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Surveillance Panopticon Grows More Powerful With Attempted TikTok Ban, Backdoors

The revelation the FBI attempted to pressure Telegram's founder into creating a "backdoor" portal to the application for police and intelligence agencies has drawn attention to the US government's role in surveilling online activity.

18th-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham once devised an unsettling new concept for state punishment and control. His idea: a new prison design with a centralized watchtower enabling the warden to simultaneously view every inmate housed in cells along a vast rotunda. Unable to know whether they were being observed or not at any given time, the prisoners would eventually self-discipline, learning to remain guarded in their actions at all times.

Benthem's concept, known as the panopticon, became a powerful metaphor for surveillance and social control that is perhaps now more relevant than ever in the modern age of high-tech spying and social media. Commentator James Carey joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Wednesday to discuss the latest developments in US government agencies' quest to control the flow of information.

"First of all as a Telegram user I'm glad I stuck with Telegram," said Carey, responding to recent reports the application's developers resisted pressure from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to install a backdoor for government surveillance purposes.

"I think that it's pretty plausible… we've seen in cases like the San Bernardino shooting where Apple didn't have a backdoor ready for the US government and they were essentially ready to threaten even Apple, which is a giant American company, over getting a backdoor to encrypted software, their encryption behind locking everything," he added. "So it doesn't shock me that the US government and FBI is going out trying to get these backdoors and obviously the other intelligence agencies."

"Doesn't shock me at all," added host Garland Nixon. "Kind of what I expect from the FBI, all kinds of criminal activity and miscreant activity for the FBI – that's just any given Tuesday for them."

The FBI has been strongly criticized for a number of abuses, including its role in the murders of Black activists Fred Hampton and Malcolm X. The controversial government agency once sent a letter to civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr. warning of the imminent public revelation of his alleged extramarital affairs. The ploy has been widely considered an effort to goad the African American leader into suicide.

From 1956 until 1971 the FBI engaged in an illegal program of disruption, surveillance, and subversion of activist groups known as COINTELPRO.

"Here's the thing I want to bring up. We got to get rid of TikTok because the Chinese might be looking at something that we're doing," said Nixon, referring to congressional efforts to ban the popular social media application in the United States.

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“Based on this, it makes it a little hard to believe that the FBI and the US government are working hard to protect our data to make sure that no bad guys get their hands on it.”
Cohost Wilmer Leon also noted efforts to discourage the use of 5G routers by Chinese tech company Huawei in the US and Europe. Officials alleged the hardware may contain backdoors for the Chinese government. But revelations about the FBI’s interest in Telegram suggest the problem was perhaps that the Chinese equipment did not contain backdoors.
“It was actually they were mad because they didn't have a backdoor [for] themselves,” speculated Nixon.
Former UK cabinet minister Vince Cable once admitted that Washington’s allegations of security threats from Chinese technology are unproven, confessing the UK government banned Huawei equipment as a diplomatic favor for the United States.
“I think that nobody believes, obviously, that anyone wants to protect our data because everybody else is also on Facebook or Instagram, X, whatever it is,” said Carey. “It doesn't matter where you are. It doesn't matter if you're not on any social media. If you're using a cell phone all your data has been stolen by somebody at some point, you know?”
“No one really believes that the FBI is truly looking for any type of data integrity,” he concluded.
“I think the major thing with TikTok is they don't want competition stealing your data. This is their job.”
“I think there's a real angle to try and remove any type of competition for the tech giants here.”
Former tech consultant and National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed the exhaustive capabilities of US intelligence agencies in 2013, demonstrating that the NSA is able to spy on electronic communications taking place anywhere in the world.
His groundbreaking disclosure was followed by the so-called "Vault 7" leaks four years later, which revealed the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) possesses a number of powerful tools allowing the agency to hack into most consumer electronics devices and even frame foreign governments for cyberattacks.
^anatoly wrote this almost completely himself but I guess I still need to send it to you I dunno

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Politico admits the West is losing its proxy war against Russia

“Morale among troops is grim, ground down by relentless bombardment, a lack of advanced weapons, and losses on the battlefield”: the online news site vividly describes the state of Ukraine's army after boasting of its superb capabilities less than a year ago.

“Ukraine’s military is braced for more losses in the coming months," reported the tabloid outlet, sharing the Ukrainian leadership’s perspective on the situation stemming from the West's derailment of peace negotiations at least twice. "Oleksandr Syrsky, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, has warned that the situation on Ukraine’s eastern front has ‘significantly deteriorated in recent days.’ As Zelensky himself put it elsewhere, ‘We are trying to find some way not to retreat.’”

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Considering Western policy towards Russia, Politico acknowledged the delusions that led Europe into soaring inflation, de-industrialization, and an energy crisis.

“The West has placed too much faith in sanctions, believing they’d bring Russia to heel. There’s also been wishful thinking about Russians turning on Putin over casualty figures, or hopes he may be ousted in a Kremlin coup. Instead Russia’s economy has remained resilient,” the news outlet noted, lamenting the crushed dreams of the pro-war uniparty.

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Government surveillance panopticon grows more powerful with attempted TikTok ban, backdoors

The revelation the FBI attempted to pressure Telegram’s founder into creating a “backdoor” portal to the app for police and intelligence agencies has drawn attention to online government surveillance. Commentator James Carey joined Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program to discuss the latest developments in US government agencies’ quest to control the flow of information.

