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Western Media Forced to Admit That FABs Are 'Game Changer'

Over the past week, Western media outlets have reluctantly admitted the power of the Russian FAB glide bombs. An article published on Sunday quoted a pro-Ukrainian analyst, admitting that they have "practically no countermeasures."

The FAB glide bombs have been such a game changer in Ukraine that even Western media outlets are forced to concede their effectiveness, which has tormented Ukraine's defenses on the front line as their use has increased.

"The Western press is calling this weapon a game changer," Security and international relations expert Mark Sleboda told Sputnik's Fault Lines on Wednesday. "And for once, I might actually agree with them. This weapon has been a game changer."

FABs, which are old Soviet-era bombs retrofitted with inexpensive pop-out wings and targeting systems to transform them into "smart bombs" devastated Kiev forces in Avdeyevka, forcing a chaotic retreat from the heavily fortified city.

Essentially the equivalent to the US JDAM missiles, the FABs are more accurate and powerful, Sleboda explained. "They come in a variety of sizes, from 250kg" up to 1,500kg, he explained. "And the new ones that are soon supposed to hit the battlefield are 3,000kg. That's a three-ton bomb," he noted, adding that it can "demolish" a fortification in "one shot."

"It just leaves a big smoking crater in the ground," Sleboda emphasized.

Meanwhile, the few JDAMs supplied to Ukraine have had little effect on the battlefield because the Kiev regime lacks an air force that can penetrate Russia's air defenses. In contrast, Russia has been using the FABs frequently, noting that more than 500 of them were dropped on Avdeyevka in the last few days of the attack on the city.

"The only way to counter [FABs] is if you have really long-range air defense, which the Kiev regime has none left of," Sleboda explained, adding that a Patriot system may have the capability to target the planes dropping FABs but even that is questionable as advancements in FABs have increased their range as the conflict has gone on.

"Other than that, there's really nothing. You have to shoot down the planes [that] drop them or have really substantial air defense capable of targeting them incoming," Sleboda continued. "The regime has neither left, which is why now they're making a big splash on the battlefield. Russia is free to use them because all of [Ukraine's] Soviet legacy air defense, all the hodgepodge of Western air defense that's been sent to them is gone."

Noting that because they come from Cold War stockpiles, Sleboda explained that Russia has an "effectively unlimited supply" of FABs. "They are going to vastly accelerate the Russian process of dismantling the Kiev regime's fortified positions, [these] urban areas that have been turned into fortresses."

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'Incompetent' Western Leaders Better 'Think Twice' Before Provoking China

Tensions between the US and China have grown as the US has been more aggressive asserting itself in the South China Sea, started military alliances with Australia and Japan and placed US troops on small Taiwanese islands within eyesight of the Chinese mainland.

After it failed in Ukraine, the collective West better "think twice" before provoking a conflict with China, military veteran, author and international geopolitical consultant Dr. David Oualaalou told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Wednesday.

While speaking about NATO plans to open an office in Japan, Oualaalou said that it "doesn't make any sense" to put an office for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the Pacific unless "this is where the next conflict will be."

"The Western leaders, as incompetent as they are, better think twice, because China is not Ukraine," Oualaalou warned.

The aggressive posture of the United States comes not from the democratic process, but from what Oualaalou called "the hidden hand" of weapon manufacturers like Lockheed Martin and Raytheon. "[They] are the ones pushing for this direction [in] US foreign policy, which is not going to bode well for the average Joe, average Jane, here at home."

"Until, at some point, [people] say 'enough is enough,'" this situation will continue, Oualaalou argued. "We've already crossed that point. Something has to change, period."

Co-host Garland Nixon noted that in Europe the same aggressive actions have continued, despite NATO's failure in Ukraine, noting plans to station NATO troops in eastern European countries, including Lithuania, Moldova and possibly Ukraine itself.

"It's laughable," Oualaalou began. "For France [to be] thinking about sending its troops, they will be wiped out by the Russians in one afternoon. And the same thing with the UK, [they are] just sort of barking. It just doesn't make any sense."

Earlier, Oualaalou addressed the news that the US plans to send $138 million to Ukraine for repairs to its failing Hawk air defense systems.

"What is it going to be for? That's the fundamental question that Americans need to understand," Oualaalou pleaded. "And when you hear the statements of the secretary general of NATO [Jens] Stoltenberg that in case Trump wins the election, we need to allocate $100 billion for the next five years. $100 billion for the next five years? Ukraine will cease to exist in five years if they keep going at this rate," Oualaalou exclaimed.

"I am starting to be convinced that negotiating with the Russians is inevitable. The question is when it's going to happen," he concluded.

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US Convincing World It 'Has to be Marginalized' With Actions on Global Stage

Last month, a group of 27 bipartisan US lawmakers requested that US President Joe Biden block a top Iranian government official from entering the US for the UN General Assembly meetings in September.

The United States is discrediting the institutions it designed and convincing the world it needs to be marginalized through its actions on the world stage, Dr. Seyed Mohammad Marandi told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Wednesday.

While discussing requests from US lawmakers to US President Joe Biden to bar top Iranian diplomats from attending the upcoming UN meeting in New York, Marandi said the "harassment" of Iranian officials is not uncommon from the US but each instance is "further discrediting the United States," and "The city of New York as a center for international conferences and international negotiations."

The US is obligated under the 1947 UN agreement on headquarters to allow foreign diplomats, even from adversarial countries, access to meetings.

"As the United States becomes more irrational in its diplomatic approach, [it will] create an incentive for the Global South and the international community to rely less on the UN and to focus more on building new regional or international organizations, such as BRICS, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," Marandi explained.

The United States shaped the UN and other international bodies after World War II and did so to their own benefit, Marandi said. "The UN Security Council is a body that is completely undemocratic. The US and four other countries have permanent seats and they have a right to veto,"he continued. "And then, the United States can't even tolerate the presence of Iranian diplomats in the building."

Marandi linked the actions to the US' recent weaponization of financial institutions, presumably referring to the freezing of Afghan, Russian and Syrian assets.

"The United States, which has been benefiting from these financial institutions and [...] from the fact that the US dollar has been used globally because it's weaponizing them, [but] ultimately, it's weakening these bodies and the US dollar."

Asked about US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's comments that he saw "no evidence" of genocide by Israel in Gaza, Marandi said that behavior is also wrecking the United States' standing in the world.

"The immorality of the statements aside, the fact that the United States is behaving in this manner, whether it regards foreign diplomats, whether it regards financial institutions and the US dollar, or whether it regards the massacre of women in children, this behavior is wrecking the United States [and] its position across the world. They've wrecked themselves," Marandi explained.

"Now, on the global stage, the United States is not only seen as an accomplice in genocide but a genocide denier."

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War, New Fiscal Policy Rules and Austerity to Turn EU Into US

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children." - Eisenhower

Earlier this week, Finnish Finance Minister Riikka Purra told a local newspaper that cuts will need to be made to pensions in the country as it attempts to cut an additional €3 billion from its budget. It was the latest in a string of European countries telling its citizens to prepare for belt-tightening even as the EU approved €50 billion in aid for Ukraine.

The austerity measures by the Finnish government come as it is increasing its military budget to be in line with NATO's requirement that member nations spend at least 2% of their GDP on defense.

It also comes as New Fiscal Rules in Europe are set to constrain how EU member states can handle their debt, a move almost assured to lead to more austerity, as some of the countries with the highest debt-to-GDP ratios, including France, Italy and Poland, work to restock their military supplies after sending them to Ukraine.

"High-debt countries like Italy, France, Spain, Netherlands, Poland, and Belgium face the biggest consolidation demands," explained chief economist and head of the Economics

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Department of the Austrian Trade Unions Confederation Helene Schuberth, in an interview with independent media outlet Naked Capitalism. “For instance, Italy has to reduce its fiscal deficit by 1% of GDP per year. France has to consolidate nearly as much.”

Europe, in contrast to the US, has had a relatively robust social safety net. Universal healthcare and education is the standard across the continent. Pensions and unions are common as are housing subsidies for the poor.

