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4/15/24 Monday

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'It Sets Precedent': Israel's Conflict With Iran Shows Potential to Spiral

US President Joe Biden told the Israeli prime minister that Washington, DC wouldn't support any offensive action against Iran, calling the coordinated defense of Israeli airspace a "win" and promising "ironclad" US support for Tel Aviv going forward, US media reported.

On Saturday, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps launched over 300 drones and missiles at Israel in its first-ever direct attack on Israeli territory, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) said. The attack was a response to Israel's airstrike on the Iranian consulate in the Syrian capital in early April. According to the IDF, Israel had intercepted 99% of the aerial targets fired by Iran, including all drones.

It was later reported that at least nine Iranian missiles hit two of Israel's air bases during the attack, damaging infrastructure. Five ballistic missiles hit Israel's Nevatim air base, damaging a C-130 military transport aircraft, a runway and storage facilities, while four more missiles hit an Israeli air base in the Negev desert, though no significant damage was reported.

Michael Maloof, a former senior security policy analyst in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, an author and political commentator, joined Sputnik's Fault Lines on Monday. Speaking to the show's hosts, Maloof said that the Israelis attack on a diplomatic compound has set a precedent for how other countries may approach foreign affairs.

"The fact that the Israelis attacked a diplomatic compound, there is an international convention on consulates to protect them. No matter whether they're friend or foe, you don't attack consulates. Now, the fact that Israelis did this means that all other consulates of every country are going to be fair game if you don't like them," the former senior security policy analyst said. "That's what this is. It sets precedent. International law set by precedent."

"There was no condemnation either in the UN or by Joe Biden," Maloof added. "Yet they want the condemnation in the UN of Iran's attack. This is pathetic. This shows the one-sidedness of our rules-based order led by the US."

Sputnik's Melik Abdul then asked whether Israel wanted to involve the US in a larger, regional war.

"The Israelis would not have done it unless and until they knew they had the US where they wanted them in terms of commitment. Not only logistically but financially, and that's when they made their move and to bomb a diplomatic facility with impunity the way they did in another country, another sovereign country, I might add," answered Maloof.

"And, it's very clear that the US was very placid in any response and it continues to this day. So, the Israelis feel that they got away with it. And, the Iranians now are saying, 'no, you're not, you passed a red line, and, as a consequence, you've got to pay for it.'"

"I think that this is something that [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu has been savoring and salivating over for some time. He wanted to get the US engaged. He's done that

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even though Biden says, well, we're not going to support any offensive effort against Iran. But, once attacks begin, how do you distinguish between offense and defense?" Maloof continued. "So this is a very, very precarious time. We're on an extraordinary slippery slope. And this not only has the potential of becoming region-wide, but beyond the Middle East, which if Iran is attacked by the US, I'm fearful that it will bring in Russia and China."

When asked what could happen next regarding a potential retaliation from Israel, Maloof responded that he has been hearing conflicting reports.

"Number one I'm hearing, into this morning, is that they're still mulling over what reaction they're gonna have in retaliation. But on the other hand, The Times of Israel published a story saying that in the conversation between Biden and Netanyahu, Netanyahu agreed that he would not launch a counterattack," said Maloof of Israel.

"Now, if that's the case, I have not seen that anywhere else. The only thing I've heard is that the US would not support an offensive, if Israel were to launch. But, at the same time, anything can happen here," he added.

"Biden has laid the groundwork that we will not agree to work with them on an offensive, but what happens if Israel starts it anyway? Are we going to say, 'no, we're not doing it'? No, we're not. I mean, the repercussions in this country would be very, very great, particularly in the Congress," Maloof said. "And so, Netanyahu's basically going to call Biden's bluff and I think that Netanyahu will win."

It was reported on Monday that Netanyahu had asked the IDF to list possible targets in Iran to send a "message" to Tehran without causing casualties. Israel could strike Iran with a cyberattack, for instance. Israel reportedly wants to attack Iran in a way that would not anger its allies or undermine opportunities of building an alliance against Iran.

"Biden is fearful of having a war on his hands, as we approach the [US presidential] election," he added. "The American people perceive that he got us into this and he hasn't really stood up to Netanyahu and told him that what he's conducting himself is wrong. And, as a consequence, there is no ceasefire."

"We see [Antony] Blinken running around all the time and he might as well just stay home because he's totally useless. So, there's no projection of strength and authority coming out of this administration and Netanyahu and other countries have picked up on that."

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'US Imperialism is Trapped': US & Iranian Officials Reportedly Held Talks on Nuclear Program

According to the recent report, one of the main messages that the US conveyed to Iran was regarding nuclear deterrence.

Last month, US and Iranian officials held indirect talks in Oman to discuss Tehran's nuclear program and other issues, according to a recent report from an American news source. The talks represent the first indirect engagement between the US and Iran, after White House Middle East coordinator Brett McGurk traveled to Oman secretly on May 8 for the talks with Omani officials.

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During the talks, the US “made it clear that Iran will pay a heavy price” should they acquire 90% uranium enrichment, sources said.

Dr. Gerald Horne, who holds the John Jay and Rebecca Moores Chair of History and African-American studies at the University of Houston, joined Sputnik’s The Critical Hour on Monday. Horne suggested that US imperialism is “trapped” following an escalating conflict between Israel and Iran.

“What you see is that US imperialism is trapped, it wants to focus on China, but it's bogged down in Ukraine now is on the verge of being bogged down in Iran and West Asia more generally,” said Horne. “If there is a further escalation of this crisis, do not expect the Iranians to give the Israelis and their US ally a head's up.”

“Israel has a problem in Gaza with a tattered global image, and so they decided to enlarge the problem, by, on April 1st attacking the Iranian legation in Syria. Iran, obviously, had the right to reply and respond and has done so in a measured manner.”

“But, now we see uber hawks like John Bolton, the former [former US President Donald] Trump national security adviser, suggesting that the US seize the opportunity in league with Israel to try to inflict a major blow on the Iranian nuclear program and perhaps even overthrow the regime, which has been a fond wish of the uber hawks for decades now. That, of course, could bring this entire small planet to the cusp of World War III, and, I'm afraid to say that that may not necessarily deter or detain Israel,” Horne said.

Sputnik’s Garland Nixon noted that about three quarters of American voters aged 18 to 29 disapprove of the way US President Joe Biden is handling the Gaza war, citing recent polls. Recent polls also found that overall, registered voters say they favor Trump over Biden, for the upcoming US presidential election, by about two percentage points. About 46% of registered voters said they trust the job of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Trump compared to 38 who said the same about Biden.

“The left of the Democratic Party has adopted the Palestinian question as a cause to be reckoned with. And this brings up the contradictions in US mainstream politics because, obviously, whenever folks on the left talk about trying to form a third party, they're hammered into line, bludgeoned into submission, told that they must stay within the ranks of the Democratic Party,” Horne explained. “Now this particular issue of Palestine is helping to tear the Democratic Party apart.”

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Australia Refused Palestinians Visitor Visas Out of Fear Their Stay Wouldn’t Be 'Temporary'

In November, the Albanese government had to explain that Palestinians granted visas had undergone standard security checks in order to assuage terrorism fears caused by the Coalition.

In the first three months of the Israel-Gaza conflict, about 160 Palestinians were refused visitor visas by Australia mostly due to concerns that they would not stay temporarily, a recent report revealed. About 150 people were refused because they “did not demonstrate a genuine

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intention to stay temporarily in Australia", while ten others who applied were rejected for other reasons.

This report comes after one made a month ago which revealed that some Palestinians who had been granted visas were experiencing cancellations. Nearly 2,300 temporary visas—allowing persons to travel to Australia but not work, access healthcare, nor education—had been granted to Palestinians with Australian connections between October 7 and February 6.

However, only 330 people made it to Australia during that time period.

Rasha Abbas, the co-founder of the Palestine Australia Relief and Action Foundation, said that many of the rejected Palestinians had been "encouraged" by the Australian government to use the tourist visa clause that was being rejected.