“First of all as a Telegram user I'm glad I stuck with Telegram,” said Carey. “I think that it's pretty plausible… we've seen in cases like the San Bernardino shooting where Apple didn't have a backdoor ready for the US government and they were essentially ready to threaten even Apple, which is a giant American company, over getting a backdoor to encrypted software.”

“Doesn't shock me at all,” added host Garland Nixon. “Kind of what I expect from the FBI, all kinds of criminal activity and miscreant activity for the FBI – that's just any given Tuesday for them.” For more than a decade the FBI engaged in an illegal program of disruption, surveillance, and subversion of activist groups known as COINTELPRO.

Cohost Wilmer Leon also noted efforts to discourage the use of 5G routers by Chinese tech company Huawei in the US and Europe. Officials alleged the hardware may contain backdoors for the Chinese government. But revelations about the FBI’s interest in Telegram suggest the problem was perhaps that the Chinese equipment did not contain backdoors.

Former UK cabinet minister Vince Cable once admitted Washington’s allegations of security threats from Chinese technology are unproven, confessing the UK government banned Huawei equipment as a diplomatic favor for the United States.

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'No One More Cowardly': Israel War Cabinet Weighs Attack on Iran Despite US Cautioning

While the Biden administration has shown intense loyalty to Israel in their fight with Hamas - even at the risk of losing favor among its own political party - the US is now cautioning Israel to not escalate its ongoing conflict with Iran, following a retaliatory attack from the Islamic Republic over the weekend.

On Tuesday Israel's war cabinet met to discuss a potential response to Iran's strike on Saturday, but did not come to a conclusion. But on Wednesday, the Israeli prime minister said that Israel would decide on its own how to respond to Iran's retaliatory attack, despite advice from its Western allies. Meanwhile the US has been urging Israel to show restraint.

Laith Marouf, a journalist and political commentator, joined Sputnik's The Final Countdown on Wednesday to discuss the escalating conflict between Israel and Iran, as well as the possibility of the US being dragged into the mess.

"It's clear from the statements of the Israeli government that they will be retaliating for Iran's retaliation [over the weekend]. And, the Iranians said that they will hit back immediately if they are targeted. So this is right now, clearly, if Israel attacks Iran, we will be having a full-out war in the region," said Marouf.

Sputnik's Angie Wong noted that US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said the US will impose new sanctions on Iran's "missile and drone program" and entities that support the country's military program as punishment for its attack on Israel, according to an American news source.

"The equipment that the Israelis have can't actually spot Hezbollah's drones," said Marouf, who added that Hezbollah has been using weapons not seen before. "We're seeing a change in how Hezbollah is acting, how Israel is acting and also this showed us today that the drones coming from Lebanon will not be intercepted. There will be no time for Israel to figure out where the drones are coming from, like the ones coming from Iran that take a few hours to reach because of the distance. In a full-out war with Hezbollah, Israel will have no chance to intercept anything."

Sputnik's Ted Rall then noted how US President Joe Biden urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to "take the win" regarding the West's interception of Iran's attack. Israel, however, has signaled that they will continue to escalate the conflict.

"For Israel, its strategic call is permanency as a colony. And already we can see right now the permanency of Israel is in question," said Marouf. "We also can see right now that if Hezbollah enters into an air battle with the Zionists, following the strategy of Iran, they could destroy the Israeli Air Force."

"And, Netanyahu would like to wait for Trump for that full-out war, but he has no choice but to activate it now," he added. "Therefore, he's going to pull Biden with him into this war. And believe me, the US will be siding with Israel, and that means a full-out regional war. American bases will be targeted. American ships will be targeted. I think everybody in the US should get themselves ready mentally for seeing American troops coming back in coffins."

"In six months, we've seen, again, ground forces of Israel defeated in Gaza," he continued. "Israel right now has been demoted from being a regional power into really a full vassal, just like Bahrain, Qatar or the United Arab Emirates that cannot protect itself.

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“[Israel] cannot exist without the direct military protection of the US, the UK, France and others. If that protection wasn't there, there would be no Israel. Therefore, Netanyahu has no choice but to pull the Americans into it. And, clearly, the US elites do not want to give up this apartheid state. They do not want to let go of it like they did let go of South Africa.
Rall then pressed Marouf on his statement claiming that Israel has loss the ground war to Hamas, adding that the IDF has “obliterated, flattened two-thirds or three-quarters of the Gaza Strip” and that “tens of thousands of Gazans have been officially killed”.
“It's very easy to kill civilians. It's very easy to carpet bomb whole neighborhoods from the air, and that's what Israel is good at. It's good at killing civilians that are not combating it - children, women, unarmed delivery people in their homes, destroying mosques and hospitals and universities,” Marouf explained.
“But when the Israeli military entered Gaza, they were faced with huge resistance and they lost so many of their armaments. In fact, some estimates say that the Israeli military ground forces lost 90% of their armored vehicles. Meaning, tanks, APCs and their armored Caterpillar tractors. Now Israel has lost most of that in this battle with the resistance in Gaza, and they had to withdraw,” he added.
“But come to a real fight, there is no one more cowardly as a soldier on this planet than an Israeli soldier. And that battle of 25,000 fighters in Gaza versus a half a million Israelis, proves to you that that's the fact.”

