia by expanding sanctions, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

UKRAINE CONFLICT
* US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov discussed the battlefield situation and Kiev's most pressing capability requirements amid the ongoing conflict with Russia, Pentagon deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh said on Friday.
* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken raised the alarm during this week's NATO foreign ministers' summit in Brussels over the allegedly "concerning scale" of China's support for Russia amid ITS special military operation in Ukraine, US media reported.

GAZA
* The United States' representative to the UN Security Council attempted to manipulate the group by making misleading statements about resolutions regarding Israel's conflict with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday.
* The US representative to the United Nations mentioned that a call to protect humanitarian aid workers was included in a draft resolution vetoed by Russia and China, but failed to mention that a ceasefire resolution ultimately passed by the council included a similar demand, Nebenzia said.
* Russia believes that such low standards have no place in the UN Security Council and he US should instead focus on ending arms supplies to Israel, which are being used to kill Palestinians, Nebenzia said.
* Germany rejects Nicaragua's accusations of violating international law and facilitating genocide in Gaza in connection with its weapons supplies to Israel, German Foreign Ministry spokesman Sebastian Fischer said.

OIL MARKETS

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* Crude prices broke above $90 per barrel on Friday, giving the oil rally its biggest week since early February.
* Russia's major oil producer Gazprom Neft expects global oil prices to be between $80 to $100 per barrel this year, the comapny's director Alexander Dyukov said on Friday.

MOLDOVA AND TRANSNISTRIA DEVELOPMENTS
* The head of Moldova's autonomous region of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, said on Friday that the region will declare independence if Moldovan authorities decide to unite with Moldova.
* A kamikaze drone attacked a military unit in Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria - six kilometers (3.7 miles) from the border WITH Ukraine - and caused minor damage to a radar station, the State Security Ministry said.

EARTHQUAKE IN NEW YORK
* A magnitude 4.8 earthquake hit in the area west of Manhattan and has been felt throughout the US state of New York, Governor Kathy Hochul said on Friday.
* The John F. Kennedy and the Newark international airports are on full ground stops to assess potential after effects from the earthquake that hit the region earlier on Friday, Hochul said.
* No structural damage or service disruptions to the New York public transportation have been reported in the wake of an earthquake, New York City Police Department Chief of Transit Michael Kemper said.

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Centrist US Political Group No Labels Says Ending 2024 Presidential Ballot Access Effort

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Centrist US political organization No Labels is ending its efforts to put forth a so-called unity ticket in the 2024 presidential election, the group's National Convention Chair Mike Rawlings said on Friday.
"We have made the decision to end our 2024 ballot access effort," Rawlings said.
No Labels was unable to find candidates for a unity ticket with a viable path to winning the White House, Rawlings said.
Although the decision is disappointing, the group will continue its work, Rawlings said. People in the United States want alternative political candidates more than ever before, Rawlings said.
No Labels has become the "consensus leader" for centrist Americans, Rawlings said.
The organization frames itself as a group focused on uniting people in the US through intellectual openness, common-sense problem solving and avoiding political extremes.

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If US Preparing Proposals for Prisoners Exchange, Russia Will Study Them - Antonov

BUTNER, North Carolina, April 5 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Antonov said on Friday that if the US administration is really preparing proposals for an exchange of prisoners with Russia as reports have suggested, then Moscow will definitely study them.

"It's very difficult for me ... to speak for the current US administration. If they are preparing these proposals, I want to say that they will be studied accordingly and our relevant services will give an adequate response. It's unlikely that we need to make any guesses today. We just need to wait," Antonov said after visiting Russian national Roman Seleznev in a North Carolina prison.

At the same time, Antonov noted that Seleznev, who is serving a 27-year term in the United States, has no chance for parole.

"There are no such chances. There is a possibility if he is exchanged for one of the Americans within the framework of the appropriate confidential channel. I don't know any details in this area," he added. "We, in particular, the diplomats, do not deal with this issue."

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Antonov Visits Russian National Seleznev in US Prison, Calls Detention Conditions 'Harsh'

BUTNER, North Carolina, April 5 (Sputnik) - Russia's Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Antonov after visiting Russian national Roman Seleznev in a North Carolina prison called the conditions of his detention “harsh” and said that his health is suffering.

"Just a few minutes ago I left the prison, where I met with Roman Seleznev," Antonov said. “His health is not good, the conditions [of his detention] are very harsh."

Seleznev was detained by the US Secret Service in the Maldives in 2014 and was transferred to the United States. His attorney, his father and the Russian Foreign Ministry have called the incident a kidnapping and a violation of international law.

After being convicted on charges of cyber fraud in 2016, Seleznev was sentenced in 2017 to 27 years in prison. He is serving his sentence in the US federal prison in Butner, North Carolina.

The Russian Embassy in Washington will send a note to the US State Department demanding that the conditions of Seleznev's detention be alleviated.

"Roman is holding up, Roman does not hide and openly says that he is a patriot, that he is ready to devote all his strength and energy, when freed from American dungeons, to serving the Motherland. He misses Moscow very much, he misses his loved ones very much."

The ambassador noted that Seleznev still has to serve another 12 years in prison.

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Biden Says Parties Responsible for Baltimore Bridge Collapse Will Pay to Repair Damage

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden pledged to hold those responsible for the bridge collapse in Baltimore accountable to the fullest extent of the law and make them pay to repair the damage.

"My administration is committed, absolutely committed to ensuring that parties responsible for this tragedy pay to repair the damage and be held accountable to the fullest extent the law will allow," Biden said in his remarks during his visit to Baltimore, Maryland.

Earlier in the day, the US Army Corps of Engineers released a tentative timeline for repairs to restore safe navigation in the port of Baltimore following the collapse of the bridge, and the work could be completed by the end of May.

US officials are still avoiding answering questions regarding the timing of the complete restoration of the bridge, which took five years to build in the 1970s.