"We are really perplexed as to what changed," said Abbas. Palestinian groups and refugee advocates later said they were "relieved" when the federal government finally reversed its visa cancellations for those fleeing Gaza.

The Australia Palestine Advocacy Network president, Nasser Mashni, said it is unbelievable that the Australian government is rejecting some visa applications "while implying that it believes people won't leave Australia because of how unbearably oppressive and dangerous the Israeli government has made life for Palestinians", according to Monday's report.

"Ukrainians were told to apply for these same visas ... in 2022, and there were no reports of visas being rejected on these grounds," he added. "The government must treat Palestinians with the humanity and compassion it so rightly offered to Ukrainians."

"It is beyond cruel to deny people fleeing the onslaught in Gaza the possibility of safety because they might be unable to return to their homes," added David Shoebridge, the Greens' immigration spokesperson. "Let's be clear, the main reason people would be unable to return to Gaza is because of the Israeli invasion, with 80% of homes in Gaza made uninhabitable.

"Palestinians fleeing that devastation are being denied safety in Australia because their homes have been destroyed, with their lives and the lives of their family threatened," said Shoebridge.

Like the US, the Australian government had insisted that Israel has the right to defend itself against Hamas following the October 7 attack, but they also urged Israel to show restraint. The Australian public is also divided on the conflict, with 19% of those over 18 believing their government "should do more to support Palestine" and 17% saying the government "should do more to support Israel."

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'Nothing you can do to stop us': Iran's strikes on Israeli bases establish deterrence

Iran is playing the long game in its dealings with Israel, carefully calibrating its actions to restore deterrence against the country rather than concerning itself with world opinion, former United Nations weapons inspector Scott Ritter stressed.

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The analyst joined Sputnik's Fault Lines program and challenged the perception that Israel is in a stronger position after reports of intercepting most of Iran's retaliatory strikes over the weekend.

"The job wasn't to say, 'we're going to hurt you,'" Ritter claimed. "The job was to say, 'hey, Israel, look around you. Right now you have America's most sophisticated X-band radar to give you intelligence when we launch our missiles… you have the whole world coming to your assistance to protect you and you can't stop our missiles from hitting your most important bases. That's the future, if you dare attack us again.'"

Israel has conspicuously forbidden journalists from observing the aftermath of Iran's attack on Israel's bases in recent days. Video posted to social media appeared to show several hypersonic missiles striking Israel's Ramon military airbase in the Negev desert.

Ritter insisted Iran attacked Israel in such a way that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could save face while also revealing Tehran's capabilities if Israel strikes it again. "All those things that were shot down – understand those were designed to be shot down," he said. "Iran put a program together with the United States that said, 'we're going to let you shoot all this stuff down so you feel good. But in the end our good stuff hit the bases, just so you know that we can do that anytime we want, and there's nothing you can do to stop us.'"

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'Nothing You Can Do to Stop Us': Iran's Strikes on Israeli Bases 'Establish Deterrence'

Former US Marine Corps intelligence officer Scott Ritter urged observers to look beyond Israel and the United States' framing of Iran's retaliatory strike, noting Tehran was able to successfully deal damage to Israeli military assets.

Former United Nations weapons inspector Scott Ritter stressed that Iran is playing the long game in its dealings with Israel, carefully calibrating its actions to restore deterrence against the country rather than concerning itself with world opinion.

The former US Marine Corps intelligence officer offered the analysis on Sputnik's Fault Lines program Monday, challenging the perception that Israel is in a stronger position after intercepting most of Iran's retaliatory strikes over the weekend.

"The point is prior to this Israel had established a dominance – I'll call it deterrence dominance," claimed Ritter. "Meaning that, from an Israeli perspective, nobody should ever dare attack Israel, that Israel has let it be known that if you attack Israel, there will be a ten-fold response, that your life would end, it would be horrible, you can't do it. And, for the most part, people didn't attack Israel."

"And so Israel had become very arrogant, had become sort of the neighborhood bully writ large," he explained. "And this is why Israel was bombing Syria with impunity, striking targets in Lebanon with impunity, striking targets in Iraq with impunity."

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Israel frequently bombs Syrian airports and other infrastructure and has been illegally occupying the country's Golan Heights territory since 1967. In 1982 the Israeli military bombed the Lebanese capital of Beirut so aggressively the US President Ronald Reagan referred to the event as a "holocaust," hurting the feelings of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Observers also suggest Zionist opposition to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein played a role in the United States' decision to invade the country and remove him from power in 2003. "It's very clear: Israel had the most influence in this and more so since we know how the Israelis were running into the Pentagon consulting with Rumsfeld and all those guys without even having to show any badge or anything," former CIA Analyst Ray McGovern claimed on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program recently.

"And then they struck the wrong target," said Ritter, referring to Israel's recent strike on Iran's diplomatic compound in Syria earlier this month. "You see, Iran said, 'we have a great latitude for pain because we'll absorb that pain, because we recognize that in a broader sense of the word Iran is prevailing strategically against Israel, especially when it comes to Gaza and the Israeli defeat that is ongoing in Gaza.'"

"And so Iran delivered a blow, but remember, the purpose of the blow was not to destroy Israel or even bring harm to Israel," he clarified. "The purpose of the blow was to establish Iranian deterrence precedent so that in the future Israel would know what the consequences of its actions would be. And this Iran did with extreme alacrity and extreme effectiveness."

"The job wasn't to say, 'we're going to hurt you.' The job was to say, 'hey, Israel, look around you. Right now you have America's most sophisticated X-band radar to give you intelligence when we launch our missiles… you have the whole world coming to your assistance to protect you and you can't stop our missiles from hitting your most important bases. That's the future, if you dare attack us again.'"

Israel has claimed in public statements that it was allegedly able to intercept most of Iran's strikes and prevent major damage. But the country has conspicuously forbidden journalists from observing the aftermath of the attack on Israel's bases, notes former CIA analyst Larry Johnson. Video posted to social media appeared to show several hypersonic missiles striking Israel's Ramon military airbase in the Negev desert.

Host Jamarl Thomas pushed back on Ritter's analysis, asking, "At the point where their generals keep getting murdered, are you really projecting that level of strength if ultimately you are just choreographing in this way?... Is it really a projection of strength if you're choreographing what you're doing?"

"You're referring to the Iranian attack on al-Assad airbase after the [US] assassination of Qasem Soleimani and the fact Iran telegraphed that so that they struck empty buildings and they didn't kill Americans," Ritter responded. "Let's look at it this way. When Iran shot down a Global Hawk [US drone] and Donald Trump wanted to bomb Iranian air defense sites, did he? The answer's no. Why? Because the Pentagon said they'll kill everybody. They just set their deterrence. They showed us what they got, and we got nothing to defend against it."

"When Iran said we're going to strike Israel, what did the United States do?" he asked. "Say bring it on? We stand side by side with the Israelis? We will attack you? We will bomb your territory? The United States went 'wow, we'll defend Israel, but we're not attacking you.' Yeah, that's called deterrence."

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“Iran doesn't want a shooting match with the United States,” Ritter argued. “They wanted to avoid it, and they have done so. The United States is scared to death of bombing Iran, of creating a conflict because they know what Iran will do. Iran will flatten every single American military base with the range of their missiles. And if the United States takes its next step, Iran will shut down international oil supplies and the economy will crash, and Joe Biden will never get reelected.”

Ritter insisted that Iran attacked Israel in such a way that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could save face and back down while also revealing Tehran’s capabilities if Israel strikes it again.

“All those things that were shot down – understand those were designed to be shot down,” he claimed. “Iran put a program together with the United States that said, ‘we're going to let you shoot all this stuff down so you feel good. But in the end our good stuff hit the bases, just so you know that we can do that anytime we want, and there's nothing you can do to stop us.’”

Ritter also claimed Iran is focused on economic development rather than seeking military conflict with Tel Aviv.