Compounding matters is what has been called an “energy crisis” in Europe. Western sanctions on Russia, have forced the EU to turn to the US for its supplies, in addition to buying Russian gas through a third party.

Russia has “for decades been a very well-received and inexpensive trading partner with Europe. Now, Europe is prevented from engaging in that trade,” Dr. Linwood Tauheed, an associate professor of economics at the University of Missouri told Sputnik’s The Critical Hour on Thursday.

All of this, of course, works to the benefit of the United States. Not only has Europe been forced to buy expensive gas, but the rising cost of energy has caused de-industrialization across the continent, particularly in Germany, which was previously a global economic and industrial powerhouse. Much of that industrialization has moved across the pond to the US, where energy and labor remain relatively cheap.

Additionally, the new military purchases are almost certainly going to benefit US weapon manufacturers.

“That military spending increase comes into the US, mainly [from] US weapons manufacturers, and therefore you get growth in the US,” Tauheed explained. “So the US gets a bump because of increased military hardware spending and the EU goes into austerity because of cuts to pensions and free education and healthcare and so forth.”

In the last quarter of 2023, Europe’s economy saw no growth while the US grew only 2.5% throughout the year, a figure Tauheed argues is partially the result of Europe’s deindustrialization. “So we have one entity – the US – that is basically sucking the blood out of the other entity, which is the EU,” Tauheed explained.

However, Europe’s austerity measures are unlikely to help those countries balance their budget. The decreased social spending by the government decreases consumer spending and ultimately those countries’ GDP. That will, in turn, lead to more austerity.

After the financial crisis in 2008, Europe responded with austerity measures while the US implemented a financial bailout. The countries with the strictest austerity measures showed the slowest signs of recovery. In addition, they also saw an increase in suicides and a decrease in healthcare effectiveness. They also failed to address their debts and Italy’s banks saw cuts in their Moody credit rating as a result.

“The ultimate goal of this process is to dismantle welfare programs, to dismantle free health care, free education, housing subsidies and so forth in the EU,” Tauheed said.

“This is going as planned, to have the EU eliminate those [programs] so that it can be said that there are no better alternatives than for-profit healthcare and expensive education since the EU couldn’t sustain [it],” Tauheed speculated.

And with that, the EU will move closer to the US, not only economically and politically, but in appearance. Europe’s leaders are once again faced with the question that has haunted world leaders since the dawn of civilization in one form or another: guns or butter?

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After generations of the highest standards of living in the world, Europe is increasingly moving towards guns, while its citizens struggle to buy butter.

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Mexican Embassy Raid: Jorge Glas is 'Ecuador's Julian Assange'

Last week, Ecuadorian security forces barged into the Mexican embassy in Quito and seized former Ecuadorian Vice President Jorge Glas, drawing condemnation from UN Secretary-General António Guterres. Mexico has since severed diplomatic ties with Ecuador and requested that the UN expel the country from the international body.

In many ways, Jorge Glas is the Ecuadorian equivalent to Julian Assange, Ecuadorian journalist and editor of The Cradle Esteban Carrillo told Sputnik's Fault Lines on Thursday.

"This man who was being persecuted, who has been made to be the ultimate evil in Ecuador, humiliated, dehumanized, [is] our own Julian Assange in many ways," Carrillo contended.

Glas reportedly attempted suicide last week and is now on a hunger strike. He was transferred to a hospital on Tuesday and is now said to be in stable condition. Glas served as vice president of Ecuador from 2013 to 2017. He was released from prison in 2022 after serving more than four years. Glas has long maintained that the corruption charges against him are politically motivated.

Ecuador, under a previous administration, gave Julian Assange asylum in the country's embassy in the UK, before the UK government convinced the then-Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno to revoke his asylum.

Though the situations differ significantly: Assange is a journalist while Glas was a public official and Ecuador's recognized government approved the UK operation to arrest Assange, the Ecuadorian connection and the fact that both events include police storming an embassy make the parallels difficult to ignore

"[The storming of the Mexican embassy] can leave [no] doubt that Jorge Glas is being persecuted politically. He is a political prisoner of the [Ecuadorian President] Daniel Noboa government, and he was a political president of [former Ecuadorian presidents] Guillermo Lasso and Lenin Moreno governments," Carrillo explained.

"Why? Because when he was vice president, in Ecuador, we had an earthquake, a very bad earthquake, he led the reconstruction efforts in [the] province where the earthquake hit worst," Carrillo began. "He built a park that didn't exist before. He built a park on top of a hole in the ground. And this, according to the attorney general's office, is corruption."

Glas was accused of corruption and bribery related to those construction efforts. Prosecutors alleged and convicted Glas of taking bribes from a Brazilian construction company. Glas maintains that the case against him was built on "lies." Glas was a part of the leftist Rafael Correa government.

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Moreno, who was once an ally of both Correa and Glas, turned sharply right after entering office and removed Glas' powers as vice president before eventually having him arrested. Successive Ecuadorian leaders have come from the political right in the country.

“This is a man who, just like Julian Assange is hanging on by a thread, is holding onto a hope that there is a light at the end of the tunnel and now, thankfully, you have international actors,” working on behalf of Glas, Carrillo explained. “You have Mexico saying ‘We still consider him an asylee. We still consider that he has asylum with us. You [also] have the [Organization of American States] OAS saying the Ecuadorian government needs to give him safe passage to Mexico because that is what international conventions say. You violated his rights, his human rights, he needs to be in Mexico where they granted him political asylum.”

“Jorge Glas is a trophy. He was vice president for Rafael Correa during his 10 years of a leftist government in Ecuador that did so much for the country,” much in the same way Assange is for the US security state, Carrillo explained.

Europe, in contrast to the US, has had a relatively robust social safety net. Universal healthcare and education is the standard across the continent. Pensions and unions are common as are housing subsidies for the poor.

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But that may be about to change. With a new fiscal policy that constrains how countries in the EU can deal with their debts, growing demands that NATO nations spend 2% GDP on the military and rising energy costs resulting from sanctions on Russia, that may be about to change.

Earlier this week, Finnish Finance Minister Riikka Purra told a local newspaper that cuts will need to be made to pensions, and other countries across Europe are planning their own austerity measures, resulting in protests across the continent.

This comes in the wake of Europe pledging to send €50 billion in aid to Ukraine over the next few years, in addition to support from individual governments.

“The ultimate goal of this process is to dismantle welfare programs, to dismantle free health care, free education, housing subsidies and so forth in the EU,” Dr. Linwood Tauheed, an associate professor of economics at the University of Missouri told Sputnik’s The Critical Hour on Thursday.

“This is going as planned, to have the EU eliminate those [programs] so that it can be said that there are no better alternatives than for-profit healthcare and expensive education since the EU couldn’t sustain [it],” Tauheed speculated.

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US Expects Major Iranian Attack Against Israel as Soon as Friday - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The United States expects a major Iranian retaliation against Israel in response to the April 1 attack on its consulate in Damascus as soon as Friday, CBS reported, citing two US officials.

The attack may target military sites inside the country with over 100 drones and dozens of missiles, the report said.

The officials are not ruling out that the Iranians could opt for a smaller-scale attack to avoid a drastic escalation, but their retaliation is believed to be imminent, the report added.

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Biden Administration Opposes Amendment on Bill Allowing Surveillance on Foreigners Abroad

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The Biden Administration opposes an amendment brought by Representative Andy Biggs that would have made Section 702 a stand-alone piece of legislation over worries that it could be used to circumvent constitutional protections of US citizens, the White House said.

"...the Administration strongly opposes the amendment proposed by Rep. Biggs to H.R. 7888 that would rebuild a wall around, and thus block our access to, already lawfully collected information in the possession of the U.S. Government," the statement said on Thursday.

The release added that the expiration of Section 702 would prevent the United States from gathering important insights into threats to the American people, including terrorist threats, fentanyl supply chains, and spies belonging to hostile governments.

"To protect the American people, we need to maintain this vital collection authority while strengthening its protective guardrails with the most robust set of reforms ever included in legislation to reauthorize Section 702, and H.R. 7888 does that," the statement continued.