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

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Blinken Rings Alarm Over 'Concerning Scale' of Chinese Support for Russia - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken raised the alarm during this week's NATO foreign ministers' summit in Brussels over the allegedly "concerning scale" of China's support for Russia amid the special military operation in Ukraine, the Financial Times reported on Friday, citing three people familiar with the discussions.

Blinken was vocal in warning his NATO counterparts that China is now assisting Moscow "at a concerning scale" and providing "tools, inputs, and technical expertise," the report quoted the US top diplomat as saying.

The sources also quoted Blinken as saying during the meetings in Brussels that China is supporting Russia's production of optical equipment and propellants as well as its space sector, which allegedly not only contributes to Russia's aggression in Ukraine but threatens other countries.

"The warnings were explicit," the report quoted one of the persons as saying. "There has been a shift and it was felt in the room... this was a new development. It was very striking."

Moreover, Blinken raised the issue of Russia-China trade relations in every session of the NATO foreign ministers' meetings and asked them to raise concerns in talks with China, speak publicly about them and take appropriate action on Chinese entities and companies helping Russia's industrial base, the report said.

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Following a new round of sanctions against Chinese entities for their alleged links to Russian military industrial base in February, the Chinese Commerce Ministry said that China resolutely stands against US sanctions imposed on Chinese enterprises over alleged links with Russia, and it will adopt the necessary measures to protect the rights and interests of its companies.

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N. Cyprus Leader on Interparliamentary Group With Baku: Hope Other States Follow Suit

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Azerbaijan establishing a working group on inter-parliamentary relations with northern Cyprus is "very important" and may serve as an example for other countries to follow, Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar told Sputnik.

"Azerbaijan's decision is very important. This parliamentary group is very important," Tatar said. "It's an expression of Azerbaijan's approval of Turkish Cypriots and support to the Turkish Cypriots. Otherwise they wouldn't have done this because this is a major decision - it involves the Azerbaijan parliament. The parliament has taken this very important decision to cooperate with the parliament of northern Cyprus. We welcome the decision."

Tatar also expressed hope that other nations will follow the example of Azerbaijan.

"I hope that this will be an example for the other states to make some major improvements with the relationship with TRNC," he said. "I once again thank Ilham Aliyev, the President, for his support and all the members of the parliament of Azerbaijan for their kind gesture to the Turkish Cypriots on this Ramadan day."

Cyprus has been de facto divided into Greek and Turkish parts since 1974. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was declared in 1983 with Turkey's backing. It is recognized only by Turkey.

Negotiations on the reunification of Cyprus have been underway almost from the moment of its partition. Since the negotiations in the Swiss town of Crans-Montana collapsed in 2017, no formal peace talks have been held over Cyprus.

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US, Chinese Military Officials Conclude Talks on Armed Forces' Interactions - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Senior US and Chinese military officials concluded a two-day meeting in Hawaii about recent interactions between their air and naval forces, the Defense Department reported on Friday.

The meeting, referred to as the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) working group, included representatives from US Indo-Pacific Command, US Pacific Fleet and US Pacific Air Forces and their Chinese counterparts.

The officials reviewed specific safety-related events in the region that have occurred in recent

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years, the report said.
The officials also discussed sustaining maritime and aviation operational safety and professionalism, the report added.
The MMCA talks, which have taken place for more than two decades, were last held in December 2021.

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Replacement for Baltimore's Collapsed Key Bridge Already Being Planned - US Senator

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - A replacement for Baltimore's collapsed Francis Scott Key bridge is already being planned, US Senator Ben Cardin said on Friday.
Earlier in the day, the US Army Corps of Engineers released a tentative timeline for repairs to restore safe navigation in the port of Baltimore following the collapse of the bridge, and the work could be completed by the end of May.
"You heard the announcements today in regard to opening the channel, and we're already planning for the replacement of the bridge," Cardin, who represents the US state of Maryland in the Senate, said.
Everyone responsible for the damage will be held accountable in the insurance proceeds, Cardin also said.
Work to reopen the channel and rebuild the bridge cannot wait further, Cardin added.
On March 26, a commercial Singapore-flagged cargo ship hit the Key Bridge soon after departing from Baltimore to Colombo, Sri Lanka.
The bridge collapsed and the authorities suspended ship traffic in the port of Baltimore until further notice.

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New York Governor Says 3 Aftershocks Hit Region After Main Magnitude 4.8 Earthquake

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Three smaller aftershocks hit near the coast of the northeastern United States after a magnitude 4.8 earthquake rattled the New York City area, New York Governor Kathy Hochul said on Friday.
"Following this morning's 4.8 magnitude earthquake, 3 much smaller aftershocks hit our region: 1.8 magnitude at 12:31pm, 2.0 magnitude at 1:14pm, and 2.0 magnitude a few minutes ago [posted 2:56 p.m. EDT]," Hochul said in a statement via social media platform X.
Such aftershocks are normal and not expected to cause further damage, Hochul said.
The magnitude 4.8 earthquake disrupted flights out of airports in the area and led to the temporary evacuation of the Russian Consulate in New York.

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Majority of Likely US Voters Rate Congress' Job Performance Poorly - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The majority of likely voters in the United States rate the performance of the US Congress poorly, according to a Rasmussen Results poll released Friday.

A majority of respondents, 59%, believe that Congress is doing a poor job, the poll report said. The figure rose from 52% in January, the poll report added.

Just 15% of respondents believe that Congress is doing a good or excellent job, having declined from 20% in January, the poll report said.

Independent voters have a more negative view of Congress than their Republican and Democratic counterparts, the poll report said. Just under two-thirds of unaffiliated respondents, 65%, believe that Congress is doing a poor job, the poll report said.

Older voters also have a more negative view of Congress, the poll report said. Whereas 29% of respondents under the age of 40 think Congress is doing a good or excellent job, just 12% of respondents between the ages of 40 and 64 hold that view, and only 4% of voters age 65 and older, the poll report said.