“They've been focused on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, they've been focused on BRICS, they've been focused on their strategic pivot to the East,” he noted. “So for them to come in and do this feel good thing to make you, me and everybody else feel good – because apparently that's what this is about, making the larger audience that has nothing to do with Iran feel good about the Iranian response – they don't care.

“The Iranians are focused strategically on maintaining that pivot to the East, building strong economic relations, normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia, and, more importantly since October 7th, facilitating the victory of Hamas over Israel which by Israel's own admission Hamas is winning,” he claimed.

“Haaretz [newspaper] – I think a day before the Iranian retaliation – came out with a headline story that said ‘Israel's lost this thing, it's over.’ I mean, there's nothing Israel could do to turn this around in Gaza. They've lost the world. They can't defeat Hamas. Hamas is emerging still intact militarily, they're stronger politically. And Iran's like, ‘we want to sustain that, too. We don't want to distract the world with this larger Israeli-Iranian conflict, we want to keep the focus on Palestinian statehood.’”

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US House Republicans Considering Multiple Foreign Aid Measures This Week - Speaker Johnson

(Updates with change in attribution in headline/lede; details in paras 1-4)

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The US House Republican Conference is considering trying to pass multiple bills this week to provide aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said in a statement.

"I have just spoken with the @HouseGOP conference on my plan to address national security supplemental legislation on the growing security crises," Johnson said via X on Monday

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evening. "This week, we will consider separate bills with a structured and germane amendment process to: fund our ally Israel, support Ukraine in its war against Russian aggression, strengthen our allies in the Indo-Pacific, pass additional measures to counter our adversaries and strengthen our national security."

House Republicans are reportedly considering providing $48.4 billion to Ukraine, $14.1 billion to Israel, and $2.4 billion for security operations in the Indo-Pacific region. There's also some $3.3 billion for the US submarine industrial base and $2.4 billion for US operations in the Red Sea.

Punch Bowl News reported that one of the bills will include a TikTok ban, a measure to sell seized Russian assets, lend-lease-style military aid, and convertible loans for humanitarian relief.

The House Republican leadership will attempt to advance the plan under a single rule.

On Monday, House Republicans held a closed-door conference meeting, where House Speaker Mike Johnson reportedly outlined the plan to colleagues. Johnson told House Republicans that he will allow an amendment process for the legislation.

Johnson, who spoke with President Joe Biden earlier in the day, also reportedly said that any Ukraine aid legislation must be considered as a standalone bill.

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US House Passes Iran-Related Bills in Response to Weekend Attack on Israel

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a set of bills to address Iran and its financing, following its attack on Israel over the weekend.

The House of Representatives altered its planned legislative schedule for the week in order to consider the Iran-related bills on Monday.

"The House of Representatives stands strongly with Israel, and there must be consequences for this unprovoked attack," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the schedule change.

House lawmakers passed the No US Financing for Iran Act in a vote of 294 in favor and 105 opposed. The bill prohibits the US Treasury Secretary from authorizing certain transactions by US financial institutions in connection with Iran.

The legislation bans transactions in connection with the importation from or exportation to Iran of any goods or services other than agricultural commodities, food, medicine, medical devices, or humanitarian assistance.

The bill also prevents the International Monetary Fund from providing financial assistance to Iran and codifies prohibitions on Export-Import Bank financing for Iran.

The House of Representatives also passed the Iran-China Energy Sanctions Act in a vote of 383 in favor and 11 opposed. The legislation imposes restrictions on correspondent and payable-through accounts in the United States with respect to Chinese financial institutions that conduct transactions linked to the sale of Iranian petroleum and petroleum products.

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US House Tables Attempt to Reconsider Reauthorization, Reform of Surveillance Power

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives tabled a motion to reconsider legislation that reauthorizes and reforms Section 702 spying authorities of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA).

House lawmakers approved a motion to table the motion to reconsider in a vote of 259 in favor and 128 opposed on Monday. The legislation can now head to the US Senate for consideration.

On Friday, the US House of Representatives passed the bill, dubbed the Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act. The bill reauthorizes Section 702 authorities for two years and reforms several aspects of the surveillance power.

However, House lawmakers rejected an amendment to the bill that would have inserted a warrant requirement for surveillance of US citizens. The Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution enshrines protections against unreasonable searches and seizures without proper issuance of a warrant.

“Politicians who love freedom don’t authorize warrantless surveillance of American citizens. Fix FISA [Section] 702. Or shut it down,” US Senator Mike Lee said on Monday in a statement via social media platform X.

The Biden administration and US defense and intelligence officials repeatedly urged lawmakers to reauthorize Section 702 authorities before their expiration on April 19, claiming that the power is vital to national security.

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US House Republicans Considering Multiple Foreign Aid Measures This Week - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The US House Republican Conference is considering trying to pass multiple bills this week to provide aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, Punchbowl News reported, citing four sources familiar with the plan.

House Republicans intend to pass four foreign aid bills this week, the report said on Monday.

One of the bills will include a TikTok ban, a measure to sell seized Russian assets, lend-lease style military aid and convertible loans for humanitarian relief, the report said.

The House Republican leadership will attempt to advance the plan under a single rule.

On Monday, House Republicans held a closed-door conference meeting, where House Speaker Mike Johnson reportedly outlined the plan to colleagues. Johnson told House Republicans that he will allow an amendment process for the legislation.

Johnson, who spoke with President Joe Biden earlier in the day, also reportedly said that any Ukraine aid legislation must be considered as a standalone bill.

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Tax Returns Show Biden, First Lady Made Over $600,000 in 2023

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden made more than $600,000 in 2023, according to their joint tax return released by the White House.

"The President and First Lady filed their income tax return jointly and reported federal adjusted gross income of $619,976," the White House in a release on Monday that also provided a copy of the filing.

Biden's $400,000 salary made up the bulk of the reported income, with his added pensions, according to the document.

The First Lady reported just under $86,000 from her job teaching at Northern Virginia Community College, the release said.

The Bidens paid $146,629 in federal income tax at a 23.7% tax rate and $30,908 in Delaware income tax as well as $3,549 in Virginia income tax, the release said.

They also contributed $20,477 to 17 separate charities, the release added.

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Czech Leader Says Discussed With Biden Increasing US LNG Exports to Europe - Press Pool

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala told reporters he discussed with President Joe Biden the need to increase US exports of liquified natural gas (LNG) to Europe as the region seeks to diversify its supply away from Russia, according to the White House press pool.

The White House press pool said on Monday that Fiala highlighted that one of the topics discussed with Biden at the White House was increasing Europe's import of LNG gas from the United States as Europe ends its dependency on Russian energy.

In January, Biden paused the approval of new LNG exports in the United States, citing a need to better assess climate, health, and economic considerations of pending licenses.

Republican US lawmakers who oppose the bill have said that Biden's temporary pause on new LNG exports and projects will benefit Russia and have a detrimental impact on future energy investments in the United States.

Others who defend Biden's decision emphasize that Biden's temporary LNG export ban only applies to countries without US free trade agreements, which affects a narrow set of permits.

Fiala also told reporters that he will talk to US lawmakers on Tuesday about efforts to approve new Ukraine funding.

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IAEA Chief Says Worried Iran Nuclear Sites May Potentially Become Targets

UNITED NATIONS, April 16 (Sputnik) - International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi said he is worried about the Israel-Iran conflict potentially including hitting targets at Iranian nuclear sites.

"We are always concerned," Gossi said on Monday. "What I can tell you is that our inspectors in Iran were informed by the Iranian government that yesterday all the nuclear facilities that we are inspecting to date remain closed upon security considerations."

However, Grossi said the nuclear facilities will be reopened today.

Grossi made the comment during a media stakeout after discussions on Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) at the UN Security Council.

On Saturday night, Iran launched more than 300 drones and missiles at Israel in retaliation for the latter attacking Iran's consulate in Syria and killing several commanders.

Israel said its armed forces intercepted 99% of the drones and missiles fired by Iran.

Israeli war cabinet member Benny Gantz said on Sunday that Israel would build a regional coalition to confront Iran and would retaliate in the fashion and timing of their choice.