Last month, lawmakers sent a letter to House leaders urging them to make Section 702 a stand-alone piece of legislation in order to prevent what they felt was misuse of the surveillance authority by the US government.

In February, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that the House of Representatives will consider legislation to reform and reauthorize Section 702 at a later date, in order to grant lawmakers more time to come to a consensus on how to move forward.

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China Militarizing Merchant Marine, Has 100 Times US Shipbuilding Capacity - General

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WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - China is militarizing its merchant marine force and enormous shipbuilding capacity, now 100 times the size of the United States, to dominate maritime activity in the Indo-Pacific region, US Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) head General Jacqueline Van Olst told a congressional hearing.

"The PRC [People's Republic of China] is militarizing its merchant marine force, not only to compete with Western powers but also to dominate maritime activity in the Pacific," Van Olst said in her testimony to a House Armed Services Committee (HASC) hearing on the posture and readiness of the TRANSCOM and MARAD (United States Maritime Administration) Mobility Enterprise on Thursday.

China is now estimated to have controlling stakes in 96 foreign ports in 53 countries, Van Olst told the committee.

"The PRC builds 100 times the number of ocean-going vessels as compared to the 20 United States, makes 80% of ship-to-shore cranes used in the United States, and produces 85% of the world's shipping containers," she said.

Also, China invests $132 billion in subsidies for shipping and shipbuilding, Van Olst added.

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Biden Growing Frustrated With Congress Delay to Approve Ukraine Aid, No Plan B - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is growing frustrated with Congress' delay in approving new Ukraine aid because it has no backup plan to help Kiev, Bloomberg News reported citing people familiar with the matter.

The report said on Thursday that the Biden administration is also growing frustrated with allies in Europe over delays on their part to put together a plan to use profits from frozen sovereign Russian assets to help Ukraine.

There are concerns mounting that Russian forces could make major gains in Ukraine in the coming weeks, the report noted.

US officials said "there is no Plan B" for the United States to help Ukraine aside from the $60 billion in military aid included in the Senate-passed supplemental bill, the report said.

Earlier this week, House Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters that he and his colleagues are still reviewing different options to potentially take on the Ukraine aid issue.

Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene and other Republican hardliners have threatened to move forward on a motion to oust Johnson from his position as House Speaker if they are displeased with his handling of funding for Ukraine.

The United States has been unable to provide Ukraine with significant security packages since funding ran out in late December.

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Biden in Meeting With Philippines President Discussed S. China Sea Security - White House

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in a meeting with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos discussed maritime security issues in the South China Sea, among other matters of mutual concern, the White House said in a press release.

"President Biden met today at the White House with President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. of the Philippines," the release said on Thursday. "President Biden and President Marcos underscored their commitment to international law in the South China Sea."

The release further said that Biden reinforced the United States' commitment to the Philippines under the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, which covers any armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft—to include those of its Coast Guard— in the Pacific, including anywhere in the South China Sea.

The statement is made in light of heightened tensions between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea.

Moreover, Biden and Marcos also reviewed new initiatives to enhance economic and energy security, bolster maritime cooperation, and invest in critical infrastructure, among other topics, the release noted.

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US Lawmakers Introduce Bill to Fund Repair of Collapsed Baltimore Bridge - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The US state of Maryland's federal congressional delegation introduced legislation to fully fund the replacement of the collapsed Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore, the lawmakers said in a statement.

The legislation, dubbed the Baltimore Bridge Response Invests and Delivers Global Economic (BRIDGE) Relief Act, amends the federal cost-share requirement for emergency relief funding, the statement said on Thursday.

"As we continue to mourn the lives lost in Baltimore, we are committed to doing everything we can to support our City, our state, and our workers. That's why federal Team Maryland is putting forward this bipartisan legislation to ensure the federal government covers the full cost of rebuilding the bridge as safely and quickly as possible - and that federal taxpayers benefit from any monies recovered from those found responsible," Senator Chris Van Hollen said in the statement.

The bill reiterates current laws requiring any funds recovered from applicable insurance or liable parties to be used to reimburse taxpayers for the cost of replacing the bridge, the statement said.

On March 26, the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed after being struck by a cargo ship. Six people were killed in the incident.

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UPDATE - US Airlines Urge Biden to Pause Approval of More Flights to US By Chinese Airlines -Letter

(Updates with Chinese Embassy reaction in paras 8-10)

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - A coalition of US airline companies is urging the Biden administration to pause the approval of additional flights to the United States by Chinese airlines due to alleged unfair business practices, according to a letter obtained by Sputnik.

Last month, the US Department of Transportation (DOT) announced that it is increasing the number of weekly round-trip flights allowed from China to 50 effective March 31. The number of weekly round-trip flights previously allowed was 35. The Chinese government will also allow US airline carriers to make 50 weekly round-trip flights to China, DOT noted.

"On behalf of the US aviation industry, we are writing to urge you [to] pause additional passenger flights between the United States and the People's Republic of China until US workers and businesses are guaranteed equality of access in the marketplace, free from the existing harmful anti-competitive policies of the Chinese government," the letter said on Thursday.

The letter is co-signed by the heads of the Airlines for America, Air Line Pilots Association, Allied Pilots Association, and the Association of Flight Attendants.

The letter claims that Chinese airlines gained an advantage over US airline companies following restrictions China placed on services during the outbreak of COVID-19.

The coalition warns that if the continued growth of the Chinese aviation market is allowed to continue "unchecked," flights by US carriers will continue to be relinquished to Chinese carriers at the expense of US workers and businesses, according to the letter.

The letter mentions that Chinese airlines gain an advantage over US airlines by continuing to access Russian airspace and by receiving help from the Chinese government. US airline carriers stopped flying through Russian airspace at the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in March 2022.

The Chinese Embassy in response to the letter said that increasing direct flights and mutual visits between the United States and China will help enhance mutual understanding between the citizens of both countries.

"On our part, the Chinese side has recently rolled out several measures to facilitate travels between our two countries," Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu told Sputnik. "For instance, we now provide walk-in visa application services and have significantly optimized the visa policy for travelers from within the United States. We hope the US side will work with China in the same direction, take measures to clear obstacles in travel, visa, and border entry policies, and further increase direct flights significantly."

Such steps would help bring the two countries together, Liu added.

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US Navy Orders $450Mln Construction at Main Naval Base to Support Europe - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has awarded nine construction companies a combined $450 million US Navy contract for general construction in the Hampton Roads area of operations, the main US base to supply NATO allies with equipment and maritime support across the Atlantic Ocean, the Defense Department announced.

"[The nine companies] are awarded a combined $450 million ...construction contract for general construction in the Hampton Roads area of operations (AO)," the Defense Department said in a release on Thursday.

The release named the construction companies as JWContractors, Herndon, Virginia; Addon Services, Alexandria, Virginia; Bay Electric Company, Newport News, Virginia; Encon Desbuild JV3, Hyattsville, Maryland; and Mark Turner Construction, Glen Allen, Virginia.

The other companies were MIG WMJ JV1, Virginia Beach, Virginia; Ocean Construction Services, Virginia Beach, Virginia; SAW Eastern, Virginia Beach; Virginia and Virtexco Corporation, Norfolk, Virginia, the release said.

Work on the construction projects is scheduled to take a maximum of five years with an expected completion date of April 2029, the release added.

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US Border Crisis Has Created Backlog on Vetting Process of Illegal Migrants - FBI Chief

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The immigration crisis on the US southern border has created a backlog in the US vetting process that helps weed out illegal migrants with criminal records, FBI Director Christopher Wray said during a congressional hearing.

"Our lab is the one who would then test [migrants] and it has proven to be critical in identifying murderers, rapists, and all sorts of dangerous individuals," Wray told the House Appropriations Committee on Thursday. "We have a backlog...because of the sheer volume at the border. With the volume of people coming across [the border], the volume of the need for samples has gone skyrocketing as well. So there's a backlog and the backlog should be of concern to all of us."

The FBI has been engaged in DNA testing for several years of individuals crossing the US southern border, Wray noted.