The poll surveyed 1,100 likely US voters from March 26-28. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

The surveys were conducted amid efforts by Congress to pass supplemental funding legislation with aid for Ukraine and Israel, which have been ongoing since October.

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US Federal Reserve Tracking Price of Gold, But Not More Strongly Than Other Indicators

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve is monitoring the price of gold but it is not looking at it more strongly than other indicators, Federal Reserve Board of Governors member Michelle Bowman said on Friday.

Earlier this month, the price on gold grew 0.42%, surpassing $2,153 per troy ounce for the first time in history, according to trading data.

"Yes, we were thinking about it. I don't know that we're thinking about it more strongly than any other indicator at this point," Bowman said during a discussion hosted by the Manhattan Institute.

Gold is generally a dollar-denominated asset, so the historic increase in the price of gold is significant because when the value of gold increases, the value of the dollar decreases.

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Alabama Death Row Inmate Says Ready to Face Execution, Seeks Closure for Victims' Families

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Alabama death row prisoner Derrick Dearman said in an interview this week that he is ready to face execution without further appeals, acknowledging the need for justice for the families of the five people he killed 8 years ago.

"Now it's time for the victims and their families to get the justice they rightly deserve to start the closure," Derrick Dearman said, as quoted by NBC News.

According to the report, Derrick Dearman has sent nine letters to people involved in the case, including Alabama Governor Kay Ivey and Attorney General Steve Marshall. In these letters, he informed them of his decision to cease his appeals and expressed his desire to be executed.

Dearman's decision comes after the Alabama Supreme Court denied his appeal and upheld his six murder convictions. He was charged for six homicides because one of his victims was five months pregnant at the time of the murders.

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UPDATE 2 - Biden Briefed on Earthquake in New Jersey, New York - White House

(Adds quote from Biden in para 4)

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has been briefed on the earthquake in New Jersey and New York and is in touch with his team to monitor the situation, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.

"The President has been briefed on the earthquake, which had an epicenter in New Jersey, and he is in touch with his team who areis [sic] monitoring potential impacts. The White House is in touch with federal, state, and local officials as we learn more," Jean-Pierre said in a social media post.

The White House, in a separate follow-up statement, said Biden discussed the earthquake with New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy and assured him that his administration is coordinating with state and local officials to offer assistance as necessary.

"Regarding the earthquake, I spoke to the governor, [he] thinks everything's under control and is not too concerned about it," Biden said.

Earlier today, a 4.8 magnitude earthquake in New Jersey rattled the New York area and other parts of the northeast. The earthquake was felt throughout the United Nations headquarters and even briefly interrupted a UN Security Council meeting. According to UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric, no damage to the building or disruption has been reported.

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Canada to Do 'Everything Necessary' to Prevent Foreign Interference - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government will continue to do everything it deems necessary to prevent instances of foreign interference in the country, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

Trudeau made the remarks amid allegations by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) on Thursday that India and Pakistan meddled in Canada's 2019 and 2021 elections.

The allegations were made amid the ongoing public inquiry into foreign interference in federal electoral processes and democratic institutions.

"We've known for many, many years that many different countries take an interest in engaging in Canadian institutions and interfering in work of Canadian institutions," Trudeau said. "I can assure people that we will continue to do everything necessary to prevent interference from whatever country it comes from."

CSIS alleges that Pakistani governmental officials sought to clandestinely influence Canadian federal politics in 2019 to further Islamabad's interests in the country.

CSIS also alleges India allegedly attempted to interfere and carry out clandestine operations in Canada, including by using an "Indian government proxy agent."

Trudeau said Canada undertook several measures to counter foreign interference in the country's institutions and electoral processes. The public inquiry's role was to highlight the measures and determine whether more can be done to prevent foreign meddling.

In early September, Canada announced a public inquiry into foreign interference in its federal elections and democratic institutions. The inquiry was mandated to examine and assess alleged interference by China, Russia and other foreign states as well as non-state actors.

China and Russia have both dismissed Canada's claims of interference.

Quebec Court of Appeals judge Marie-Josee Hogue, charged with leading the inquiry, is set to deliver a first interim report by May 3 and a definitive assessment by December 31.

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US House Democrats Draft Legislation to Rename Florida Prison After Trump - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - A group of US House Democrats introduced a bill to rename the Miami Federal Correctional Institution in Florida after former president Donald Trump, the lawmakers said in a statement on Friday.

"Everyone knows President Trump loves to write his name in gold letters on all his buildings," US Congressman Jared Moskowitz said in the statement. "But he's never had his name on a federal building before and as a public servant I just want to help the former president."

The legislation comes in response to a measure introduced earlier this week by House Republicans to rename the Washington Dulles International Airport after Trump.

The bill to rename the Miami federal prison after Trump is backed by Moskowitz and

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Congressmn Gerry Connolly and John Garamendi.
The House Democrats cited Trump's ongoing legal cases as reason to name a prison after the former president and presumptive 2024 Republican presidential nominee rather than an airport.

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Fed Official Says There's Likelihood Things May Evolve in Way That Requires Rate Hike

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve Board of Governors member Michelle Bowman said on Friday that there is a likelihood circumstance in the US economy may evolve in a manner that might require another policy rate increase.
"I do see that there's a likelihood that things could evolve in a way that might require us to affect the policy rate again in an upward way," Bowman said during an event hosted by the Manhattan Institute.