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Idaho Can Enforce Law Restricting Gender-Altering Care for Minors - US Supreme Court

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The state of Idaho can move forward with enforcement of a law restricting access to gender-altering care for minors, the US Supreme Court said in a ruling.

A district court previously issued a preliminary injunction, which universally blocked enforcement of the state law. The US Supreme Court stayed the injunction except as it pertains to the actual parties of a lawsuit challenging the law.

"Ordinarily, injunctions like these may go no further than necessary to provide interim relief to the parties. In this case, however, the district court went much further, prohibiting a State from enforcing any aspect of its duly enacted law against anyone. Today, the [US Supreme] Court stays the district court's injunction to the extent it applies to nonparties, which is to say to the extent it provides 'universal' relief," the US Supreme Court said in a divided ruling.

In 2023, Idaho adopted the Vulnerable Child Protection Act, which regulates attempts to alter the sex of a minor, including genital surgeries and puberty-blocking medication. The law was set to take effect on January 1, 2024, but two children and their parents sued to block enforcement of the legislation.

The district court's injunction as it relates to the two minor plaintiffs will remain in place pending appeal, the US Supreme Court said.

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Lockheed Martin Wins $17Bln Defense Contract to Develop Next Generation Interceptors - MDA

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has won a $17 billion defense contract to continue development of next generation interceptors to provide a necessary level of missile defense for the US Northern Command, the Missile Defense Agency said in a press release.
"The Missile Defense Agency selected Lockheed Martin to continue development of the Next Generation Interceptor (NGI) through a Critical Design Review, All up Round qualification, integration in the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense Weapon System, and flight testing. These efforts will lead to a follow-on production and emplacement contract to support achieving the United States Northern Command's #1 priority requirement for homeland missile defense: initial operational capability for the NGI no later than 4th Quarter of Fiscal Year 2028," the release said on Monday.

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Grossi Says There Are No Heavy Weapons At ZNPP

UNITED NATIONS, April 16 (Sputnik) – Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency Rafael Grossi said on Monday that there are no heavy weapons at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (ZNPP).
“There is no heavy weaponry there,” Grossi told reporters.

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IAEA Chief Grossi Says Plans to Visit Russia, Ukraine Soon

UNITED NATIONS, April 16 (Sputnik) - International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi said on Monday that he intends to travel to Ukraine and Russia soon.
"Yes, we need to [go to] Ukraine and Russia, as I have been doing since the beginning," Grossi said during a press conference in response to a question whether he intends to travel to Ukraine soon.
The IAEA must keep channels of communication open with Russia and Ukraine, Grossi added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) -

IRAN-ISRAEL CONFLICT
* The United States received messages from Iran forecasting its counterattack on Israel this past weekend but was not given information regarding the attack's timeframe or targets, National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Monday.
* Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has asked the Israel Defense Forces to list possible targets in Iran to send a message to Tehran without causing casualties, the Washington Post reported.
* Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev held a phone conversation with Israeli National Security Council Director Tzachi Hanegbi to discuss the latest tensions in the Middle East, the Russian Security Council said.
* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States has been coordinating a diplomatic response to seek to prevent escalation after Iran launched retaliatory strikes on Israel over the weekend.
* Israel has postponed its plans for a ground operation in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip negotiating a responsive measures towards Tehran amid the Iranian retaliatory attack, CNN reported, citing two Israeli sources.
* Russia is extremely concerned about escalating tensions in the Middle East and calls on all countries to show restraint, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

US SANCTIONS ON IRAN
* The United States is following up with G7 nations' capitals to impose new multilateral sanctions on Iran's missile and other programs in the wake of its retaliatory strikes against Israel, National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Monday.
* The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) extended a general license authorizing transactions related to Venezuelan state-owned energy company Petroleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA).
* The United States is imposing a new set of Belarus-related sanctions on 10 people and 12 entities, the US Treasury Department said.

RUSSIA ADDS MORE PERSONS ON TERRORIST LIST
* Russia has added Ukraine's right-wing Russian Volunteer Corps (banned as terrorist organization in Russia) to the list of terrorists and extremists, the Russian Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) said on Monday.
* Russia has added theater director Evgenia Berkovich and playwright Svetlana Petriychuk to the list of terrorists and extremists, Rosfinmonitoring said.

US-RUSSIA SPACE COOPERATION
* The Russian state space corporation Roscosmos and NASA are holding negotiations on

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creating unified docking modules to assist each other in space after cooperation on the International Space Station (ISS) ends, Roscosmos head Yuri Borisov said on Monday.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Ukraine has lost up to 420 soldiers in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Monday.
* The Dutch government said in a memorandum that it had approved the allocation of an additional 4.4 billion euros ($4.7 billion) in aid to Ukraine for 2024-2026.
* The European Commission recommended the Council of the EU to approve Ukraine's comprehensive reform plan that paves the way for allocating support to Kiev under the bloc's 50 billion ($53 billion) euro Ukraine Facility.

SITUATION AT ZNPP

* International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Rafael Grossi said on Monday that attacks on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant earlier this month repeatedly violated one of the five principles he outlined last year to avert a nuclear disaster amid the Ukraine conflict.
* Attacks around the ZNPP have to stop immediately as nuclear safety is already compromised, Grossi told the UN Security Council.
* Grossi said even though the six reactors at the ZNPP are in a cold shutdown, the threat of a major disaster at the facility remains real.
* Russia is making every effort to prevent security threats aimed at the ZNPP, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said.
* Russia expresses gratitude to the IAEA for promptly condemning the attacks on the ZNPP, Nebenzia said.

TOP * STORY *

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NYT Directed Journalists to Avoid Using Word 'Genocide' When Covering Gaza – Reports

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) – The New York Times directed its journalists to avoid using the words "genocide," and "ethnic cleansing" and refrain from using the phrase "occupied territory" when writing about Gaza amid Israel's ongoing military operation in the enclave, The Intercept reported on Monday, citing an internal memo.

The memo, which has been circulating in the newspaper since November, also prohibits reporters from using the word Palestine "except in very rare cases" and directs them to stay away from the term "refugee camps" to speak about areas populated with displaced Palestinians, the report said.

However, even though the memo supposedly "offers guidance about some terms and other issues we have grappled with since the start of the conflict in October," some New York Times staffers have already noted that the directive shows evidence of the paper's deference to Israeli narratives, according to the report.

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"I think it's the kind of thing that looks professional and logical if you have no knowledge of the historical context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict," the report cited one of the staffers as saying. "But if you do know, it will be clear how apologetic it is to Israel."

The Biden administration continues to shield Israel and deny that Tel Aviv's actions in Gaza, where dozens of thousands of people have died, including children and women, amount to a war crime or genocide.

On October 7, 2023, 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 33,700 people have been killed so far by Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip, according to local authorities.

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F-35 Costs Soar Again by Nearly $400Mln in 5 Years With Jet's Reliability Down - Report

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The costs of the Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint Strike Fighter have rapidly risen by nearly $400 million over just a five year period, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a new report on Monday.

"We reported ... that DOD [Department of Defense] projected costs to sustain the F-35 fleet keep increasing - from $1.1 trillion in 2018 to $1.58 trillion in 2023," the report said. "Yet, DOD plans to fly the F-35 less than originally estimated, partly because of reliability issues with the aircraft."

The F-35 jet's ability to perform its mission has also trended downward over the past five years, the report said.

"We've made 43 recommendations to improve the F-35 program in recent years. DOD has yet to implement 30 of them," the report also said.

The F-35 aircraft is the United States' most advanced and costly weapon system and the Department of Defense currently operates about 630 of them.

The Department of Defense plans to buy about 1,800 more and intends to use them through 2088, according to the report.

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Trump Stock Sinks Ahead of New Share Issue, Start of Hush-Money Trial

NEW YORK, April 15 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump's media stock fell 20% on Monday, in another plunge since its public debut three weeks ago, as the company announced

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a plan to issue new shares and as the former president went to trial for allegedly covering up his affair with pornography star Stormy Daniels to win the White House four years ago.