Wray further said that the delay in vetting has led to the release of migrants into the US public who later need to be found for apprehension after information is confirmed that a certain individual is determined to be a risk to the public.

US Border Patrol reported that agents have arrested some 54 illegal migrants who are convicted sex predators in the Del Rio sector of the US southern border since October 1,

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including multiple child rapists. The Del Rio Sector is located in southern Texas and is considered one of the busiest sections of the US southern border for illegal immigration.

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General Atomics Wins $173Mln Deal to Upgrade MQ-9 Drones for Netherlands - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - General Atomics Aeronautical Systems has been awarded a more than $173 million US Air Force contract to upgrade four MQ-9A drones and two ground control stations for the Netherlands, the US Defense Department announced.

"General Atomics Aeronautical Systems [of] Poway, California has been awarded a ...$173,568,509 ...contract action for capability upgrades to four MQ-9A unmanned air vehicles and two ground control stations," the Defense Department said in a release on Thursday.

The contract will also cover the provision of support equipment, spares, and upgrade kits, the release said.

Work on the project will be performed in Poway, California over the next five years and is expected to be completed by January 15, 2029, the release added.

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Boeing to Make $11Mln Display Parts For US Navy, Kuwait, Australia F/A-18s - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - Boeing has been awarded a more than $111 million US Navy modification contract to supply avionics parts for F/A-18E/F fighter aircraft and E/A-18G Growlers for the US Navy, Australian Air Force, and Kuwait, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"The Boeing Company [of] St. Louis, Missouri is awarded a ...$111,891,468 ...order ...for the production and delivery of avionics long lead time parts and spares," the release stated on Thursday.

The equipment will support the engine fuel, large area, and head-up displays of the F/A-18E/F Block III and E/A-18G electronic warfare aircraft for the US Navy, Royal Australian Air Force, and Kuwait, the Defense Department said.

"Work will be performed in Berkley, Missouri (35.1%); Haifa, Israel (26.7%); Merrimack, New Hampshire (23.1%); Stillwater, Oklahoma (5.6%); Malabar, Florida (5.0%); Torrance, California (1.5%); Netanya, Israel (1.2%); Kanata, Ontario, Canada (1.0%); and various other locations (0.8%)," the release said.

Work on the contract is scheduled to take four years and is expected to be completed in May 2028, the Defense Department said.

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US Navy Orders 6 More Insitu Unmanned Aerial System Vehicles for $84Mln - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - Insitu has received a more than $84 million US Navy modification contract to purchase six RQ-21A and 20 ScanEagle unmanned air vehicles (UAS), the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Insitu [of] Bingen, Washington is awarded a ... $84,468,841 modification contract ... to procure six RQ-21A and 20 ScanEagle unmanned air vehicles (UAS)," the release said on Thursday.

The contract will also include payloads and turrets; support equipment; spares and special tooling, the release also said.

The contract extension also purchases services, including training, site surveys, engineering and technical and repair of repairable in support of the RQ-21A Blackjack and ScanEagle unmanned air vehicles, the release added.

Most of the work on the contract will be performed in Bingen, Washington (88%) as well as at locations outside the continental United States (12%) over the next two and a quarter years and is expected to be completed in June 2026, according to the release.

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Missile Defense Agency Orders $4Bln Command Upgrade From Lockheed Martin - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin Rotary and Mission Systems has received a more than $4 billion Missile Defense Agency (MDA) contract to develop new capabilities to the command and control, battle management and communications system, the US Defense Department said in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Corporation, Rotary and Mission Systems [of] Huntsville, Alabama is being awarded a contract ... of $4,099,900,000," the release said on Thursday.

The ordering period of the contract will last five years from May 1, 2024, through April 30, 2029, with an option to extend through April 30, 2034, the release said.

"Under this follow-on contract, Lockheed Martin will develop, model, integrate, test, verify, evaluate, validate, document, deliver, field, train, operate, sustain, and support updates and new capabilities to the command and control, battle management and communications (C2BMC) system," the release added.

The Missile Defense Agency in Huntsville, Alabama, will oversee work on the contract as its contracting activity, according to the release.

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Alleged Russian-Backed Hackers Stole US Government Messages With Microsoft - CISA

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - An alleged Russian-backed hacker group stole messages between the US federal government and Microsoft through the latter's corporate email accounts, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said in a statement.

"The Russian state-sponsored cyber actor known as Midnight Blizzard has exfiltrated email correspondence between Federal Civilian Executive Branch (FCEB) agencies and Microsoft through a successful compromise of Microsoft corporate email accounts," CISA said in an April 2 emergency directive, made public Thursday.

The successful compromise of Microsoft corporate email accounts and the exfiltration of correspondence with the US government present a grave and unacceptable risk to agencies, the directive said.

The directive instructed federal agencies to analyze the content of exfiltrated emails, reset compromised credentials and take additional steps to ensure their accounts are secure.

In January, Microsoft said that it detected and disrupted an alleged cyber attack by Midnight Blizzard, also known as Nobelium. The group used a password spray attack to gain access to a small percentage of Microsoft corporate email accounts, including members of the senior leadership team, Microsoft said.

In March, Microsoft said that it intensified security measures to combat Midnight Blizzard and vowed to implement security enhancements and vigilant monitoring.

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Iranian Response to Israeli Strike in Damascus to Be Limited, Non-Escalatory – Reports

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) – Iran will respond to Israel's strike on its consulate in Damascus, Syria, but will do it in an "appropriate" way to avoid an escalation, Axios reported, citing a person in the know.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian told his German counterpart that Iran will respond to the killing of its senior military commanders in the strike, but will do it in a limited way, the report said on Thursday.

During a 90-minute phone call between Amir-Abdollahian and Annalena Baerbock, who initiated the contact, the two diplomats focused primarily on the escalated tensions following the strike, the report said.

While Baerbock conveyed the US warning about a possible Israeli response to an attack by Iran, Amir-Abdollahian retorted that Tel Aviv violated international law and Tehran has the right to respond to it and punish the aggressor, the report added.

At the same time, the Iranian foreign minister did not provide any details as to how limited and "appropriate" Tehran's retaliation might be.

On April 1, Israel carried out an airstrike on the consular annex of the Iranian embassy in

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Damascus, destroying the building. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps said seven of its members had been killed in the attack, including two commanders. The Syrian Health Ministry said the next day that the attack had also killed four Syrians and injured 13 more.

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

US media reported earlier, citing Iranian and US intelligence sources, that Iran plans to strike dozens of sensitive targets in Israel, including energy infrastructure and various other facilities, using ballistic missiles and drones carrying explosives.

The Iranian Mission to the UN said earlier on Thursday that punishing Israel for attacking Iran's diplomatic premises in Damascus, Syria could have been avoided if the UN Security Council had condemned the attack.

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US Embassy in Israel Says Restricting Travel for Personnel, Families Until Further Notice

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The US Embassy in Israel said in a statement that it is restricting personal travel for US government employees and their families in the country until further notice.

"Out of an abundance of caution, US government employees and their family members are restricted from personal travel outside the greater Tel Aviv (including Herzliya, Netanya, and Even Yehuda), Jerusalem, and Be'er Sheva areas until further notice," the statement said on Thursday.

However, US government personnel are authorized to transit between the three areas for personal travel, the statement added.

The embassy may further restrict or prohibit travel to certain areas of Israel and the West Bank in response to security incidents without advance notice, the statement also said.

The security environment in Israel remains complex and can rapidly change depending on the political situation and recent events, the statement added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) -

GLOBAL ECONOMY

* The world has avoided the risks of global recession and stagflation, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday.

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* The medium-term outlook for global growth is just above 3% and remains well below its historical average, Georgieva said.
* The IMF expects interest rate cuts in major advanced economies in the second half of the year amid inflation slowdown, Georgieva said.

WORLD BANK OUTLOOK
* The World Bank expects the Russian economy to grow by 2.2% this year and 1.1% in 2025, according to a regional economic update report released on Thursday.
* The cost of recovery and reconstruction in Ukraine has reached $486 billion, which is more than two times size of the country's economy in 2021, the World Bank said.
* The pace of recovery in Ukraine is expected to decelerate to 3.2% in 2024 from 4.8% last year amid a smaller harvest and continued labor shortages, the World Bank said.