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Biden Administration 'Lacks Moral Character' Regarding Assange's Extradition

The US embassy said a “sentence of death will neither be sought nor imposed on Assange” and that they’re able to provide their assurance as he is not charged with an eligible offense, but this did not address the concern that Assange can be tried for a more severe espionage charge which could lead to the death penalty, one report notes.
On Sunday, it was reported by an American news source that the Australian government asked the US to offer Julian Assange, an Australian citizen, a “felony plea deal” allowing him to return home. Days later, the US Embassy in London submitted “assurances” to potentially avoid an appeal in the case against the WikiLeaks founder.
“Assange will not be prejudiced by reason of nationality with respect to which defenses he may seek to raise at trial and at sentencing,” the U.S. Embassy in London claimed. “Specifically, if extradited, Assange will have the ability to raise and seek to rely upon at trial (which includes any sentencing hearing) the rights and protections given under the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States.”
The US embassy added that a decision as to the “applicability” of the First Amendment is “exclusively within the purview of the US courts”, but the assurance did not specify whether the US government believes the First Amendment rights under the US Constitution apply to a non-US citizen, one journalist noted.

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On Wednesday, the host of AM Wake Up and Slow News Day, Steve Poikonen joined Sputnik's The Critical Hour to delve deeper into the recent report. Sputnik's Wilmer Leon asked Poikonen if the Biden administration "plans to have Assange die in London's Belmarsh prison", where he has been imprisoned for five years. His incarceration has been condemned by international human rights organizations as well as the UN human rights officials.

"It certainly seems that way. And if it's not that they want him to expire in the British dungeon, it's at least that they kick it down the road to the next administration. Not only does the Biden administration lack the cognitive function to make a decision, they lack the moral character to stand by anyone that they made by hook or by crook in the first place," said Poikonen.

"The way that the appeal for the assurances were worded, it leaves a lot of room for the British High Court to step in and say, 'okay, you didn't assure anything; in fact, you contradict stuff you've already entered into the record'. So, it'll be interesting to see what the court does with this as well."

Regarding the US' "reassurances" on the issue of the First Amendment, Poikonen suggested that while Assange may be able to say the words "First Amendment", he is not entitled to any of those rights nor does the US consider him to be a journalist, which they have argued in the past and continue to argue.

"The First Amendment doesn't apply in the eyes of the courts. To say nothing of the fact that diplomatic assurances have nothing to do with the US criminal Justice Department," said Poikonen. "You're talking about two entirely different spheres of the federal government, and one of them have the ability to make assurances, the other does not, and that's the diplomatic assurances that they're getting."

"If Assange was allowed to present a First Amendment defense - and this is what his legal team has argued - it's the whole reason it was considered by the High Court in the first place, the entire case would fall apart because the US would then have to somehow prove that what WikiLeaks did was different than every other publishing outlet in the history of publishing outlets," he explained. "So, the US doesn't want that case. They don't want Julian Assange on US territory."

"Assange is a 52-year-old man who's been in very, very poor health for the last five years, specifically because of the treatment he's endured at the hands of being detained without being charged of anything," he added.

When asked what Assange could do to address these growing issues, Poikonen suggested the European Court of Human Rights, but admitted that either way, Assange may be subjected to multi-level surveillance or a form of "permanent monitoring that any dissident would be subjected to for the rest of their lives".

Assange first founded WikiLeaks in Australia in 2006. Four years later, WikiLeaks released almost half a million documents relating to the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In August, Swedish prosecutors issued an arrest warrant for Assange based on a woman's allegation of rape and another woman's allegation of molestation. The warrant was withdrawn shortly afterward due to insufficient evidence. Assange has also denied the allegations.

Assange then traveled to Britain and afterward, Swedish police issued an international warrant for his arrest. In June of 2012, he entered the Ecuadorian Embassy in London seeking asylum. After Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno withdrew Assange's asylum status in 2019, he was sentenced to 50 weeks in prison for jumping bail in 2012.

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In May of 2019, the US government indicted Assange on 18 charges over WikiLeaks' publication of classified documents. Prosecutors claimed that he "conspired" with US army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning to "hack" into a Pentagon computer. Months later, Sweden would drop their rape investigation.
And most recently, in March of 2022, Britain's top court refused Assange permission to appeal against his extradition. Assange now faces 17 Espionage Act charges and a charge of conspiracy to commit computer intrusion.

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NASA Postpones Mars Sample Project and Seeks Alternatives Amid Budget Cuts

The cost for NASA's project sharply increased and is now estimated to be between $8 billion and $11 billion, with the date of the project also having been pushed off by about a decade.
NASA revealed that their plan to bring samples from Mars to Earth has been postponed due to costs. The goal of the project - the Mars Sample Return program - is to return samples from Mars in order to better prepare human explorers who may seek to go there. According to NASA, they have partnered with the European Space Agency (ESA) for the project.
The date has reportedly been pushed forward multiple times due to ballooning costs. On Monday, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said in order for the program to move forward, NASA is now "seeking innovative designs" from the NASA community.
"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," said Nelson.
"Safely landing and collecting the samples, launching a rocket with the samples off another planet – which has never been done before – and safely transporting the samples more than 33 million miles back to Earth is no small task. We need to look outside the box to find a way ahead that is both affordable and returns samples in a reasonable timeframe," he added.
NASA released their response to an independent review of the project from September of 2023. In their response, they included: "an updated mission design with reduced complexity; improved resiliency; risk posture; stronger accountability and coordination; and an overall budget likely in the $8 billion to $11 billion range."
Reviews of the project have suggested that the costs should be no more than $5 billion to $7 billion, said Nelson. But NASA has had to reduce its spending due to budget cuts for the 2024 and 2025 fiscal years, causing the agency to take a hit of $2.5 billion.
The agency is now asking its community to find a way to revise the plan so that it is cheaper and faster. NASA will also solicit architecture proposals in an effort to see return samples in the 2030s and at a lower "cost, risk, and mission complexity". The agency hopes to receive these proposals by late fall.