Shares of Truth Social - trading under the DJT symbol synonymous with Trump's initials - has lost almost 70% from its debut high of $79.38 on March 26, hovering under $27 now.

Operated by Trump Media and Technology Group and loosely styled on the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter), the company unveiled on Monday a plan to issue 21.4 million new shares that will add some $247 million to its coffers.

News that the stock will be diluted, along with Trump's court appearance which made him the first president to be criminally indicted after leaving office, took their toll on company's stock, which has fallen in nine of the 12 trading sessions since its debut.

Trump launched the company after his suspension from Twitter and Facebook (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) for allegedly inciting his supporters to enter the US Capitol following his loss to Joe Biden in the 2020 US presidential election.

Seeking a White House comeback, Trump is challenging Biden again in this November's election, using Truth Social as among his campaign boosters. But the company has been massively diminished since Trump left office, with his attempts to encourage his followers to flock to his new media platform apparently not resonating well enough.

Truth Social says it has almost nine million users but it does not say how many of these are active. In comparison, X has nearly 240 million daily active users as of June 2022.

Trump Media and Technology Group lost $58.2 million on a revenue of $4.1 million in 2023 and says it expects to remain in the red "for the foreseeable future" as it works to expand its user base, attracting more platform partners and advertisers."

At the start of Trump's hush-money trial on Monday, prosecutors asked the judge to fine the former president and remind him he could go to jail for violating a gag order about potential witnesses. Trump faces 34 counts of falsifying records during his 2016 presidential campaign to cover up a $130,000 payment he allegedly made to Stormy Daniels to hush up a 2006 sexual encounter she alleges they had.

Trump denied any such relationship and all charges against him. He has accused Judge Juan Merchan, among others, of bias in advancing a meritless case against him that he says was cooked up by the Biden administration.

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Russia Informs IAEA That Ukraine Has Intensified Attacks on ZNPP - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, April 15 (Sputnik) - Ukraine has "significantly intensified" its attacks on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), and Moscow informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) about it, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said.

"And yet, over the last few months, such attacks not only resumed. They significantly intensified," Nebenzia said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

Russia continues to report to the UN Security Council and the IAEA Secretariat about these

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"unacceptable actions," Nebenzia added.

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Russia Called on IAEA to Name Source of ZNPP Attacks, To Not Keep Avoiding Answer - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 15 (Sputnik) - Russia called on the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) leadership to point to the source of the recent attacks against the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and not to keep avoiding this answer, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday.

"In light of the above, we call on IAEA leadership to recognize this obvious fact and not to walk this linguistic tightrope any longer, to point to the source of attacks on the NPP," Nebenzia said in the UN Security Council to the members during discussions on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. "This is an issue pertaining to ZNPP safety and security as well as the radiological safety of Europe."

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US House Speaker Signs Mayorkas Impeachment Articles, Sending to Senate - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Monday that he signed articles of impeachment against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, sending the matter to the US Senate for consideration.

"Today, I signed the articles of impeachment for Secretary Mayorkas. Tomorrow, they will be delivered to the Senate," Johnson said in a statement via social media platform X.

The situation at the United States' borders is the number one issue for Americans, the statement said. Lawmakers must hold officials who "engineered" the crisis to full account, the statement said.

In February, the US House of Representatives passed impeachment articles against Mayorkas, citing his alleged failure to secure the borders from illegal immigration. The resolution accuses Mayorkas of willful and systemic refusal to comply with and enforce immigration laws.

The US Senate is tasked with holding an impeachment trial, although the Democratic majority in the chamber could dismiss the matter with a simple majority of votes.

US Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin has called the impeachment effort a waste of time.

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China Calls on Ukraine, Russia to Show Restraint,Cooperate Within Nuclear Safety Framework

UNITED NATIONS, April 15 (Sputnik) - China called on Ukraine and Russia to exercise restraint and cooperate within the framework of the convention on nuclear safety, the Chinese Deputy Ambassador to the UN Geng Shuang said on Monday.

"China once again calls on the parties concerned to exercise common restraint and adhere to the spirit of humanity, science, communication, and cooperation while strictly complying with the Convention on Nuclear Safety and other relevant international law," Shuang said in the UN Security Council.

Nuclear safety around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant will ultimately depend on a political settlement between the two states, he added.

On April 7, Ukraine's kamikaze drones attacked the territory of the ZNPP right after an inspection carried out by IAEA experts, the plant's press service said. The IAEA confirmed minor damage to the sixth power unit of the ZNPP, adding that nuclear safety had not been compromised. The attack also left three workers injured, with one of them sustaining serious injuries, Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom said.

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Russia Taking Every Effort to Avert Security Threats to ZNPP - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, April 15 (Sputnik) - Russia is making every effort to prevent security threats aimed at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said on Monday.

"Ensuring nuclear safety and security was and remains an unconditional priority for the Russian Federation. Our country, with the support of the IAEA's [International Atomic Energy Agency's] leadership, is making every effort to prevent safety and security threats at the ZNPP," Nebenzia said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

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US, Ukrainian Officials Discuss Ways to Unlock Frozen Russian Assets - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) – US Under Secretary of the Treasury Jay Shambaugh met with Ukrainian Minister of Finance Sergii Marchenko to discuss measures to unlock Russian sovereign assets to support Kiev in its conflict with Russia, the US Department of the Treasury said on Monday.

"The Under Secretary also discussed ways to unlock the value of immobilized Russian sovereign assets to support Ukraine's continued resistance and long-term reconstruction," the

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statement said.

Shambaugh informed his counterpart on the US administration's efforts to push for Congress to pass bipartisan legislation to provide military assistance and direct budget support to Ukraine, it added.

Shambaugh also commended Ukraine's performance under its IMF program, including the recently approved third review, according to the statement.

After the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, Western countries imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, including the freezing of nearly half of the country's foreign currency reserves. The West is estimated to hold some $300 billion in Russian central bank assets and has been discussing ways to tap the frozen funds.

Moscow has maintained that any attempt to confiscate its assets would violate international law. The Russian Foreign Ministry has condemned the freezing of Russian assets as outright theft.

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Russia Grateful to IAEA Form Promptly Condemning Attacks on ZNPP - Ambassador to UN

UNITED NATIONS, April 15 (Sputnik) - Russia expresses gratitude to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for promptly condemning the attacks on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said on Monday.

"We are grateful to the agency's leadership for swiftly and clearly condemning direct attacks on the ZNPP and to calls to end provocations there at the site," Nebenzia said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

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IAEA's Grossi Says Potential Dangers of Major Nuclear Accident at ZNPP Remain Very Real

(Adds Grossi's remarks in paras 3-4, fixes date in para 5)

UNITED NATIONS, April 15 (Sputnik) - Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency Rafael Grossi said on Monday that even though the six reactors at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (ZNPP) are in a cold shutdown, the threat of a major disaster at the facility remains real.

"Even though the plant's six reactors are now in cold shutdown, with the final unit shifting into that status two days ago following the IAEA's recommendation, the potential dangers of a major nuclear accident are very real," Grossi said in the UN Security Council to the members.

The situation is "dangerously close to a nuclear accident," Grossi warned.

"We must do everything in our power today to minimize the risk of an accident," he stated.

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Grossi Says Recent Attacks on ZNPP Violated Nuclear Safety Principles He Laid Out

UNITED NATIONS, April 15 (Sputnik) - International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Rafael Grossi said on Monday that attacks on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant earlier this month repeatedly violated one of the five principles he outlined last year to avert a nuclear disaster amid the Ukraine conflict.

"Nevertheless, Madame President, over the past ten days, the first of these principles has been violated repeatedly in what marks a step-change increase in risk to nuclear safety and security at Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Plant," Grossi said at a UN Security Council meeting.

On April 7, Ukraine's kamikaze drones attacked the territory of the ZNPP right after an inspection carried out by IAEA experts, the plant's press service said. The IAEA confirmed minor damage to the sixth power unit of the ZNPP, adding that nuclear safety had not been compromised. The attack also left three workers injured, with one of them sustaining serious injuries, Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom said.