MIDDLE EAST
* The United States is adopting necessary measures, including to protect its forces in Israel, amid the risk of Iranian retaliatory acts in the wake of the recent Israeli strike on its consulate in Damascus, Defense Department spokesman Pat Ryder said on Thursday.
* The United States hopes that Israel killing the sons and grandchildren of Hamas political office Chairman Ismail Haniyeh will not affect the ongoing ceasefire and hostage talks, US State Department Matthew Miller said.
* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with his Turkish, Chinese and Saudi counterparts asking them to urge Iran not to retaliate against Israel nor escalate tensions, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.
* The United States has warned Iran to not carry out retaliatory strikes against Israel over the bombing of Iran's consular annex in Damascus, Syria, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said.
* Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin and Turkish Ambassador in Moscow Tanju Bilgic advocate an urgent and widespread ceasefire in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict zone, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
* Punishing Israel for attacking Iran's diplomatic premises in Damascus, Syria, could have been avoided if the UN Security Council had condemned the attack, the Iranian Mission to the UN said.

PUTIN-LUKASHENKO MEETING
* The peace initiatives of Russian President Vladimir Putin on resolving the situation with Ukraine will resonate with the Ukrainian military, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on Thursday.
* Belarus may send a second female cosmonaut in space with Russia's support, Lukashenko said.
* Putin said that he would contact Lukashenko to continue their consultations on the peaceful settlement of the Ukraine conflict if necessary.
* Russia is not invited to the peace conference in Switzerland while the people organizing this event say that it is impossible to take place without it, meaning that this conference will be a panopticon, Putin said.

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CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed on Thursday with the proposal of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on the return to the draft Istanbul treaty with Kiev.
* Moscow was forced to respond to Ukraine's strikes on Russian energy facilities, and Russian troops refrained from doing this in winter, Putin said.
* Ankara did not transfer or impose on Moscow and Kiev any draft settlement in Ukraine, a source in the Turkish presidential administration told Sputnik.
* The previous counteroffensive of the Ukrainian armed forces resulted in the death and severe injuries of 166,000 Ukrainian servicepeople, a senior source in the Russian Defense Ministry said.

KISHIDA'S ADDRESS IN US CONGRESS

* Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in his address to a joint session of the US Congress said that there exists an imminent danger of nuclear weapons proliferation in East Asia.
* China opposes rhetoric that smears its international image, the Chinese Embassy in Washington told Sputnik in response to Kishida's comments during his address to the US Congress.

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Iraq Prime Minister to Discuss Security Partnership During Visit to US - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia'a Al-Sudani will discuss he security partnership with the US during his visit to Washington next week, a senior State Department official said on Thursday.
"There will be discussions about the US defense and security relationship as part of the discussions. Obviously, this will come up with the President [Joe Biden], and also in his meeting with the Secretary of Defense [Lloyd Austin], so it is likely to be a very important part of our discussion," the official told reporters.

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US Airlines Urge Biden to Pause Approval of More Flights to US By Chinese Airlines -Letter

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - A coalition of US airline companies is urging the Biden administration to pause the approval of additional flights to the United States by Chinese airlines due to alleged unfair business practices, according to a letter obtained by Sputnik on Thursday.
Last month, the US Department of Transportation (DOT) announced that it is increasing the number of weekly round-trip flights allowed from China to 50 effective March 31. The number of

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weekly round-trip flights previously allowed was 35. The Chinese government will also allow US airline carriers to make 50 weekly round-trip flights to China, DOT noted.

"On behalf of the US aviation industry, we are writing to urge you [to] pause additional passenger flights between the United States and the People's Republic of China until US workers and businesses are guaranteed equality of access in the marketplace, free from the existing harmful anti-competitive policies of the Chinese government," the letter said.

The letter is co-signed by the heads of the Airlines for America, Air Line Pilots Association, Allied Pilots Association, and the Association of Flight Attendants.

The letter claims that Chinese airlines gained an advantage over US airline companies following restrictions China placed on services during the outbreak of COVID-19.

The coalition warns that if the continued growth of the Chinese aviation market is allowed to continue "unchecked," flights by US carriers will continue to be relinquished to Chinese carriers at the expense of US workers and businesses, according to the letter.

The letter mentions that Chinese airlines gain an advantage over US airlines by continuing to access Russian airspace and by receiving help from the Chinese government. US airline carriers stopped flying through Russian airspace at the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in March 2022.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to Sputnik's request for comment on this matter.

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UNSC Should Intervene if Sudan Army Does Not Open Humanitarian Corridors - US Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, April 11 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield on Thursday urged the UN Security Council to intervene in Sudan if the country's armed forces (SAF) do not unblock corridors for the delivery of humanitarian aid amid the ongoing conflict in the country.

"Should the SAF not reverse course immediately, the Security Council must intervene to ensure lifesaving aid is delivered and distributed, including, if necessary, through a cross-border mechanism," Thomas-Greenfield said during a press briefing.

The UN Security Council can help by authorizing across-the-border humanitarian aid deliveries from Chad similar to the mechanism that existed in Syria for about nine years, Thomas-Greenfield said.

The United States is engaging very actively with the SAF as well as the RSF and other parties on the ground to see how Washington can work with all of them to facilitate getting needed humanitarian assistance into areas where people are starving, she added.

Violent clashes between Sudan's regular armed forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces broke out on April 15, 2023. The parties to the conflict have since introduced several temporary nationwide ceasefires since then, but none has helped settle the conflict.

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US Sees 'Powerful Reasons' for New Zealand to Engage Practically With AUKUS - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The United States sees "powerful reasons" for New Zealand to engage practically with the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) alliance when all parties deem such engagement appropriate, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and New Zealand Foreign Affairs Minister Winston Peters said in a joint statement on Thursday.

"We share the view that arrangements such as the Quad, AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity contribute to peace, security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and see powerful reasons for New Zealand engaging practically with them ... when all parties deem it appropriate," the statement said.

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Chinese Embassy in US Says After Kishida Speech China Opposes Rhetoric Smearing Its Image

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - China opposes rhetoric that smears its international image, the Chinese Embassy in Washington told Sputnik on Thursday in response to Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's comments during his address to the US Congress.

Earlier in the day, Kishida said during his speech to US lawmakers that China presents a strategic challenge to global peace and stability.

"China has all along been a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development and a promoter of international order," Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu told Sputnik. "We are committed to peace, stability and enduring prosperity of the Asia-Pacific. We oppose the rhetoric that smears China's international image."

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US Taking Measures to Protect Forces in Israel Amid Risk of Iran's Retaliation - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The United States is adopting necessary measures, including to protect its forces in Israel amid the risk of Iranian retaliatory acts in the wake of the recent strike on its consulate in Damascus, Pentagon spokesman Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"As I mentioned earlier, from the very beginning of this conflict, two of our key objectives have been to ensure the safety and security of US forces and citizens in the region, as well as

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supporting Israel's inherent right to self defense. And so as we monitor potential threats, we're of course taking appropriate measures to include any necessary force protection measures," Ryder said during a press briefing.

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US Hopes Killing of Hamas Leader's Sons Would Not Affect Hostage Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – The United States hopes that the killing of the chairman of the political office of Palestinian movement Hamas Ismail Haniyeh's sons and grandchildren in Israeli strikes in Gaza will not affect the ongoing ceasefire and hostage talks, US State Department Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

On Wednesday, media reported that an Israeli strike on the Palestinian enclave had killed three sons of Haniyeh and several grandchildren. Haniyeh said that the deaths of his sons would not affect the movement's ceasefire demands. The Israel Defense Forces later confirmed that the strike killed Haniyeh's sons.

"With respect to those strikes, I certainly hope that it [incident] will not [affect the talks], but I wouldn't want to make any kind of assessments," Miller said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Thursday, The Wall Street Journal reported, citing mediators, that Palestinian movement Hamas has largely rejected a plan for a temporary ceasefire in the Gaza Strip proposed by the United States and will propose its own plan this week for a permanent end to the conflict in the region.