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“NASA has engaged in a systematic effort to determine the early history of Mars and how it can help us understand the formation and evolution of habitable worlds, including Earth,” NASA wrote in a press release.
“As part of that effort, Mars Sample Return has been a long-term goal of international planetary exploration for the past two decades. NASA’s Perseverance rover has been collecting samples for later collection and return to Earth since it landed on Mars in 2021”.
The Perseverance rover has already gathered 24 core samples since landing in 2021 at Mars’ Jezero Crater, but the agency hopes it will collect a total of more than 30 in order to study Mars’ history.

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US Embassy in Niger Suppressing Intel to Create Image of Good Ties With Niger - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 18 (Sputnik) - A US military whistleblower is warning that senior officials at the American Embassy in Niger are intentionally suppressing intelligence in order to maintain the image of strong relations with the host country, the Washington Post reported citing a complaint it obtained.
The report said on Wednesday that a US airman filed a private whistleblower complaint to Congress accusing top officials at the US Embassy in Niamey of “intentionally suppressed intelligence” as a means to maintain the “facade of a great country-to-country relationship.”
The report said the whistleblower believes the embassy's actions could have potential implications for US relations with other African nations and the safety of American personnel in the region.
The State Department and Defense Department rejected the claims of negligence, the report noted.
However, the Biden administration admits that talks with Niger's transitional government to maintain a US military presence in Niger are difficult and may fail to produce an agreement, the report added.
Last month, a spokesperson for the Nigerien military said that the country’s transitional government, which took power in a coup last July, ended the military agreement with immediate effect, citing the interests of the Nigerien people.
Niger’s Interior Ministry recently said the United States had promised to submit a plan for the "disengagement" of troops from the West African country after Niamey ended its military pact with Washington. The statement was published on social media after Nigerien Interior Minister Mohamed Toumba hosted US Ambassador Kathleen FitzGibbon for talks earlier in the day.

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House Approves Bill to Require State Dept. to Designate Houthis as Foreign Terror Group

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives approved a measure that would require the State Department to designate Yemen's Houthi rebel group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).

The House passed the legislation in a 285-135 vote on Wednesday and will now send it to the Senate for consideration.

The Biden administration removed the Houthis' FTO designation in February 2021 but re-listed them as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity in January.

The bill comes following a series of attacks by the group on military and commercial vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The attacks prompted the United States to form a multinational coalition to protect commercial shipping in the area, as well as to strike alongside the United Kingdom various Houthi targets in Yemen.

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House Passes Bill to Rescind Biden Sanctions Waiver That Unfroze $6Bln in Iranian Funds

WASHINGTON, April 18 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation to rescind the Biden administration's sanctions waiver to unfreeze $6 billion worth of Iranian funds meant for humanitarian purposes.

The Republican-majority House passed the measure in a 259-160 vote on Wednesday, sending it to the Senate for consideration.

In September, the Biden administration as part of a prisoner swap deal with Tehran unlocked $6 billion in frozen Iranian funds.

US officials have said the funds are closely monitored to ensure none of it is used for Iranian security operations, however, Republicans in Congress have been skeptical about its oversight.

The House also passed legislation to establish a congressional review process for any proposed presidential action to waive or end sanctions on Iran, which heads to the Senate for consideration.

The House has approved a series of anti-Iran bills this week in response to Tehran's decision to carry out a retaliatory attack against Israel. Iran retaliated after Israel killed several senior Iranian military officials at an Iranian consulate in Damascus in early April.

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UNRWA Chief Says Never Received Evidence From Israel About Staff October 7 Allegations

UNITED NATIONS, April 18 (Sputnik) - UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini said he never received any

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evidence from Israel regarding his staff participation in the October 7 attack.

"As Commissioner-General of UNRWA, I have never ever received anything in writing," Lazzarini said during a UN Security Council meeting on Wednesday.

In January, Israel shared data with UNRWA's leadership on the alleged involvement of some agency staff in the October 7 Hamas attack and vowed to hold accountable anyone involved in acts of terror.

Lazzarini said the Office for Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), which took over the investigation, should be asked for answers.

OIOS began its work on January 29, the day UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres tasked it with investigating the Israel's claims, Lazzarini said.

UNRWA said in a report published on Tuesday said that some of its staff members detained by Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip were subjected to abuse and maltreatment, including severe beatings and being forced to strip naked. The report also said that staff in some cases were detained while performing their official duties.

UNRWA is the primary humanitarian agency in the Gaza Strip, with over 2 million people depending on the agency for their survival.

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More Than Three-Quarters of US Adults Paying Higher Grocery Costs Than Last Year - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 18 (Sputnik) - More than three-quarters of adults in the United States are paying more for groceries now than they were one year ago, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll.

Seventy-nine percent (79%) of respondents claimed that they pay more in grocery costs now than in the previous year, whereas just 15% claimed costs have not risen, the poll report said on Wednesday.

Moreover, 60% of respondents claimed to have changed their eating habits due to rising food prices, the poll report said.

Last week, US President Joe Biden said that inflation has fallen by 60% from its peak during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that housing and grocery costs remain too high.

The poll surveyed 1,271 adults in the United States from April 8-10. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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NASA Chief Expresses Concern About Russia-China Alignment in Space Cooperation

WASHINGTON, April 18 (Sputnik) - NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said in a congressional testimony that he is concerned about a possible alignment of Russia and China in space

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cooperation.