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UN Envoy to Visit Cyprus in May for Third Time Since January - Turkish Cypriot Leader

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The UN secretary-general's personal envoy on Cyprus, Maria Angela Holguin Cuellar, will travel to the island in May, which will be her third visit since she took office in January, Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar said on Friday.
"She visited us twice in these three months," Tatar said during a press conference at the United Nations headquarters in New York. "She is coming back again in May."
Tatar told Sputnik earlier in the day that Holguin is trying to restart reunification talks for Cyprus but there is no common ground yet.
Tatar said in an interview that northern Cyprus is sovereign and demands that its "equal" status be acknowledged by the international community and the United Nations.
Tatar stated that the non-recognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus seeks a practical solution that is fair and sustainable.
Cyprus has been de facto partitioned into a Greek and a Turkish part since 1974. The Turkish Cypriots proclaimed in 1983 the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus with Turkey's backing. Negotiations on the reunification of Cyprus have been underway almost since the partition of the island.
The United Nations has attempted to mediate reunification talks, but the negotiations have reached an impasse. While the Greek Cypriots say they believe the issue can be settled only on the basis of United Nations decisions within the framework of a two-zone federation, the Turkish Cypriots advocate for a solution involving two sovereign states.

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US, Ukrainian Defense Chiefs Discuss Situation on Battlefield - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov discussed the battlefield situation and Kiev's most pressing capability requirements amid the ongoing conflict with Russia, Pentagon deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh said on Friday.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with Ukrainian Minister of Defence Rustem Umerov today regarding developments on the ground and the impact of Russia's continued aerial attacks against civilian critical infrastructure. Secretary Austin and Minister Umerov discussed Ukraine's most pressing capability requirements and reaffirmed the urgent need for the National Security Supplemental," Singh said in a press release.

After the failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in late 2023, Russia went on the offensive on several segments of the lengthy frontline and was able to achieve significant military successes, including the liberation of Avdeevka in February 2024.

Russian troops at present continue to build on their success by moving west from Avdeevka and liberating villages along the way.

Earlier on Friday, Yan Gagin, an adviser to the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) head Denis Pushilin, told Sputnik that the Russian military has entered the suburbs of the city of Chasiv Yar, also known as Chasov Yar, in the DPR, despite the city being heavily fortified and mined over the past year.

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Oil Price Exceeds $90 Per Barrel in Biggest Weekly Rally Since Early February

NEW YORK, April 5 (Sputnik) - Crude prices broke above $90 per barrel on Friday, giving the oil rally its biggest week since early February.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, reached as high as $87.50 by 1:00 p.m. in New York, marking a peak not seen since the $92.45 reached on October 23. For the week, Brent was up 5%, the most since a 6.3% rally since the week that ended on February 2.

US crude, tied to the West Texas Intermediate (WTI) benchmark, hit a session high of $87.49 - the loftiest level since the $88.29 high on October 23. The WTI benchmark gained 5% on the week -, the most since a 6.3% rise during the week that ended on February 2.

This week's run-up in oil, the second in a row, came as Russian energy facilities faced fresh threats from Ukrainian drone attacks, while the conflict in the Middle East appeared to escalate. Both events have a bearing on oil, with Russia being one of the largest exporters of the commodity and the Gaza conflict zone being in the proximity of some of the biggest energy producers.

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"The likelihood that continued restricted Russian product exports could further tighten US petroleum supplies has suddenly forced recalculation of US [oil] balances across the rest of this month and possibly beyond," analyst Jim Ritterbusch said in a note issued earlier this week by his Ritterbusch and Associates company.

In the Middle East, Iran has vowed a heightened war against Israel after an Israeli airstrike that killed two generals and five other military advisers at the Iranian embassy compound in Damascus.

Analysts have warned that a direct Iranian involvement in the Gaza war could spark a region-wide conflict with plausible impact on oil supply.

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US Has No Plans to Conduct Independent Investigation of IDF Strike on WCK – Kirby

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – The United States is not planning to conduct an independent investigation of the Israeli strike on the World Central Kitchen in Gaza which killed seven aid workers earlier this week, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Friday.

“There are no plans for the US to conduct an independent investigation or a separate investigation in this event,” Kirby said during a press briefing.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said earlier on Friday that the United States wants to see an independent, thorough, and full investigation into the deaths of foreign World Central Kitchen staff in the Gaza Strip.

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.

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

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US Federal Reserve May Need to Hike Policy Rate If Progress on Inflation Stalls - Bowman

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WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve might have to increase the policy rate if progress on cooling inflation in the United States is stalled or reversed, Federal Reserve Board of Governors member Michelle Bowman said on Friday.

"While it is not my baseline outlook, I continue to see the risk that at a future meeting we may need to increase the policy rate further should progress on inflation stall or even reverse," Bowman said during a discussion hosted by the Manhattan Institute.

Bowman also said that now is not the appropriate time to lower the policy rate, adding that she continues to see a number of upside risks to inflation.

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US Congresswoman Says Earthquakes, Eclipses Represent 'Strong Signs' From God to Repent

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - An earthquake on the eastern coast of the United States on Friday and a total solar eclipse on April 8 represent signals from God for the country to repent, US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said on Friday.

"God is sending America strong signs to tell us to repent. Earthquakes and eclipses and many more things to come," Greene said in a statement via social media platform X.

Greene said that she prays the US listens to such signals.

Earlier on Friday, a magnitude 4.8 earthquake hit occurred near New York City. The geological event resulted in ground stops at area airports, but there were no life-threatening situations reported, New York Governor Kathy Hochul said.

On April 8, a total solar eclipse will be visible across the US. Solar eclipses occur when the moon blocks out the Sun while passing between the Sun and the Earth. Eclipses have also historically held religious significance or been attributed to supernatural forces.

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Chances Of Aftershocks After Earthquake in New York Remain Low- NYC Emergency Management

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The chances of aftershocks following the earthquake in New York are low, New York City Emergency Management Commissioner Zachary Iscol said on Friday.

"The likelihood of aftershocks remains low but we do remain vigilant," Iscol said during a press conference.

NYC Mayor Eric Adams said during the press conference that as of now there have been no reports of major impacts to infrastructure or injuries, however, the authorities are still assessing the situation.

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Earlier today, an earthquake of 4.8 magnitude rattled the New York area.