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Blinken Asks Turkish, Chinese Counterparts to Urge Iran Not to Attack Israel - Miller

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with his Turkish, Chinese and Saudi counterparts asking them to urge Iran not to retaliate against Israel nor escalate tensions, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

"Secretary Blinken has been engaged in diplomacy over the past 24 hours, Through a series of calls to foreign counterparts, including Turkish Foreign Minister [Hakan] Fidan, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan, to make clear that escalation is not in anyone's interest and that countries should urge Iran not to escalate," Miller said during a press briefing.

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

US Told Iran Not to Attack Israel in Retaliation for Consular Annex Strike - White House

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has warned Iran to not carry out retaliatory strikes against Israel over the bombing of Iran's consular annex in Damascus, Syria, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters on Thursday.

"We communicated to Iran and we said we had no involvement [in the attack in Damascus]," Jean-Pierre said in response to a question about whether the US government had directly communicated to Iran to not attack Israel.

On April 1, 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. The Syrian Health Ministry said that four Syrians were also killed in the attack and 13 more were wounded.

Iran said it reserves the right to respond to the attack and punish the aggressor with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi vowing that Israel would pay a heavy price.

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US 'Certainly Deeply Concerned' Over Reports Gaza on Brink of Famine – White House

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – The US is "certainly deeply concerned" about reports that Gaza is on the brink of famine, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

On Wednesday, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Samantha Power told a Senate Hearing that conditions for famine were already observable in Northern Gaza.

"We know how dire the situation is in Gaza. So, we are certainly deeply concerned about these reports, so we've been working around the clock to get more of that aid into Gaza," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

However, the Press Secretary did not confirm whether US President Joe Biden and his administration shared Power's assessment about the existence of famine in the northern part of the Palestinian enclave.

Jean-Pierre said that Israel had made "good progress" on allowing an increased flow of humanitarian assistance into Gaza but added that more remains to be done.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel and breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. Nearly 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted during the attack. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 33,100 people have been killed so far by Israeli strikes

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in the Gaza Strip, according to local authorities.

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FBI Chief Warns of Potential for Coordinated ISIS-K Attack in US Akin to Crocus Attack

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - FBI Director Christopher Wray said during a congressional hearing on Thursday that the agency is increasingly concerned about the potential of a coordinated attack in the United States by the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia) similar to the attack on the Crocus City Hall concert venue.

"Now, increasingly concerning is the potential for a coordinated attack here in the homeland, akin to the ISIS-K [Islamic State – Khorasan Province] attack we saw at the Russia concert hall, just a couple of weeks ago," Wray told the House Appropriations Committee.

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FBI Remains Concerned About Foreign Terrorist Threats to US From IS, Al-Qaida - Director

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - FBI Director Christopher Wray said on Thursday that the agency remains concerned about threats to the United States posed by foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (banned in Russia).

"The FBI remains concerned about the intent of FTOs, such as ISIS [Islamic State] and al-Qaeda and their affiliates, to carry out or inspire large-scale attacks in the United States," Wray said in a statement to the US House Appropriations Committee.

The FBI is concerned about any FTO that may exploit the conflict between Israel and Hamas to mobilize their followers, Wray said.

There is no information to indicate that Hamas has the intent or capability to conduct operations in the US, but the FBI is concerned about the possibility of Hamas supporters engaging in violence on the group's behalf, Wray said.

Homegrown violent extremists are the "greatest, most immediate" international terrorist threat to the United States, Wray also said.

Domestic violent extremists, particularly racially motivated or anti-government extremists, remain the greatest domestic terrorist threat in the United States, Wray added.

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Japan's Kishida Portrays China as Global Stability Threat in Address to US Congress

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WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Thursday during a speech to US lawmakers that China presents a strategic challenge to global stability.

"China's current external stance and military actions present an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge, not only to the peace and security of Japan, but to the peace and stability of the international community at large," Kishida said during his address to a joint session of US Congress.

Kishida is on an official state visit in Washington this week for meetings with President Joe Biden and other US officials on a range of topics, including security and space.

On Wednesday, Biden announced that the United States, Japan and Australia will create a network system of air missile and defense architecture.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to Sputnik's request for comment on this matter.

Earlier this week, however, the Chinese Embassy highlighted that US plans to deploy a mid-range missile system in the Asia-Pacific by the end of this year will undermine regional stability.

This planned deployment of a mid-range missile system in the Asia-Pacific would be the first of its kind since the United States and Russia agreed to the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987, which is now defunct after both countries withdrew from the treaty in 2019.

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US Congressman Says Introduced Bill to Restrict Federal Government DEI Training

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Mark Alford said on Thursday that he introduced legislation to restrict federal government agencies from instituting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training.

“As a nation, we should place our focus on our commonality and the things that unite us,” Alford said in a statement shared with Sputnik. “That is exactly why I am introducing legislation to prevent any federal agency from instituting DEI in their trainings.”

Alford introduced the bill, dubbed the Diversity Equity Inclusion Dead on Arrival Act, alongside four other House Republicans.

Lawmakers cannot allow “rotten initiatives” to grow within the US government, Alford said.

Alford said that he and his colleagues on the House Armed Services Committee have worked to ensure such programs are eliminated from the US military. However, it is now time to eliminate DEI across the federal government, Alford said.

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Trump Campaign Requests Presidential Debates Begin Earlier This Year

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WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The Trump campaign in a letter to the Commission on Presidential Debates on Thursday requested that the debates begin earlier this year than currently proposed in order to give Americans a chance to hear from the candidates before casting their votes.

"While the Commission on Presidential Debates has already announced three presidential debates and a vice-presidential debate to occur later this year, we are in favor of these debates beginning much earlier," the letter said.

The letter points out that in the 2020 presidential election, tens of millions of Americans had already voted by the time of the first debate in late September.

The Trump campaign estimates that by the time of this year's first proposed debate on September 16, more than 1 million Americans will have likely voted; by the time of the second proposed debate on October 1, more than 3 million Americans will have likely cast a vote; and by the date of the third proposed debate on October 9, some 8.7 million Americans will have likely already voted.

Moreover, the Trump campaign mentions that former President Abraham Lincoln and former US Senator Stephen Douglas had seven debates in 1858 in the race for a US Senate seat in the state of Illinois, adding that just as many debates should be held in current elections.

Americans will cast their vote for US president in the 2024 elections on November 5. Former President Donald Trump is the presumptive Republican nominee while President Joe Biden is the presumptive Democratic nominee after they both secured enough delegates for the nomination in their respective primaries.

Some 154.6 million Americans cast a ballot in the 2020 presidential election, and approximately 137.5 million voted in the 2016 presidential election, according to the US Census Bureau.

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Canadian, French Governments Sign Partnership on Climate, Environment Cooperation

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – Canada and France on Thursday signed a partnership to enhance cooperation in the spheres of climate and environment for the years 2024-2027 and a declaration of intent on mutual assistance to combat wildfires.

The partnership was signed by Canadian Minister of Environment Steven Guilbeault and France's Minister Delegate for Foreign Trade and Economic Attractiveness Frank Riester.

The signature was witnessed by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his French counterpart Gabriel Attal, who is on his first official visit to Canada from April 10-12.

"The signing of the partnership between the French Republic and the Government of Canada for the climate and the environment 2024 2027," the ceremony speaker said.

The purpose of the partnership is to enhance cooperation in reaching "ambitious" carbon neutrality targets, clean technologies, biodiversity loss, and plastic pollution, among others, Trudeau said.

Besides the partnership, Canada and France signed a declaration of intent between the Canadian Ministry of Natural Resources and France's Ministry of Interior and the Overseas in

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the areas of mutual assistance and cooperation on wildlife fires.
Trudeau further announced that in line with the declaration of intent, France would be acquiring two Canadian-made cistern planes.