"We're concerned about that. Absolutely," Nelson told the US House Appropriations Committee on Wednesday.

However, despite icy diplomatic relations between the United States and Russia, cooperation between them in operating the International Space Station (ISS) was still running as smoothly as ever, Nelson said.

"There is absolutely no indication that anything has changed in the highly professional relationship between the astronauts and the cosmonauts, between the NASA people and Mission Control in Moscow [and] between the Russian people and Mission Control in Houston and it has continued in a professional and highly effective manner," Nelson said.

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US Ending Sanctions Relief on Venezuela Oil, Gas Sector Will Not Impact Chevron - Official

WASHINGTON, April 18 (Sputnik) - Chevron and several other foreign energy companies will be able to continue operating in a limited capacity in Venezuela under special waivers regardless of the Biden administration's decision to end sanctions relief on Venezuela's oil and gas sector, a senior US official said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the United States announced that it will not renew Venezuelan General License 44, which provides US sanctions relief to oil and gas sector operations in Venezuela, due to Washington's election-related concerns in that country. General License 44 is set to expire on Thursday.

"Today's action will not affect other existing authorizations related to Venezuela's oil and gas sector such as Venezuela General License 8M or General License 41," the official told reporters during a conference call on Wednesday.

In November 2022, the United States issued Venezuela General License 41, which authorizes Chevron to resume limited natural resource extraction operations in the country.

Venezuelan General License 8M allows energy firms Halliburton, Schlumberger, Baker Hughes Holdings, and Weatherford International to continue operating in Venezuela at a limited capacity as well.

The US Treasury Department issued General License 44 in October to authorize transactions involving Venezuela's oil and gas sector for six months, but the Biden administration had repeatedly warned that it would let the license expire on April 18 if it determined Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro was preventing free and fair elections in the country.

The Maduro government has cracked down on opposition figures ahead of the elections over allegations that they are plotting against him.

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US House Passes Bill to Prohibit Purchase of Customer Data by Government Entities

WASHINGTON, April 18 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation to prohibit law enforcement and intelligence agencies from obtaining consumer records or information from a third party in exchange for anything of value.

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Fourth Amendment Is Not For Sale Act, in a vote on Wednesday of 219 in favor, 199 opposed and one present.

"We have the Fourth Amendment for a reason. If law enforcement wants to gather information about you, they should first obtain a warrant. They should have to go to a judge and explain why there is probable cause and why they need to know this information. When federal law enforcement agencies purchase this data, however, they bypass our judicial system entirely," US Congressman Jerrold Nadler said in a statement on the bill.

The Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution enshrines protections against unreasonable searches and seizures without proper issuance of a warrant.

The bill requires the government to obtain a court order before acquiring certain customer and subscriber records from a third party.

The legislation also prohibits other government agencies from sharing certain records or information with law enforcement and intelligence agencies, as well as prohibits the use of such records or information in any trial, hearing, or proceeding.

Moreover, the bill expands prohibited disclosures of stored electronic communications under the Stored Communications Act, which generally prohibits certain technology providers from disclosing the contents of stored electronic communications to anyone, including the government.

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Only 29% of F-35 Force 'Fully Mission Capable' a Year Ago - US Air Force Chief Allvin

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Less than 30%, or well below one-third, of all the F-35s flown by the US armed forces were fully mission capable as of one year ago, Air Force Chief of Staff General David Allvin confirmed to the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) on Wednesday.

Representative Matt Gaetz asked Allvin whether he agreed with a statement on Tuesday from F-35 Lockheed Martin-US Air Force Joint Program Office (JPO) Director Lieutenant General Michael Schmidt that as of February 2023, only 29% of all the 630- F-35s currently in US armed forces service were fully mission capable. "I have no basis to dispute that," Allvin replied.

Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall told the committee that little more than half of the F-35s in the US Air Force, Navy, and Marines were even operationally capable - a lower status of readiness than fully mission capable.

"That is not a good number," Kendall acknowledged.

The F-35 aircraft is the US Department of Defense's most advanced and costly weapon system. The US armed forces currently operate about 630 of them. They plan to buy about

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1,800 more, and intend to use them through 2088, the GAO noted.

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Biden Sets Up New Office In Chicago To Track US Criminal Guns, Traffic - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has set up a new national center in Chicago to track guns used in crimes, their ballistics, and networks of weapons dealers and traffickers across the United States, two top federal law enforcement officials announced on Wednesday.

"Deputy Attorney General Lisa O. Monaco and Director Steven Dettelbach of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) announced today the opening of a new Crime Gun Intelligence Center (CGIC) in Chicago," the Department of Justice said in a press release.

CGICs are centralized law enforcement hubs that focus on investigating and preventing gun violence in local communities, using cutting-edge technologies, including ATF's National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) and eTrace systems, to rapidly develop and pursue investigative leads to drive case clearance rates up, the release explained.

"By combining talent, technology, and data from 13 agencies in a single hub, law enforcement in Chicago will generate more leads to take repeat shooters off the streets, so we can push case-closure rates up and drive violent crime rates down," Monaco said.

The CGIC in Chicago will work to identify specific incidents and trends in firearm offenses, enabling law enforcement authorities to move quickly in investigating and prosecuting violent crimes in the most appropriate venue, Acting US Attorney Morris Pasqual said in the release.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 18 (Sputnik) –

IMF FORECAST

* The International Monetary Fund expects the level of global public debt to increase to 93.8% of GDP in 2024 and reach 98.8% in 2029, according to its latest Fiscal Monitor report released on Wednesday.