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UPDATE - Biden Briefed on Earthquake in New Jersey, New York - White House

(adds new statement from White House in para 3-4)
WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has been briefed on the earthquake in New Jersey and New York and is in touch with his team to monitor the situation, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.
"The President has been briefed on the earthquake, which had an epicenter in New Jersey, and he is in touch with his team who areis [sic] monitoring potential impacts. The White House is in touch with federal, state, and local officials as we learn more," Jean-Pierre said in a social media post.
The White House in a separate follow-up statement said Biden discussed the earthquake with New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy and assured that his administration is coordinating with state and local officials to offer assistance as necessary.
Earlier today, a 4.8 magnitude earthquake in New Jersey rattled the New York area and other parts of the northeast. The earthquake was felt throughout the United Nations headquarters and even briefly interrupted a UN Security Council meeting. According to UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric, no damage to the building or disruption has been reported.

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Miami Port Deputy Director Tells Congress Port Security Funding Needs Boost

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Funding for the security of ports across the United States has shrunk to only 25% of its highest amount, Miami Port Deputy Director Frederick Wong, testifying on behalf of the American Association of Port Authorities told Congress on Friday.
“The Port Security Grant Program (PSGP) was created shortly after 9/11 as Congress realized that ports – as critical infrastructure – were vulnerable to threats," Wong told a hearing of the Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Subcommittee of the Committee on Homeland Security. "However, in the ensuing years, PSGP funding has dwindled to a fourth of its highest appropriated amount."
Wong said the funding was insufficient to finance the programs needed to maintain and upgrade port security across the United States.
"We ask Congress to increase PSGP funding to cover more port projects and ensure that ports are the main recipient of PSGP awards," he said.
The PSGP is the main method by which ports and related groups can make large-scale

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security upgrades to their facilities, Wong explained.

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Elon Musk Says Reuters 'Lying Again' About Tesla Company Updates

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Friday that the media outlet Reuters is "lying again" about the latest updates on his electric vehicle producing company Tesla.

"Reuters is lying (again)," Elon Musk said via his social media platform X (formerly Twitter).

Musk made the comment in response to the tweet by another X user who pointed out to a recent Reuters' article claiming in the headline that the company has scrapped plans to produce low-cost cars.

At the beginning of March, Musk said "the legacy media lies as easy as breathing" in a reference to Reuters as well as other corporate media outlets.

However, Musk emphasized that Reuters is "the worst" among them at present.

Musk has said that he strives to make X a leading news organization with the input of so-called citizen journalism.

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US Attempted to Manipulate UN Security Council About Israel-Gaza Resolutions - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States' representative to the UN Security Council attempted to manipulate the group by making misleading statements about resolutions regarding Israel's conflict with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday.

"Just a few minutes ago, we bore witness to a cynical attempt — an inexcusable attempt — at manipulation on the part of our US colleagues," Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting.

The US representative to the UN mentioned that a call to protect humanitarian aid workers was included in a draft resolution vetoed by Russia and China, Nebenzia said. However, the US failed to mention that a ceasefire resolution ultimately passed by the council included a similar demand, Nebenzia said.

Russia believes that such "low standards" have no place in the UN Security Council, Nebenzia said. The US should instead focus on ending arms supplies to Israel, which are being used to kill Palestinians, Nebenzia said.

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Another Provincial Premier Joins Calls for Meeting with Trudeau on Carbon Tax Hike

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – Four provincial premiers as of Friday have requested Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to meet with them in connection with their opposition to a carbon tax increase that came into effect on April 1.

"Today, I jointed Premiers [Andrew] Furey, [Blaine] Higgs and [Danielle] Smith in calling on Prime Minister Trudeau to convene a First Ministers' meeting on the carbon tax … It's time for leaders to listen to the overwhelming majority of Canadians who oppose the carbon tax and the way it is increasing the cost of living," Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe said via X.

Moe expressed discontent with a tax he considers to be unaffordable, unfair, and ineffective in fulfilling its alleged purpose.

"Canadians expect us to work together, and it's time for you to come to the table," he said.

In March, the prime ministers of Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island issued letters addressed to Trudeau in which they urged him to either halt the planned hike or scrap the carbon tax altogether. The calls were echoed by the premiers of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario and more recently by Manitoba.

Trudeau argued that he would maintain the hike because a tax rebate would reimburse the money to the families paying it and bring more in return to eight in 10 families in participating regions nationwide. The prime minister has also accused Conservative politicians across the country, including some premiers, of "lying" about the carbon tax.

In 2019, the Trudeau government introduced "carbon pricing" aiming to charge fossil fuel distributors for fuel consumed across Canada and tax large industrial companies as major carbon emitters. However, the fiscal measure also affects ordinary citizens who pay more at the pump and have higher energy bills depending on the fuel used to power home heating.

Both fuel distributors and industrial emitters had to adjust to the new rate which went from C$65 ($47) to C$80 ($59) per tonne of carbon on April 1. The tax is set to grow by yearly increments of C$15 (US$11) until it reaches C$170 (US$126) by 2030. In early March, a poll conducted by Leger found that 69% of Canadians opposed the hike.

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Newark, JFK Airports on 'Full Ground Stops' After Earthquake - New York Governor

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The John F. Kennedy and the Newark international airports are on full ground stops to assess potential after effects from the earthquake that hit the region earlier on Friday, New York Governor Kathy Hochul said.

"JFK and Newark airports are on full ground stops to assess any potential for after effects," Hochul said during a press conference.

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New York Governor Says No Life Threatening Situations at This Time After Earthquake

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - New York Governor Kathy Hochul said on Friday that state authorities have not identified any life threatening situations in the area after a 4.8 magnitude earthquake hit the northeast coast of the United States earlier in the day.

"At this point ... we have not identified any life threatening situations," Hochul said during a press conference.

Another state official said they have no reports of damage in the state at this time due to the earthquake.