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Confrontation Tactics Must Be Abandoned to Resolve Korea Issue - China Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, April 11 (Sputnik) - The key to resolving the Korea issue is to discard the outdated confrontational tactics influenced by a Cold War mentality, Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Geng Shuang said on Thursday.
"To resolve the [Korean] Peninsula issue, it is imperative to abandon the outdated approach of confrontation and pressure. The Korean War has long ended, but the Cold War mentality behind the wall is still lingering," Geng said during a meeting of the UN general Assembly.
Geng emphasized the importance of being dedicated to reaching a political settlement and noted that history and practice have consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of dialogue and cooperation in easing tensions and in advancing political processes.
Earlier on Thursday, Russia announced that it plans to present a draft resolution to extend for one year the mandate of the UN Security Council Panel of Experts to update the North Korean sanctions regime.
Last week, Russia vetoed a US-draft resolution to extend the Panel of Experts' mandate for one year and said updating the sanctions regime against North Korea is long overdue in the UN Security Council despite Western states' opposition to move away from their destructive and punitive rhetoric against that country.
At the end of March, the United States and South Korea jointly coordinated sanctions against six individuals and two entities for allegedly aiding North Korea's weapons of mass destruction program. The sanctions target alleged agents of designated banks and companies that employ North Korean information technology workers abroad.

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US Sees Getting People to Mars As Horizon Goal, 'Then Beyond' - NASA

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 11 (Sputnik) - Exploration Systems Development Mission Directorate Associate Administrator Cathy Koerner said on Thursday that sending people to the "Moon, Mars, and beyond" is the roadmap for NASA to venture beyond Earth.
"Ultimately, what we are trying to do is create a blueprint for exploration beyond Earth," Koerner shared. "So, first to the Moon, and then to Mars, and then beyond."
In January, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson announced that the space agency has delayed the first US manned mission to the Moon in more than half a century until September 2026 "to work

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through the challenges" of developing and integrating the spacecraft systems in the Artemis program.

NASA officials explained that it delayed both its planned Artemis II mission to fly around the Moon and back and subsequent Artemis III manned landing at the lunar South Pole to give time to deal with unanticipated problems.

These involved the development of new spacesuits, unanticipated detachment of material from the reentry heat shield on the unmanned Artemis I mission last year, and failures with the Orion spacecraft life support system and new abort ejection mechanism for its astronauts.

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Kishida Says Japan to Continue Supporting Ukraine in Conflict With Russia

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said in his address to a joint session of the US Congress on Thursday that Japan will continue supporting Ukraine in its conflict with Russia.

"Japan will continue to stand with Ukraine," Kishida said during his address.

Kishida pointed out that Japan has provided Ukraine with a security aid package worth $12 billion that included anti-drone detection equipment, as part of the larger NATO assistance package.

The Japanese Prime Minister is visiting Washington this week for a state dinner with US President Joe Biden and a bilateral summit followed by a first-ever trilateral summit with the Philippines later on Thursday.

The United States and Japan announced several new strategic initiatives to cooperate on security, space, technology and climate action as part of Kishida's visit.

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Alleged CIA Officer Claims Agency Working in Ukraine Under Guise of US State Dept. - Video

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - Self-professed CIA contracting officer Gavin O'Blennis claims that the US intelligence agency is operating in Ukraine under the guise of the State Department, according to undercover footage of a conversation with the officer recorded by Sound Investigations.

"We're under State Department cover," O'Blennis said, when asked about the CIA's work in Ukraine by what appears to be an undercover reporter.

O'Blennis presented credentials that appeared to confirm his employment by the CIA. O'Blennis also claimed to have previously worked for the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security.

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The CIA does whatever it needs to in Ukraine and provides advice and intelligence "all the time," but is not allowed to engage in combat, O'Blennis said.

O'Blennis noted that he does not work directly with Ukraine, but rather, just transfers and spends money as a contracting officer.

Earlier this month, US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylore Greene said that the CIA is running the conflict in Ukraine against Russia.

US corporate media also reported in February that the CIA created a network of spy bases in Ukraine over the past at least eight years, including a dozen forward operating bases along the Russian border.

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Russia Hopes IAEA Will Fairly Assess Kiev's Attacks on Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Station- Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 11 (Sputnik) - Russia wishes for a fair assessment from the International Atomic Energy Agency regarding Ukrain's provocative attacks on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant during the next UN Security Council meeting on April 15, the Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

"This topic will be raised at the dedicated meeting on the 15th of April. We hope that a fair assessment of what's going on will be issued by the IAEA leadership and their staff, who are at the NPP and can observe Ukrainian provocations firsthand," Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine, which was called for by the Western states.

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US, Japan Resist Russia's Arguments on Obligations for All Weapons in UN Resolution- Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 11 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan, draftees of the UN Security Council resolution on outer space activities, very much resist Russia's arguments to include obligations on all weapons in addition to nuclear ones, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

"But the penholders [United States, Japan] fiercely resist our arguments. In other words, they want to include an obligation of non-development of nuclear weapons, specifically designed to be placed in outer space, but resist including a wider similar obligation pertaining to any kind of weapons," Nebenzia said.

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RPT - UNSC Not Right Body for Outer Space Resolutions, Wider Participation Needed - Nebenzia

(Repeats to fix headline)
UNITED NATIONS, April 11 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is not the right body to adopt resolutions on outer space activities that affect all UN members, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday, commenting on a draft resolution sponsored by the US and Japan to ban nuclear weapons in space.
"It is obvious that the Security Council with its membership limited to 15 is not an appropriate forum to take on space issues which affect wider UN membership," Nebenzia said after a UN Security Council meeting.

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UNSC Not Right Body for Outer Space Resolutions, Wider Participation Needed - Envoy

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Japanese PM Kishida Warns of Imminent Danger of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation in East Asia

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in his address to a joint session of the US Congress said that there exists an imminent danger of nuclear weapons proliferation in East Asia.
“I have worked to vitalize the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime so that we can gain momentum in pursuit of the aspiration. But there exists an imminent danger of nuclear weapons proliferation in East Asia. North Korea's nuclear and missile program is a direct threat,” Kishida said.

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Punishing Israel for Consulate Attack Avoidable Had UNSC Condemned It - Iran Mission to UN

UNITED NATIONS, April 11 (Sputnik) - Punishing Israel for attacking Iran's diplomatic premises in Damascus, Syria, could have been avoided if the UN Security Council had condemned the attack, the Iranian Mission to the UN said on Thursday.

"Had the UN Security Council condemned the Zionist regime's reprehensible act of aggression on our diplomatic premises in Damascus and subsequently brought to justice its perpetrators, the imperative for Iran to punish this rogue regime might have been obviated," the Iranian Mission said via the social media platform X.

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Russian Economy to Grow at 2.2% in 2024, 1.1% in 2025 - World Bank

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The World Bank expects the Russian economy to grow by 2.2% this year and 1.1% in 2025, according to a regional economic update report released on Thursday.

"Economic growth is expected to decrease to 2.2 in 2024, and 1.1 percent in 2025," the report said.

The figures were revised upward by 0.9 and 0.2 percentage points, respectively.

In 2023, the Russian economy grew by 3.6%, according to the updated estimate.

"Tighter labor markets, capacity constraints, and restrictive monetary policy are expected to weigh on growth in Russia," the report said.

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US Interest Rates Remaining High Can Become Big Worry for Global Financial Stability - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - US interest rates remaining high for a prolonged period of time may cause worries for global financial stability, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday.

"If it continues for a long time, it could become a big worry in terms of financial stability," Georgieva said during a conversation at the Atlantic Council in Washington.

The United States still has to deal with inflation, which requires higher interest rates, but this is not great news for other countries, Georgieva said.

"Higher interest rates make the United States more attractive, so financial flows come here, and that leaves the rest of the world somewhat struggling," Georgieva said.

The IMF chief also pointed out that high interest rates help strengthen the US dollar but also weaken other currencies.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said in late March that there is no real threat of a

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recession in the United States and inflation is not far from the target goal of 2%, however, the US central bank still needs to see more price moderation before embarking on interest rate cuts.