* The IMF said in a new report that it has reduced the projected level of Russia's public debt in 2024 to 20.8% of GDP and to 21.9% in 2025.

* The IMF said in a new report that it expects China's public debt to reach 88.6 % of GDP in 2024 and exceed 110% in 2029.

* The US public debt will exceed 123% of GDP in 2024 and almost reach 134% in 2029, the IMF said.

US-VENEZUELA RELATIONS

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* The US Treasury Department will not renew a US sanctions waiver on Venezuela's oil and gas sector over US concerns on election-related issues in the Latin American country, a senior US administration official said on Wednesday.
* The United States will continue to engage with representatives of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's government and the Venezuelan opposition after the US decision to not renew a sanctions waiver on Venezuela's oil and gas sector, a senior US administration official said.

MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

* Israel was planning to strike Iran on Monday but called off the attack and decided to wait as tensions rise high following its attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus and retaliatory strikes by Tehran, Axios reported on Wednesday, citing US official and Israeli officials.
* Threats to attack nuclear facilities during tensions between Israel and Iran is a "dangerous path" that will lower the threshold of what is permissible in this field, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.
* Russia calls for an early de-escalation in the Middle East and urges all countries in the region to show restraint, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said

US HOUSE ISRAEL, UKRAINE AID BILLS

* A $26.38 billion Israel aid bill proposed in the US House of Representatives includes $4 billion to replenish Iron Dome and David’s Sling missile defense systems, according to a US House Appropriations Committee summary released Wednesday.
* A $26.38 billion Israel aid bill includes a prohibition on funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), according to a US House Appropriations summary.
* The Ukraine aid bill that will be considered by US lawmakers this week would require the US president to enter an arrangement with Kiev related to repayment of US economic assistance provided to the country, a draft text of the bill revealed.
* A $60.84 billion Ukraine aid bill proposed in the US House of Representatives requires President Joe Biden to promptly deliver long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) to Ukrainian forces, according to a copy of the bill text.
* The US House of Representatives will vote on bills to provide aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan on Saturday, House Speaker Mike Johnson said.

WESTERN SANCTIONS ON IRAN

* The European Union needs to include Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the sanctions list, Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said on Wednesday ahead of the EU summit.
* European Parliament President Roberta Metsola said that she supported new sanctions against Iranian missiles and drones industry, as well as adding the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to the list of terrorist organizations during the ongoing EU summit.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The NATO-Ukraine Council will convene on April 19 at the request of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Wednesday.
* NATO allies should prioritize providing support to Ukraine instead of meeting capabilities targets of the alliance, Stoltenberg said.
* Stoltenberg said that he had discussed with the prime ministers of the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and Denmark the supply of air defense to Ukraine.
* Ukraine has lost up to 480 soldiers in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the

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Russian Defense Ministry said.
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Nebenzia: Unacceptable to Call UN Palestine Agency 'Terrorist Organization'

UNITED NATIONS, April 17 (Sputnik) - Russia considers it unacceptable to brand the UN Palestinian Refugee Agency a terrorist organization or shut it down, particularly after 178 of it staff have died in the current Middle East conflict, Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia said on Wednesday.
"So far 178 staff have perished. This is the highest number of staff of a UN agency that have died all at once. Against this backdrop, what's categorically unacceptable is attempts to label UNRWA, a terrorist organization, as well as calls to close it down," Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting.
Unfounded allegations against UNRWA staff should not not be used to tarnish the whole organization, he added.
Earlier the day, the US State Department said Washington was deeply concerned about a recent report claiming that Israeli forces are abusing UN humanitarian workers it has detained.
The UN Palestinian Refugee Agency (UNRWA), in a report published on Tuesday, said some of its staff members detained by Israeli forces in Gaza were subjected to ill-treatment, including severe beatings and being forced to strip naked. The report also states that in some cases UNRWA staff members were detained by Israeli forces while performing official duties.
UNRWA is the primary humanitarian agency in the Gaza Strip, with over 2 million people depending on it for their survival. In January, Israel shared data with the agency's leadership on the alleged involvement of some of its staff members in the October 7 Hamas attack and vowed to hold accountable anyone involved in "acts of terror."

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China Already Has Larger Navy, Also Growing Larger Air Force Than US - Congressman

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - China already deploys a larger navy with more ships at sea than the United States and is rapidly expanding its air force, which is also set to outnumber the US Air Force, Congressman Mike Rogers told Congress on Wednesday.
"China has already outpaced us with the size of their navy and is on track to do so with a larger air force," Rogers told a hearing of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) on the Fiscal Year 2025 (FY 2025) budget.
Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall agreed in his testimony to the committee that China,

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officially designated as the strategic "pacing challenge to the United States, was outspending and out-equipping the US armed forces already.

"Time is my greatest concern. We are in a race for military technological superiority with a capable pacing challenge. Our cushion is gone. We are out of time...The United States is now facing a competitor with national purchasing power that now exceeds our own. [This is] a challenge we have never faced in modern times ...They are building a military designed to defeat the United States. That is the purpose of it, and we have got to respond to that," he said.

The FY 2025 budget request did not keep pace with China's acknowledged 7% per year growth of China's military budget, Kendall said.

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US House Ukraine Aid Loan Proposal 'Smoke and Mirrors' - Congressman Perry

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - A proposal in the US House of Representatives to provide Ukraine aid through loans is deceptive due to measures included to cancel the debt, Congressman Scott Perry said on Wednesday.