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No Damage, Disruption Reported at UNHQ in New York Following Earthquake - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - There was no disruption or damage to the UN's main building in New York following the local earthquake, UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric told Sputnik on Friday.

“The earthquake was felt throughout the United Nations headquarters building but no damage or disruption has been reported,” Dujarric said.

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UPDATE - Russian Consulate Visitors in NY Temporarily Evacuated Amid Earthquake - Consul General

(updates lede, adds details in para 4)

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - The visitors of the Russian Consulate located in New York were temporarily taken outside of the premises due to a short-term earthquake in the New York area, Russian Consul General in New York Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik,

"We temporarily asked visitors of the Consulate General to leave the building. Now, if there is no second wave, we expect that we will be able to resume work," Zakharov said.

According to him, an assessment remains to be made to determine whether the building was damaged.

Earlier today, an earthquake of 4.8 magnitude rattled the New York area. The earthquake was also felt throughout the United Nations headquarters and even briefly interrupted an ongoing UNSC meeting. According to UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric, no damage to the building or

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disruption has been reported.

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Meta to Tag AI-Created Images, Videos on Its Social Media Platforms - Vice President

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Meta has decided to tag all Artificial Intelligence (AI)-created images and video and audio content on its social media platforms Facebook and Instagram (outlawed in Russia as extremist organizations), Vice President of Content Policy Monika Bickert said on Friday.

"We are making changes to the way we handle manipulated media based on feedback from the Oversight Board and our policy review process with public opinion surveys and expert consultations," Bickert said in a statement.

According to the statement, Meta plans to tag video, audio and image content with the statement "Made with AI" based on AI indicators or user disclosure.

"We agree with the Oversight Board's recommendation that providing transparency and additional context is now the better way to address manipulated media and avoid the risk of unnecessarily restricting freedom of speech, so we'll keep this content on our platforms so we can add labels and context," Bricked said.

Meta also plans to tag AI-generated content beginning in May and by July will cease removing content based solely on its policy on manipulated videos.

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UN Envoy Trying to Restart Cyprus Reunification Talks But No Common Ground for Now - Tatar

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The UN Secretary-General's personal envoy Maria Angela Holguin Cuellar is trying to restart reunification talks for Cyprus but has not yet found common ground, Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar told Sputnik on Friday.

"The UN Secretary-General has a personal envoy Maria Angela Holguin Cuellar who has just completed her three-months-long assignment. She's got another three months, she's trying to find out whether there's common ground or not for negotiations to start," Tatar said. "However, up to now, there is no common ground."

Tatar noted that Northern Cyprus is sovereign and demands that its equal status is re-acknowledged by the international community and the United Nations.

"We are co-founders of the Republic of Cyprus, but unfortunately, the Greek Cypriots forget this and they want to treat the Turkish Cypriots as a minority and impose an unacceptable solution to Turkish Cypriots," Tatar said. "We will never accept this."

Tatar emphasized that the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus seeks a practical solution that is fair and sustainable.

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"This is very important. It should be fair, lasting, sustainable and practical, because at the moment, we have two states in Cyprus. We have two peoples, two democracies, two authorities and this has been the case for 60 years," Tatar said. "Therefore, there is no way that you can switch the clock back."

Cyprus has been de facto partitioned into a Greek and a Turkish part since 1974. The Turkish Cypriots proclaimed in 1983 the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus with Turkey's backing. Negotiations on the reunification of Cyprus have been underway almost since the partition of the island.

The United Nations has attempted to mediate reunification talks, but the negotiations have reached an impasse. While the Greek Cypriots say they believe the issue can be settled only on the basis of United Nations decisions within the framework of a two-zone federation, the Turkish Cypriots advocate for a solution to involve two sovereign states.

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Tatar Says Will Discuss With UN Chief Ill-Treatment of Turkish Cypriots by Int'l Community

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar told Sputnik on Friday that he will meet with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres later in the day and will raise the issue of ill-treatment of Turkish Cypriots by the international community.

"I am meeting with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at about noon," Tatar said. "I would like to obviously pass on the message that Turkish Cypriots are very much ill-treated by the international community."

Tatar noted that an embargo had been imposed on Northern Cyprus that restricts its economic growth.

"It's so unfair on Turkey Cypriots," Tatar said. "Greek Cypriots have hijacked the state and the Republic of Cyprus is basically a pure Greek republic."

Tatar noted that Turkish Cypriots established a state in 1963 out of necessity and demand that their right to be sovereign is respected.

"After sixty years, we demand that our sovereignty be re-acknowledged. Our sovereignty is in the constitution. Therefore, it's our right," Tatar said.

Cyprus has been de facto partitioned into a Greek and a Turkish part since 1974. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was proclaimed in 1983 with the backing of Turkey. Negotiations on the reunification of Cyprus have been underway almost since the partition of the island.

The United Nations has attempted to mediate reunification talks, but the negotiations have reached an impasse. While the Greek Cypriots have said they believe the issue can be settled only on the basis of United Nations decisions within the framework of a two-zone federation, the Turkish Cypriots advocate establishing two sovereign states.

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Biden Briefed on Earthquake in New Jersey, New York - White House

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has been briefed on the earthquake in New Jersey and New York and is in touch with his team to monitor the situation, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.

"The President has been briefed on the earthquake, which had an epicenter in New Jersey, and he is in touch with his team who areis [sic] monitoring potential impacts. The White House is in touch with federal, state, and local officials as we learn more," Jean-Pierre said in a social media post.

Earlier in the day, a magnitude 4.8 earthquake rattled New Jersey and New York.

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Turkish Cypriot Leader Says Met With US State Dept. Officials in Washington on Thursday

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar told Sputnik on Friday that he met with the US State Department officials in Washington a day earlier as part of his visit to the United States.

"I was in Washington yesterday. I had several meetings with some people from the State Department and I met some people from the Hudson Institute," Tatar said.