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Grossi Says Reckless Attacks on ZNPP Must Cease Immediately, Safety Already Compromised

UNITED NATIONS, April 15 (Sputnik) - Attacks around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (ZNPP) have to stop immediately as nuclear safety is already compromised, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency Rafael Grossi told the United Nations Security Council on Monday.

“These reckless attacks must cease immediately. Though, fortunately, they have not led to a radiological incident this time, they significantly increase the risk at Zaporizhzhia NPP, where nuclear safety is already compromised,” Grossi said.

On Sunday, Ukraine's kamikaze drones attacked the territory of the ZNPP right after an inspection carried out by IAEA experts, the plant's press service said. The IAEA confirmed minor damage to the sixth power unit of the ZNPP, adding that nuclear safety had not been compromised. The attack also left three workers injured, with one of them sustaining serious injuries, Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom said.

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Rust Movie Employee Sentenced to 18 Months in Prison for Fatal Shooting Incident

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Hannah Gutierrez, the weapons supervisor of the Rust movie set, has been sentenced to 18 months in prison for the fatal shooting incident involving US actor Alec Baldwin in 2021, CBS News reported on Monday.

Last month, a US jury in the state of New Mexico convicted Gutierrez of involuntary manslaughter in the accidental shooting death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins.

Hutchins was killed on October 21, 2021, when a gun held by US actor Alec Baldwin fired during a scene rehearsal on the set at the Bonanza Creek Ranch. A wrongful death lawsuit was filed against Baldwin and other important members of the movie production on February 15, 2022.

In February 2023. Baldwin pleaded not guilty to involuntary manslaughter charges.

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NASA Looking for Cheaper, Faster Way to Get Mars Rover Samples Home - Agency Chief

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - NASA is looking for new ways to get three years of rock samples collected by the Mars Perseverance Rover since 2021 safely back to Earth cheaper

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than the $11 billion estimated cost and faster than the currently projected delivery time of 16 years from now, US space agency Administrator Bill Nelson said on Monday.

"Mars Sample Return will be one of the most complex missions NASA has ever undertaken. The bottom line is, an $11 billion budget is too expensive, and a 2040 return date is too far away," Nelson was quoted as saying in a press release. "We need to look outside the box to find a way ahead that is both affordable and returns samples in a reasonable timeframe."

NASA soon will request proposals for new plans and projects to achieve the goals of returning the samples in the 2030s and lower cost, risks and mission complexity, the release said.

"To achieve the ambitious goal of returning the key samples to Earth earlier and at a lower cost, the agency is asking the NASA community to work together to develop a revised plan that leverages innovation and proven technology," the release said.

NASA's Perseverance Rover has been collecting samples for later collection and return to Earth since it landed on Mars in 2021, the release noted.

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Texas National Guard Confirms US Soldier Discharged Weapon in 'Border-Related Incident'

EL PASO, April 15 (Sputnik) - A Texas Military Department spokesperson confirmed to Sputnik on Monday that a US National Guard servicemember fired his gun during a border-related incident on the US border with Mexico on Sunday.

"Early on the afternoon of 14 April, a National Guard Servicemember assigned to Operation Lone Star discharged a weapon in a border-related incident," the spokesperson said.

The incident is under investigation and more information will be made available as the investigation progresses, the spokesperson noted.

Media reported earlier in the day that an Indiana National Guard soldier deployed to Texas for Operation Lonestar allegedly shot at an illegal migrant who had stabbed two others with a knife on the southern border in El Paso, Texas.

The Indiana National Guard told Sputnik that it is aware of the incident, but did not provide other details.

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) declined to comment on the matter.

The Texas Governor's office did not immediately respond to Sputnik's request for comment on the matter.

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Prosecutors Threaten Trump With Fines, Jail for Social Media Posts at Trial – Reports

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WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) – As the trial in former US President Donald Trump's "hush money" case began on Monday, prosecutors threatened the defendant with fines and even jail for making social media posts amid a gag order imposed on him by the judge, CNN reported from the courtroom in Manhattan, New York.

Earlier on Monday, Trump arrived at a Manhattan court to face his first day of trial in the case involving alleged hush money paid via his attorney Michael Cohen to porn actress Stormy Daniels and others from August 2015 to December 2017. Last year, Trump pleaded not guilty on all 34 counts of falsifying business records in connection with hush money.

Prosecutors asked Judge Juan Merchan to hold Trump in contempt of the gag order and fine him $1,000 for each of the three posts and to remind the defendant that "further violations could result in jail time," the report cited prosecutor Chris Conroy as saying during the trial.

Trump's attorney Todd Blanche responded to the demand by noting that the three social media posts do not violate the gag order as the former US president had to respond to "salacious repeated ... attacks" by witnesses in the case, according to the report.

Judge Merchan has not yet ruled on the matter and has already proceeded to the selection of jurors who will decide the fate of the trial.

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Canada Targets 21 Individuals With Belarus-Related Sanctions - Foreign Ministry

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Canada has targeted 21 individuals with sanctions in connection with alleged human rights-related violations in Belarus, the Canadian Foreign Ministry said in a release on Monday.

"The Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced that Canada is imposing sanctions on 21 individuals under the Special Economic Measures (Belarus) Regulations. These sanctions are in response to the ongoing human rights violations in Belarus since the fraudulent presidential election of 2020," the release said.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko secured his sixth term in office in the August 2020 presidential election, which resulted in mass opposition protests. The West accused Minsk of election fraud and human rights violations, something Belarus denies.

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US Imposes Belarus-Related Sanctions on 10 People, 12 Entities - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing a new set of Belarus-related sanctions on 10 people and 12 entities, the US Treasury Department said on Monday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating 12 entities and 10 individuals pursuant to Executive Order (EO) 14038. This action

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builds on US sanctions imposed in response to Belarus's fraudulent August 2020 election, as well as President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's support for Russia's illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The sanctions target six revenue-generating state-owned enterprises, as well as one entity and five individuals involved in facilitating transactions for a US-designated major Belarusian defense sector enterprise, the statement said.

Moreover, the sanctions target five entities and five individuals involved in a global arms network engaged with a US-designated Belarusian defense firm, the statement said.

Both Belarus and Russia say that Western sanctions are unable to change their foreign policy and constitute warfare against the two countries.

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UN Chief Says Sudan's Internal War Could Amount to War Crimes Against Humanity

UNITED NATIONS, April 15 (Sputnik) - The internal war in Sudan between the warring parties could result in war crimes against humanity given the attacks against civilians, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Monday.

"It is a war on villages, homes, hospitals, schools, and vital systems that have been reduced to rubble in conflict hotspots, and it is a war on human rights and international humanitarian law. The indiscriminate attacks that are killing, injuring, and terrorizing civilians could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity," Guterres told reporters at the Security Council stakeout.

Earlier today, the League of Arab States (LAS) presented a five-pronged plan to resolve the conflict in Sudan.

The plan stipulates the need to preserve Sudan's institutions, as well as provide support for ceasefire efforts, an urgent humanitarian response, a comprehensive political path, and cooperation between the Arab League, the United Nations, and the African Union for the settlement of the Sudanese crisis, according to the statement.

On April 15, 2023, clashes broke out between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces. The parties to the conflict have since introduced several temporary nationwide ceasefires, but none has helped settle the conflict. Sudanese Health Minister Haitham Mohamed Ibrahim told Sputnik in a comment published earlier on Monday that more than 13,000 people had been killed and over 30,000 others injured over one year of the armed conflict in Sudan.