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Former US Football Player OJ Simpson Dies at Age 76 - Family Statement

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - Former National Football League (NFL) player and high-profile court defendant OJ Simpson died from a battle with cancer at the age of 76, Simpson's family said on Thursday.

"On April 10th, our father, Orenthal James Simpson, succumbed to his battle with cancer," the family said in a statement via the social media platform X.

Simpson died surrounded by his children and grandchildren and the family requests privacy and grace at this time, the statement said.

Simpson won a Heisman Trophy as a collegiate football player before joining the NFL in 1969. Simpson played as a running back for the Buffalo Bills from 1969-1977 and the San Francisco 49ers from 1978-1979.

Simpson also worked as an actor, appearing in numerous television and film productions during and after his football career.

In 1994, Simpson was charged for the murders of his former wife Nicole Brown and her friend Ron Goldman in trial that gained international media attention. A jury acquitted Simpson in the criminal case, but he was found liable for the deaths in a civil suit.

In October 2008, a jury convicted Simpson on charges including kidnapping and robbery for his role in a September 2007 armed robbery. The court sentenced Simpson to 33 years in prison, but he was granted parole and released in October 2017.

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US Should Provide Ukraine with Different Types of ATACMS Missiles - US European Commander

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – The United States should provide more Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) in different variants to Ukraine than it has done so far, US European Command chief Gen. Christopher Cavoli said on Thursday.

"It is," Cavoli said when asked whether it was his judgment that the US should provide Ukraine with more ATACMS and in more variants than they have already done.

On reports that Russia has a three to one advantage in artillery production over Ukraine, Cavoli said those were inaccurate. The official said that it was rather Moscow having a 3-1 output advantage over NATO.

"No, sir, they have a three to one production advantage over the North Atlantic Treaty

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Organization," he said.

On Wednesday, Cavoli said that Ukraine was suffering from a 5-1 deficit with Russia in terms of the availability of artillery rounds. He added that Ukrainian forces were already self-rationing their artillery rounds while waiting for Congress to pass a new foreign aid bill and resupply them.

The Biden administration's supplemental funding request with billions of dollars of Ukraine-related funding has been stalled in the US Congress for months. The legislation cleared the US Senate but has yet to pass the House of Representatives.

Russia has consistently warned against the West's continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

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Cost of Ukraine's Reconstruction, Recovery Has Grown to $486Bln – World Bank

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The cost of recovery and reconstruction in Ukraine has reached $486 billion, which is more than two times size of the country's economy in 2021, the World Bank said on Thursday.

"The cost of reconstruction and recovery in Ukraine has grown to $486 billion, which is more than two times the size of Ukraine's pre-war economy in 2021," the World Bank said in a regional economic update report.

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Russia to Submit Resolution on UNSC Panel to Update N. Korea Sanctions Regime - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, April 11 (Sputnik) - Russia plans to present a draft resolution to extend for a year the mandate of the UN Security Council panel in order to update the North Korea sanctions regime, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

"We plan to submit a draft resolution to the [UN Security] Council in the very near future. That would provide for a one-year extension of the panel's mandate with a clear determination of the imperative for the Council to take a decision on updating the permanent [North] Korean sanctions regime," Nebenzia said.

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Pace of Ukraine's Recovery Projected to Slow to 3.2% in 2024 From 4.8% 2023 – World Bank

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WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The pace of recovery in Ukraine is expected to decelerate to 3.2% in 2024 from 4.8% last year amid a smaller harvest and continued labor shortages, the World Bank said on Thursday.

"In Ukraine, the pace of recovery is projected to slow to 3.2% this year from 4.8% in 2023, reflecting a smaller harvest and persistent labor shortage," the World Bank said in its new report.

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Falcon 9 Rocket Launches US Space Force Military Weather Satellite Into Orbit - SpaceX

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - SpaceX announced on Thursday that it launched a national security payload successfully into orbit for the US Space Force.

The mission, identified as USSF-62, was carried into orbit on a Falcon 9 booster rocket and was the 12th national security space launch on that vehicle, SpaceX said.

The launch into low Earth orbit took place on schedule at 7:25 a.m. PT from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, SpaceX said.

The launch was SpaceX's second national security mission this year.

The mission launched the US Space Force's Weather System Follow-on-Microwave (WSF-M) satellite into low Earth orbit.

WSF-M was built by BAE Systems and is designed to provide weather intelligence for military operations, SpaceX said.

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Biden Admin. Fears Iran Might Target US Forces in Retaliation for Israeli Strike - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration believes it is possible that Iran could attack US targets in the region in retaliation to the Israeli attack on its consulate in Damascus, Syria and fears such a development, The Intercept reported citing unnamed US officials.

During a meeting on Tuesday, US National Security Council (NSC) officials voiced their concerns about the possibility of an Iranian attack on US targets in the region, the report said on Wednesday.

At the same time, one of the officials revealed that the Biden administration did not want to publicly admit that it maintains an official dialogue with Tehran amid the escalation, the report added.

On April 1, 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. The Syrian Health Ministry

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said the next day that the attack had also killed four Syrians and injured 13 more.

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

US media reported earlier, citing Iranian and US intelligence sources, that Iran plans to strike dozens of sensitive targets in Israel, including energy infrastructure and various other facilities, using ballistic missiles and drones carrying explosives.

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US Says NATO's 2% of GDP Benchmark for Defense Spending 'Inadequate' - EUCOM

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The US European Command (EUCOM) said on Thursday that NATO's current standard of 2% of GDP for defense spending is inadequate, amid efforts to push all 32 members to reach their commitments.

"I know what the alliance needs to do to modernize and to get fit for its collective defense, its new purpose, its reestablished purpose in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, and it is at least 2%... I think over time, we'll see our allies realize that 2% is inadequate for the cost, at least in the near and mid-term," EUCOM Commander Gen. Christopher Cavoli testified before the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

Cavoli noted that NATO had adopted the phrase "floor not a ceiling" at its last summit regarding the 2% benchmark.

Amid concerns that NATO is expecting the United States to shoulder the burden of the military alliance's defense spending, Cavoli said he is expecting 20 of the 32 NATO member states to meet the 2% benchmark by June.

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Trade Growth Between Politically Distant Blocks Has Slowed Since February 2022 - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - Trade growth between countries from opposing political blocs has decelerated more significantly than trade among more aligned nations since Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday.

"Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, trade growth between economies in politically distant blocs has slowed by 2.4 percentage points more than trade among those that are more closely aligned," Georgieva said in a curtain raiser speech ahead of the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings.

The current situation may benefit those countries that are playing the role of so-called

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"connectors" between different groups, she added.

"But supply chains are lengthening, with potential costs at each step," the IMF chief warned.

Georgieva also said that industrial policies are back on the agenda, with more than 2,500 policy interventions worldwide last year. China, the EU, and US account for almost half of the total, she said.

The IMF chief urged countries to act with caution to avoid market failure and worsening the situation.

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Ukraine Relies on US-Made 155mm Artillery Shells as EU Production Lags - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – The Ukrainian military is currently mainly dependent on US-made 155-millimeter artillery shells as European production has "not been up and running yet," US European Command chief Gen. Christopher Cavoli said on Thursday.

"Right now, Ukraine for 155-millimeter shells is mainly dependent on US production. European production has just not been up and running yet," Cavoli said at a Senate armed services committee hearing.

Europe is, however, seeking to increase its 155-millimeter shell production and planning investments to accelerate the output, Cavoli said.

The top US general in Europe pointed to countries such as Slovakia as an example of production ramp-up but noted that much remains to be done.

"The EU and NATO are cooperating closely on lifting production, and I believe they're going to break down some barriers and get that going," Cavoli continued, adding that it would take several months before they reach US levels of output.

In February, Czech President Petr Pavel told the Munich Security Conference that Prague had located 500,000 155mm rounds and another 300,000 122mm rounds in an unnamed non-European country that was ready to supply them to Ukraine if timely funding was provided.

Russia has consistently warned the West against continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, arguing they will do nothing but escalate hostilities and prolong the conflict. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has warned that any military cargo will be a legitimate target for Russia.

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