Tatar added that he also met with the media representatives.

Later on Friday, Tatar is scheduled to meet with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was established in 1983 with the backing of Turkey after Cyprus was partitioned in 1974 into a Turkish and a Greek part.

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No Reports of Structural Damage or Disruptions to NY Transportation After Quake - NYPD

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - No structural damage or service disruptions to the New York public transportation have been reported in the wake of an earthquake, New York City Police Department Chief of Transit Michael Kemper said on Friday.

"Was briefed by my team in regard to the earthquake," Kemper wrote on X . "There are no current reports of any structural damage and/or service disruptions to the NYC Transit system as a result."

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Russian Men Plead Guilty to $4.5Mln Scheme to Sell Aircraft Parts to Russia - Justice Dept

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – Two Russian men pleaded guilty this week to an alleged conspiracy to deliver sensitive and export-controlled aviation parts to Russian end users for a total of more than $4.5 million, the Justice Department said on Friday.

"Two Russian nationals pleaded guilty this week to conspiracy to violate the Export Control Reform Act (ECRA) in connection with a scheme to acquire and unlawfully export controlled aviation technology to Russian end users," the department said in a press release.

US prosecutors allege that Vasilii Besedin and Oleg Patsulya, who reside in Florida, conspired in May 2022 to establish an export channel to deliver US-made aviation technology in circumvention of export controls and sanctions imposed on Russia after the start of its special military operation in Ukraine, the release said.

In one episode, Besedin and Patsulya allegedly conspired to send multiple shipments of a carbon disc brake system for Boeing 737 aircraft and to accomplish this, provided suppliers with false information about the destination of the parts, according to the release.

Patsulya allegedly received a total of $4,582,288 in his US bank accounts from Russian airline companies, but as part of his plea the defendant agreed to forfeit this exact sum of money, the release said.

Both defendants pleaded guilty to conspiracy to export restricted aviation parts to Russia in violation of the Export Control Reform Act and face a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison, the release added. Patsulya also pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit international money laundering with a maximum prison sentence of 20 years.

A US federal district court will sentence the defendants on June 17, according to the release.

The West stepped up sanctions pressure on Russia after the start of Moscow's special military operation in February 2022. President Vladimir Putin has said the policy of containing and weakening Russia is the West's long-term strategy, and the restrictions have affected the entire global economy. According to Putin, the main goal of the West is to make the lives of millions of people worse. Moscow has repeatedly said Russia will solve all problems the West creates for it.

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Russian Consulate Visitors in NY Were Temporarily Evacuated Amid Earthquake-Consul General

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - The visitors of the Russian Consulate located in New York were temporarily taken outside of the premises due to a short-term earthquake in the New York area.

“We temporarily asked visitors of the Consulate General to leave the building. Now, if there is no second wave, we expect that we will be able to resume work,” Zakharov said.

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According to him, an assessment remains to be made to determine whether the building was damaged.
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Earthquake in New Jersey May Impact Air Traffic in New York, Philadelphia - FAA

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - The 4.8 earthquake that struck New Jersey may have an impact on air transportation in New York and other neighboring US states, Federal Aviation Administration spokesperson Crystal Essiaw said on Friday.
"A 4.8 magnitude earthquake in New Jersey may impact some air traffic facilities in New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia and Baltimore. Air traffic operations are resuming as quickly as possible," the spokesperson said in a statement shared with Sputnik.

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Early Assessments Show No Damage to Statue of Liberty After Earthquake - Parks Department

NEW YORK CITY, April 5 (Sputnik) - Preliminary assessments show there is no damage to the Statue of Liberty after a 4.8 earthquake struck New York and New Jersey, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation told Sputnik.
"Early assessments showing no damage on Liberty or Ellis Islands," the department said.

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Magnitude 4.8 Earthquake Hit West of Manhattan, Felt Throughout New York - Governor

NEW YORK CITY, April 5 (Sputnik) - New York governor Kathy Hochul said on Friday that a magnitude 4.8 earthquake has struck the west of Manhattan and has been felt throughout New York
"A 4.8 magnitude earthquake hit west of Manhattan and has been felt throughout New York. My team is assessing impacts and any damage that may have occurred, and we will update the public throughout the day," Hochul wrote on X.
One of New York's landmarks, the Empire State Building, posted on X in the wake of the quake: "I am fine."

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RECAST - Magnitude 4.8 Earthquake Strikes Greater New York Area, New Jersey - USGS

(Recasts to correct attribution in headline)
WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - A magnitude 4.8 earthquake hit New York and New Jersey on Friday, the United States Geological Survey said.
The European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre estimated the magnitude at 5.5.
A UN Security Council meeting was briefly interrupted as the tremor rattled the UN headquarters, a Sputnik correspondent earlier reported.

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Magnitude 4.8 Earthquake Strikes Greater New York Area, New Jersey - EMSC

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - A magnitude 4.8 earthquake hit New York and New Jersey on Friday, the United States Geological Survey said.
The European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre estimated the magnitude at 5.5.
A UN Security Council meeting was briefly interrupted as the tremor rattled the UN headquarters, a Sputnik correspondent earlier reported.

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UN Security Council Meeting Briefly Interrupted Due to Earthquake

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council meeting on Friday was briefly interrupted due to an earthquake, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Friday.
The UN Security Council was discussing the situation in Palestine, when the UN headquarters building began to shake as a result of the earthquake and cause the meeting to be briefly stopped. However, the meeting continued shortly thereafter.

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UN Humanitarian Official Says Clearly ‘No Protection’ of Civilians in Gaza Strip

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UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - There are clearly no protections for civilians located in the Gaza Strip, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs official Ramesh Rajasingham said on Friday.

"It's clear: there is no protection of civilians in Gaza," Rajasingham said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

More than 32,000 people in Gaza have been killed and more than 35,000 injured, Rajasingham said, citing local health authorities. At least two-thirds of the casualties are women and children, Rajasingham said.