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US in Contact With G7 on Sanctions Against Iran's Missile, Other Programs - White House

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WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is following up with G7 capitals to impose new multilateral sanctions on Iran's missile and other programs in the wake of its retaliatory strikes against Israel, National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Monday.
"Our teams are now following up with G7 capitals on new multilateral sanctions to target Iran's missile and other nefarious programs. G7 countries that had yet to designate the IRGC, a terrorist organization, are now considering doing so," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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Iraqi Prime Minister Says Will Discuss With Biden Future of US Military Presence in Iraq

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shyaa al Sudani said on Monday ahead of a meeting with US President Joe Biden that the two will discuss plans to determine the future presence of the US military in Iraq.
"We are going to discuss today our sustainable partnership according to the strategic framework," Sudani said during remarks at the White House alongside Biden.
Sudani referred to the the Higher Military Commission (HMC), which consists of US and Iraqi officials engaged in discussions on the future of the US-led coalition against the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) in Iraq.
Sudani said that the Iraqi government is very serious about activating the strategy framework agreement, adding that there are many benefits for both countries.
The Defense Department has previously said that launching the commission did not mean the start of negotiations between the two countries about the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.

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US Extends General License for Venezuelan PDVSA 8.5% Bond - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) on Monday extended a general license authorizing transactions related to Venezuelan state-owned energy company Petroleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA).
"Except as provided in paragraph (b) of this general license, on or after August 13, 2024, all transactions related to, the provision of financing for, and other dealings in the [PDVSA] 2020 8.5 Percent Bond that would be prohibited… are authorized," OFAC said in a general license statement.
The license, signed by OFAC Director Bradley Smith, does not authorize any transactions or activities otherwise prohibited by Venezuela Sanctions Regulations, according to the document.

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

White House Says Iran Sent No Messages on Timeframe, Targets of Counterattack on Israel

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The United States received messages from Iran forecasting its counterattack on Israel this past weekend but was not given information regarding the attack's timeframe or targets, National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Monday.

"We did receive messages from Iran, and they received messages from us too, but there was never any message to us or to anyone else on the timeframe, the targets, or the type of response," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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Indiana National Guard Says Aware Soldier Allegedly Shot at Migrant on US Southern Border

EL PASO, April 15 (Sputnik) - An Indiana National Guard spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday they are aware of an incident on the US border with Mexico involving one of its soldiers allegedly shooting at a migrant who had stabbed two other people.

"The Indiana National Guard is aware of the incident that happened Sunday, April 14. We support and care for our soldiers and airmen who are supporting Operation Lone Star," the spokesperson said.

Earlier on Monday, US media reported that an Indiana National Guard soldier deployed to Texas for Operation Lonestar allegedly shot at an illegal migrant who had stabbed two others with a knife on the southern border in El Paso, Texas.

US Customs and Border Protection declined to comment on the matter.

The Texas Military Department, the Texas Department of Public Safety, and the Texas Governor's office did not immediately respond to Sputnik's request for comment on the matter.

Several Republican states have sent members of their National Guard to the US southern border, mainly Texas, to help the state deal with a record surge of illegal migration on the US southern border.

Last month, a large mob of migrants had pushed through a small fence and several Texas National Guardsmen who were guarding the US southern border in El Paso Texas. They were immediately pushed back after they briefly reached the main border wall.

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Golden Gate Bridge Closed Amid Pro-Palestine Protests - California State Senator

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WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco closed on Monday due to pro-Palestine protests, California State Senator Mike McGuire said in a statement via social media platform X.

"Avoid the Golden Gate Bridge – A closure remains in effect due to a large protest," McGuire said.

California Highway Patrol responded to the scene, McGuire said, adding that there is no estimate for reopening the bridge.

Demonstrators blocked the bridge and held up a banner that read "stop the world for Gaza," per aerial footage of the protest posted by local media.

Pro-Palestine protesters also blocked interstate traffic in West Oakland on Monday, according to local media reports.

"Stop arming Israel," another banner during the protests on Monday said.

The protests come amid an Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip, prompted by an October 7 attack on Israel by Palestinian organization Hamas. The US has provided support to Israel in the conflict and pushed for a hostage release deal.

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US Condemns Murder of Israeli Teenager in West Bank - State Dept.

(Updates with more details in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The United States strongly condemns the murder of 14-year-old Israeli citizen Binyamin Achimair in the West Bank, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"We strongly condemn the murder of 14-year-old Israeli Binyamin Achimair and extend our sympathies to his family and friends," Miller said in a release.

Miller added that the State Department was increasingly concerned by the violence against Palestinian civilians and their property that ensued in the West Bank after Achimair's disappearance, including the killing of two Palestinians - 25-year-old Jihad Abu Aliya and 17-year-old Omar Ahmad Abdulghani Hamed.

The United States strongly condemns these murders, Miller added.

Achimair went missing on Friday, prompting mobs of armed Israeli settlers to go on rampages across the West Bank. Abu Aliya was shot during an attack on the village of Al-Mughayir later on Friday, while Hamed was shot in the head during an attack on the village of Beitin on Saturday.

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Russia Regrets US Transferred Seized Weapons in Oman Gulf to Ukraine - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 15 (Sputnik) - Russia is disappointed about the US seizing weapons in the Gulf of Oman and then sending them to Ukraine, Russian Deputy Ambassador Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Monday.

"It was [with] regret that we learned that the US has concluded the transfer of the weapons munitions they seized in the Gulf of Oman, then they transferred them to the conflict zone in Ukraine," Polyanskiy said in the UN Security Council chamber to the members.

In addition, he said that the US is interpreting the sanctions mechanism against Yemen in a bad way, it should be more taken as a subsidiary mechanism and not a way to punish Yemen.

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

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US Strongly Condemns Murder of Israeli Teenager in West Bank - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The United States strongly condemns the murder of 14-year-old Israeli citizen Binyamin Achimair in the West Bank, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"We strongly condemn the murder of 14-year-old Israeli Binyamin Achimair and extend our sympathies to his family and friends," Miller said in a release.

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Gallant Told Austin Israel Has No Choice But to Retaliate Against Iran - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Israel Defense Minister Yoav Gallant spoke over the weekend with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and informed him that Israel has no choice but to attack Iran in response to the latter's retaliatory drone and missile strike on Saturday night, Axios reported on Monday, citing a US official and a source in the know.

Gallant told Austin that Israel will not allow the Iranian attack to take place without a response, adding that the Netanyahu government also will not accept Iranian retaliatory attacks every time it strikes targets in Syria, the report said.

On Saturday night, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps launched over 300 drones and missiles at Israel in its first-ever direct attack on Israeli territory, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)

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said. The attack came in response to Israel's airstrike on the Iranian consulate in the Syrian capital in early April. IDF spokesman Daniel Hagari said Israel had intercepted 99% of the aerial targets fired by Iran, including all drones.

Israeli media reported that US President Joe Biden forced Israel to postpone its retaliatory strike immediately after Iran's attack on Saturday.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said earlier in the day that Israel will face an immediate and a larger-scale response if it decides to continue escalating tensions with Iran.

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US, PRC Hold 'Candid' Talks on Range of Bilateral, Global Issues - State Department

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Officials representing the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) held candid talks in Beijing on a range of bilateral and global issues, the US State Department said on Monday.

US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Krittenbrink and National Security Council Senior Director for China and Taiwan Affairs Sarah Beran visited Beijing for meetings with PRC officials on April 14-16, the US State Department said in a statement. Krittenbrink and Beran were joined in the meetings by US Ambassador to the PRC Nicholas Burns, the statement added.

"The two sides had in-depth, candid and constructive discussions as part of ongoing efforts to maintain open channels of communication and responsibly manage competition," the statement said. "The two sides discussed a range of bilateral, regional, and global issues, including the Middle East, PRC support for Russia's defense industrial base, cross-Strait issues, the South China Sea, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea."

The visit built on recent high-level diplomacy with the PRC to manage areas of difference and cooperation, while reducing the risk of miscalculation, the statement said.

The US emphasized its commitment to advancing its interests and values, as well as those of its allies and partners, the statement said.

Krittenbrink and Beran also met with Taiwan Affairs Office Deputy Director Qiu Kaiming to discuss cross-strait issues, the statement said. The US officials underscored the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the strait and reiterated that there has been no change to the US' one China policy, the statement said.