"The 'loan' for Ukraine is all smoke and mirrors. It allows the president to cancel up to 50% of funds owed after November 15, 2024, and all remaining funds owed after January 1, 2026," Perry said in a statement via social media platform X.

No banking institution would allow such terms, Perry added.

Earlier on Wednesday, the US House of Representatives released legislation to provide $60.84 billion in Ukraine-related funding.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson, who backed the proposal, is putting the United States last, Perry said in a separate statement.

US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene and Congressman Thomas Massie have supported vacating Johnson as speaker in response to his foreign aid plan, which also includes a bill to provide billions of dollars in aid for Israel.

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Two in Three Canadians Express Anger, Pessimism Toward Federal Government – Poll

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) – The feelings of anger and pessimism among Canadians toward Canada's Federal Government led by Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau have jointly reached 62%, a Nanos poll revealed on Wednesday.

On a national scale, 31% of Canadians expressed anger toward the Trudeau government and the same proportion said they were pessimistic about Ottawa. Only six percent answered that they were "unsure."

The poll further said that anger toward the federal government has either increased or held

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steady in every region of the country. The data shows that compared to December, dissatisfaction has grown by 12% in Quebec and 17% in the Atlantic provinces to respectively reach 24% and 38% in March, the largest increases nationwide.

Moreover, while dissatisfaction toward the federal government is running high, the proportions of satisfied and optimistic Canadians respectively stand at just 11% and 10%, the poll said. Another eleven percent expressed disinterest, it added.

The poll was conducted on a sample of 1069 Canadians aged 18 or above between March 31 and April 1.

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US Stocks Down 4th Day In Row, With Soft Earnings And No Rate Cut In View

NEW YORK, April 17 (Sputnik) - US stocks fell for a fourth day in a row Wednesday as investors parsed soft first-quarter earnings for corporate America — with the realization that interest rate cuts will probably not come fast enough to assuage their concerns by the second quarter.

"The earnings season is off to a somewhat disturbing start, with several companies reporting beats trading down when guidance was more cautious than hoped for," Louis Navellier, a Nevada-based fund manager overseeing some $1 billion in assets, said in comments carried by MarketWatch, a Wall Street Journal-associated publication.

The New York Stock Exchange's S&P 500 index, which tracks stocks of the top 500 US companies, closed down 31 points, or 0.6%, at 5,020. The blue-chip indicator is down 2% on the week after two back-to-back weekly declines of 1.6% and 1% respectively.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises stocks such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, tumbled 182 points, or 1.2%, to finish at 15,683. Week-to-date, the Nasdaq was down 3%, after prior weekly declines of 0.5%, 0.8% and 0.3% respectively.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest equities indicator that tracks the stocks of 30 large US corporations, settled at 37,753, down 46 points, or 0.1%. The Dow posted a week-to-date drop of 0.6% after prior weekly falls of 2.4% and 2.3%.

Stocks were also depressed this week by comments from Federal Reserve officials sticking to the messaging that the central bank will not be ready anytime soon to cut rates.

The Labor Department reported last week that US consumer prices expanded by 3.5% last month, beating Wall Street's 3.4% forecast and February's annualized 3.2% growth. That was well above the 2% target that would have convinced the Fed that inflation was moderating enough for the central bank to begin easing rates by middle of the year.

Inflation hit a four-decade high in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, with consumer prices growing as much as 9.1% in the year to June 2022.

In response, the Fed hiked rates by 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023. That brought official lending rates to a range of between 5.25% and 5.5% — versus the zero to 0.25% range introduced soon after the start of the pandemic.

Rates have been unchanged since July last year and the Fed has indicated that inflation needs

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to come closer to its annualized 2% target for it to consider cuts.

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Biden Says New US Steel Tariffs on Chinese Steel, Aluminum Will Not Hurt Relations With Xi

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that him seeking higher US tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminum will not hurt his relations with Chinese President Xi Jinping, according to the White House press pool.

"No," Biden when asked if he was concerned metal tariffs on China will hurt his relations with Xi.

Earlier in the day, Biden urged the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) to consider tripling the existing tariffs on steel and aluminum from China, citing "unfair competition." The USTR will also initiate an investigation into China's trade practices in the areas of shipbuilding, maritime shipping and logistics, according to the White House.

The Chinese Embassy in response to Biden's initiative said that the United States is making the repeated mistake of seeking to triple tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminum products and launching an investigation into certain Chinese industries.

The Embassy further said that US Section 301 tariff measures against China are the embodiment of unilateralism and protectionism.

"We hope that the US side will implement the important consensus and spirit of the San Francisco Summit between the two Presidents, work with China to stop actions that violate international economic and trade rules and disrupt the international economic and trade order, including the cancellation of tariffs through the Section 301 review," the Embassy said.

The tariffs were originally launched during the former US President Donald Trump's administration under Section 301 of the Trade Act. The tariff exclusions include over 300 Chinese products related to technology transfer and intellectual property, ranging from car parts to vacuum cleaners, and 77 COVID-19-related medical care products, such as face masks and gloves.

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US Senate Adjourns Mayorkas Impeachment Trial After Dismissing Articles

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The US Senate adjourned an impeachment trial for Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas on Wednesday, after dismissing the two impeachment articles against him.

Senators passed a motion to adjourn in a vote of 51 in favor and 49 opposed.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Senate dismissed the two articles of impeachment approved by the House of Representatives in February, which include alleged willful and systemic refusal to

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comply with the law and breach of public trust.

"The press would've eaten Republicans alive had we tried to table the Trump impeachment articles when we had the majority," US Senator Mike Lee said in a statement via the social media platform X.