Civilians in Gaza must be allowed to seek protection elsewhere if it is not provided in the Palestinian enclave, Rajasingham said.

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Schumer Says Wants to Work on 'Path Forward' on TikTok Legislation - Letter

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said in a letter to his colleagues on Friday that he wants to work on a "path forward" on legislation concerning TikTok that would require its parent company ByteDance to divest from the social media platform.

"In the weeks and months ahead, we have the opportunity to make progress on bipartisan bills that enhance our national security, advance online safety for kids and promote innovation, expand the Child Tax Credit, work on a path forward on Tik Tok legislation," the letter said.

On March 13, the US House of Representatives passed legislation that requires TikTok to cut ties with its China-based parent company ByteDance within 180 days or face a ban in the United States amid concerns about user privacy and foreign influence ahead of the November US presidential election.

TikTok has denied that its application poses a security threat to US users. The United States, European Union and Canada recently banned their government employees from using TikTok on official electronic devices.

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UPDATE - US Adds 303,000 Jobs in March, Beating Forecasts And Toughening Fed Path

(Adds comments, details and context in paragraphs 3-16)

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.

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"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 303,000 in March, and the unemployment rate 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 revised down February's jobs growth to 270,000 from a previously published 275,000. Net change in job creation — between what was first published and later amended — stood at 22,000 for February and January combined.

Wage growth was also back up in March at 0.3% after sliding to 0.1% in February from 0.6% in January.

"The wage numbers are hotter than they look," economist Adam Button said in a reaction posted on the ForexLive forum. "You have to take this one at face value. Treasury yields are rising 4-5 bps (basis points) on this across the curve. The US dollar is up 20-30 pips as well."

A rise in Treasury yields and the dollar indicate Wall Street's displeasure with the sterling US labor market — which while being great for Americans seeking employment isn't that fabulous for market punters counting on the Fed to expeditiously cut rates.

The central bank needs two things to cool before it can ratchet down interest rates: inflation and the plentiful jobs situation that gives Americans the confidence and ability to continue spending in a country where at least 70% of the economy is dictated by consumer behavior.

Runaway inflation triggered by supply chain breakdowns and business slowdowns in the aftermath of the COVID-19 prompted the Fed to hike rates by as many as 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023. That brought rates to a range of between 5.25% and 5.5% — versus the zero to 0.25% range introduced soon after the start of the pandemic.

The 5.25% to 5.5% range has been in place since July last year.

The central bank has said that it wants to see inflation drop to around 2% per annum before embarking on rate cuts.

While policy-makers the world over typically celebrate on seeing good jobs numbers, the Fed is in a different predicament as it is tasked with ensuring both "maximum employment" for Americans and sustainable inflation.

The central bank's mandate on inflation has put it at odds with the Biden administration, which wants the labor market to continue growing the way it is until at least November's election, when voters will choose between keeping President Joe Biden or reelecting his predecessor Donald Trump.

Biden gloated on Friday at the latest job numbers, noting in a statement that "we have passed the milestone of 15 million jobs created since I took office."

Unemployment in the United States is at five-decade lows, with the March jobless rate of 3.8% being better than February's 3.9% and the Fed's 4% target for maximum employment.

But inflation is a different story.

The Fed's favorite inflation indicator — the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index — grew 2.5% year-on-year last month. Another widely-watched price gauge — the Consumer Price Index — grew 3.2% in the year to February.

The central bank has forecast a 75-basis point rate cut each for 2024 and 2025. But it hasn't set a schedule for this and Wall Street remains hopeful of the first snip occurring by June. The Fed's next decision on rates is on May 2.

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UN Chief Wants to Investigate Why Each of 196 Humanitarian Workers Were Killed in Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday that the UN wants to find out not only why seven World Central Kitchen workers were slain this week in an Israeli strike in Gaza, but also why each of of the 196 humanitarian workers were killed in the territory.

"The question is not only this specific incident;196 humanitarian workers have been killed, and we want to know why each one of them was killed," Guterres told journalists.

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Canada's Unemployment Rate Rises to 6.1% in March – StatCan

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – Canada's unemployment rate inched up 0.3 percentage points to 6.1% in March, the country's statistics agency said on Friday.

"The unemployment rate rose 0.3 percentage points to 6.1% in March, bringing the cumulative increase over the past 12 months to 1.0 percentage points," Statistics Canada (StatCan) said in its latest Labor Force Survey.

Rising unemployment was driven by an additional 60,000 Canadians searching for a job or who are on temporary layoff, StatCan said. March data has brought the total number of unemployed Canadians to 1.3 million, an increase of 247,000 (+23.0%) compared with 12 months earlier.

Most job losses were recorded in the areas of accommodation and food services, wholesale and retail trade as well as professional, scientific and technical services, StatCan said. Growth was only observed in four industries, led by health care and social assistance, it added.

The latest figure marks the sixth consecutive month in which employment rates decrease, according to StatCan. It is also the largest increase in unemployment since summer 2022.

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Blinken Says US to Carefully Review Changes Proposed by Israel After WCK Incident

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – The United States will review carefully the changes proposed by Israel concerning its deconfliction procedures in the wake of the incident resulting in seven World Central Kitchen (WCK) workers killed in an IDF strike, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"Prime Minister Netanyahu indicated to President [Joe] Biden that Israel would be making

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further changes to its procedures to make sure that those who are providing assistance to people who so desperately need it in Gaza are protected. So, we are going to be looking very carefully at what those steps are, how it achieves better deconfliction, better coordination so that aid workers are protected," Blinken told reporters in Brussels.

Blinken underscored that the protection of civilian lives should be of primary importance in Israel's planning of its military operations and not the other way around.

The top US diplomat also noted that it is important that Israel take full responsibility for the deadly incident with WCK and do everything possible to ensure that something like this can never happen again.

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.

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

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