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US Congressman Introduces Bill to Sanction Houthis, Backers for Maritime Attacks

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Mark Green on Monday introduced legislation to impose sanctions on Yemen's Houthis for attacking vessels in the Red Sea and the

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Gulf of Aden, according to a copy of the bill text.

The bill, dubbed the Combating Houthi Threats and Aggression Act, requires the US president to impose sanctions on parties responsible for or complicit in Houthi attacks on international shipping. The legislation also mandates sanctions against parties who materially contribute to the Houthis or their operations.

The bill also requires the president to submit reports to lawmakers on the Houthis' capabilities and related risks to the United States' national security and foreign policy objectives.

"My Combating Houthi Threats and Aggression Act will allow Congress to determine the full breadth of the Houthis' capabilities and how we can best respond to this growing threat while imposing harsh sanctions," Green said in a statement, as quoted by US media.

Moreover, the bill requires a report from the president on any violations or attempted violations of a UN arms embargo against Yemen. The bill also establishes as official policy that the US will work with allies to safeguard maritime security in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Houthis have been launching attacks on commercial and military vessels in the region for months, in response to Israel's military operation in the Gaza Strip. The attacks prompted the US to form a multinational coalition to protect shipping in the area, as well as to strike Houthi targets on the ground.

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Polish President to Visit Canada April 18-23 to Discuss Ukraine, NATO Summit - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Polish President Andrzej Duda will visit Canada from April 18-23 to meet with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to discuss Ukraine and the upcoming NATO summit in Washington in July, the Prime Minister's Office announced on Monday.

"The Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, today announced that the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, will visit Canada from April 18 to 23, 2024," the Prime Minister's Office said in a press release. "Prime Minister Trudeau and President Duda will hold a bilateral meeting in Esquimalt to discuss their unwavering support to Ukraine and their shared commitment to transatlantic security ahead of the NATO Leaders' Summit in Washington in July."

Trudeau and Duda also plan to discuss bilateral cooperation with regards to energy security and clean energy, the release added.

This is Duda's second visit to Canada, according to the release.

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Canada Sanctions 6 Persons, Entities for Undermining Security in Sudan - Foreign Ministry

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Ottawa has imposed sanctions on six people and entities

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for allegedly undermining the stability and security of Sudan, Global Affairs Canada announced on Monday.

"Canada is imposing sanctions on six individuals and entities for directly or indirectly undermining peace, security and stability in Sudan. Those sanctioned are associated with the SAF [Sudanese Armed Forces] or RSF [Rapid Support Forces], the main parties to the ongoing conflict," Global Affairs Canada said in a press release.

The sanctioned target Abdelrahim Hamdan Dagalo, Ali Karti, Al Junaid Multi Activities Co. Ltd., GSK Advance Company Ltd., Defense Industries System and Zadna International Company for Investment Ltd., the release said.

The ongoing conflict between the two sides has resulted in a grave breach of international peace and security and gross and systematic violations of human rights, with a devastating scale of violence and human suffering, the release said.

"Millions continue to face acute shortages of food, water, electricity and access to medical care," the release said.

Canada remains deeply concerned about reports of gender-based violence and ethnic cleansing, particularly by the RSF in Darfur, the release added.

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Blinken Says US 'Coordinating Diplomatic Response' to Iran's Strikes on Israel

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Monday that the US has been "coordinating a diplomatic response to seek to prevent escalation" since Iran launched retaliatory strikes on Israel over the weekend.

"In the 36 hours since we have been coordinating a diplomatic response to seek to prevent escalation," Blinken said at a press briefing ahead of a US-Iraq Higher Coordinating Committee meeting.

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Trump Declares 'No Case' as First Criminal Trial Begins in New York

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump on Monday declared that there was "no case" shortly after entering a Manhattan courthouse to face 34 felony counts in the first ever criminal trial of a former US president.

"There is no case," Trump said in remarks to the press. "This is political persecution… It's an assault on America."

Trump also said that the United States is run by an incompetent man who is very much involved in the case.

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"This is really an attack on a political opponent," Trump added.
Jury selection in the case will take place on Monday.
Trump has been charged with 34 felony counts of falsification of business records in order to conceal $130,000 paid to pornography star Stormy Daniels for her silence over their alleged sexual encounter.
The case is one of four criminal indictments against Trump amid his re-election campaign and may be the only one to go to trial before Election Day in November.
If convicted, Trump faces up to four years in prison.

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FBI Opens Criminal Investigation Into Ship Behind Baltimore Bridge Crash - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) – The FBI has opened a criminal investigation into the cargo ship that crashed into the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore last month, bringing down its middle section and killing six people, The Washington Post reported on Monday, citing two US officials.
"The FBI is present aboard the cargo ship Dali conducting court authorized law enforcement activity," the agency said in a statement on Monday, as quoted in the Post, and would not comment further.
US attorney for Maryland Erek Barron said his office would not confirm the existence of investigations or comment on them.
The Singapore-flagged Dali lost power and crashed into a support pillar of the bridge on March 26. The FBI investigation will at least look at whether its crew left the Baltimore port knowing that its systems had problems, the officials said.

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US Reports No Injuries, Damage in Houthi Attack on Gulf of Aden – CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) – The US Central Command announced on Monday that a Houthi attack toward the Gulf of Aden over the weekend did not result in injuries or damage to US, coalition, or commercial ships.
"At approximately 7:00 p.m. (Sanaa time) April 13, Iranian-backed Houthi terrorists launched one anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) toward the Gulf of Aden from a Houthi controlled area in Yemen. There were no injuries or damage reported by US, coalition, or commercial ships," CENTCOM stated in a social media post.
It added that between 4:00 a.m. and 9:15 p.m. Sanaa time (18:15 GMT) on April 14, CENTCOM destroyed four UAVs "in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen in self-defense" because they posed an "imminent threat."

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The Houthis have been launching attacks on ships transiting in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden for months in response to Israel's war on Gaza. Iran rejects the West's allegations of Tehran's involvement in Houthi attacks on merchant ships, saying that the group is acting on its own.

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White House Says Strikes on Israel Showed Iran 'Not the Power it Purports to be'

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) – The White House's National Security Council said Monday that Iran's retaliatory strikes on Israel over the weekend indicated that Iran "is not the power it purports to be."

"I think it did show, did demonstrate that Iran is not the power that it purports to be, that it doesn't have that same military superiority," White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Good Morning America.

Kirby said that Israel had instead shown its "military superiority" even though it had intercepted the drones and missiles with the help of the US, UK, Jordan, and France.

Over the weekend, Iran launched hundreds of drones and missiles toward military targets in Israel in retaliation for Israel's April 1 strikes on its consulate in Damascus that killed seven people, including two IRGC generals.

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World Bank Warns of Widening Income Gap Between Vulnerable Economies, Wealthiest Nations

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Half of the world's most vulnerable economies are facing a "historic reversal" in terms of an income gap with the wealthiest countries, the World Bank said in a new report on Monday.

"Over 2020-24, average per capita incomes in half of IDA countries—the largest share since the start of this century—have been growing more slowly than those of wealthy economies," the report said.

The report, "The Great Reversal: Prospects, Risks, and Policies in International Development Association Countries," notes that the situation arises despite these countries being rich in natural resources and mineral deposits and having high potential for solar-energy generation.

"Yet a historic reversal is underway for them," the report said.

The extreme poverty rate in these countries is more than eight times the average in the rest of the world, with every fourth individual struggling on less than $2.15 per day, the report said.

About 90% of the population of 2 billion people living in the world's most vulnerable economies is facing hunger or malnutrition, and half of such countries are either in debt distress or at high

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risk of it, the report said.

"One out of three IDA countries is poorer, on average, than it was on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic," the report said, referring to the acronym for the World Bank's International Development Association.

However, the report also said that the affected countries can overcome the setback if they take full advantage of their younger populations, rich natural resources and abundant solar-energy potential.

The welfare of these countries has always been crucial to the long-term outlook for global prosperity, the World Bank said.

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