The Senate has a constitutional duty to hold a trial for all impeachments, Lee said in a separate statement.

Article 1 Section 3 of the US Constitution states that the Senate shall have the sole power to "try all" impeachments.

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US Should Consider Killing Sentinel ICBM Missile Program - Air Force Secretary

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - US policymakers needed to be open to the idea of scrapping the hugely over-budget and problem plagued Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program and finding an alternative to it, Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"I do think we have to be open minded about the alternatives," Kendall told the US House Armed Services Committee (HASC) on the Air Force budget for Fiscal Year 2024.

However, a credible, effective land-based force was essential to ensure continued deterrent capability of the US nuclear triad, Kendall insisted.

"The risk of a preemptive attack on our nuclear force becomes much higher if there is no ICBM [force]...if the stealth of the submarines is broken and the bombers are caught in their bases and you don't have anything left. ...It would be a lot of risk, more risk than we should accept ... to scrap or abandon the ICBM land leg of the deterrent force," Kendall said.

The Sentinel program is designed to replace the existing Minuteman force, the land-based leg of the US strategic nuclear triad, which is now in some cases more than 60 years old. However, the program was already $35 billion to $40 billion over budget, Congressman Adam Smith told the committee.

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US Senate Dismisses Second Article of Impeachment Against Mayorkas

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The US Senate agreed with a constitutional point of order to dismiss the second article of impeachment against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, after dismissing the first article earlier on Wednesday.

Senators agreed with the point of order that the second article of impeachment does not amount to an impeachable offense in a vote of 51 in agreement and 49 opposing.

In February, the US House of Representatives passed articles of impeachment against

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Mayorkas for allegedly failing to secure the United States' borders from illegal immigration. The Senate is tasked with holding an impeachment trial.

The first article of impeachment accuses Mayorkas of "willful and systemic refusal" to comply with immigration laws. The second article accuses Mayorkas of breach of public trust for allegedly making false statements and obstructing lawful oversight of the Homeland Security department.

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US Making Mistake by Seeking to Triple Tariffs on Chinese Steel, Aluminum - Embassy

(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is making the repeated mistake of seeking to triple tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminum products and launching an investigation into certain Chinese industries, the Chinese Embassy said in a statement to Sputnik on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, US President Joe Biden urged the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) to consider tripling the existing tariffs on steel and aluminum from China, citing "unfair competition." The USTR will also initiate an investigation into China's trade practices in the areas of shipbuilding, maritime shipping and logistics, according to the White House.

"The US is making the same mistake again and again by seeking to triple the tariff rate on Chinese steel and aluminum products and launching Section 301 investigations targeting China's maritime, logistics and shipbuilding sectors," the embassy said.

The embassy said that US Section 301 tariff measures against China are the embodiment of unilateralism and protectionism, adding that these measures have been ruled by the World Trade Organization to be in violation of WTO rules.

China and other trading partners of the United States are strongly dissatisfied with the United States' frequent use of national security, non-market behavior, overcapacity and other reasons to impose restrictions and politicize trade issues, the Embassy added.

The tariffs were originally launched during the former US President Donald Trump's administration under Section 301 of the Trade Act. The tariff exclusions include over 300 Chinese products related to technology transfer and intellectual property, ranging from car parts to vacuum cleaners, and 77 COVID-19-related medical care products, such as face masks and gloves.

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Yellen Says Discussed US Financial Support for Ukraine With Prime Minister Shmyhal

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WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Wednesday that she discussed efforts to financially support Ukraine with Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal.

"I was glad to discuss our key shared priorities, including international financial support for Ukraine, Ukraine's reform progress, and Russia's obligation to pay for the damages of its war of aggression," Yellen said in remarks following the meeting.

Budgetary assistance for Ukraine from the United States is more critical now than ever and Ukraine's success on the battlefield is inextricably linked to the Ukrainian government's ability to deliver essential services to its people, Yellen said.

The Biden administration remains committed to providing military and economic aid to Ukraine, Yellen said.

The United States will continue to impose increasing costs on Russia through sanctions as part of a global sanctions coalition, Yellen added.

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Oil Price Down 3% Moving Further Beneath $90 Per Barrel Mark

NEW YORK, April 17 (Sputnik) - Oil prices tumbled 3% on Wednesday, moving further beneath the key bullish mark of $90 per barrel as Middle East tensions eased after Iran's contained retaliatory attack on Israel and data showed US crude stockpiles rising a fourth straight week in an indication of heavier supply versus demand.

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UK-based Brent crude settled New York trading at $87.29 per barrel, down $2.73, or 3.03%, on the day.

Brent reached a five-month high of $92.18 on Thursday, prior to Saturday's attack by Iran which many feared could trigger a new Middle East catastrophe and seriously disrupt crude shipments from the oil-rich region. But the 300 Iranian aerial weapons fired towards Israel were almost entirely shot down by the Jewish state and its US-led allies. Downward pressure had built since on crude prices.

West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark for US crude, settled down $2.67, or 3.3%, at $82.69 per barrel. The WTI hit a five-month high of $87.67 on Thursday.

"It's clear that there was more hype than delivery in Iran's attack on Israel and the oil bulls who chased the market up on that are now paying the price," John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said in a text to Sputnik.

Fawad Razaqzada, a London-based analyst for StoneX, concurred.

"There was no fresh support for oil concerning potential supply disruptions in the Middle East, leaving traders to concentrate on other factors," Razaqzada wrote in a commentary to clients, shared with Sputnik. Razaqzada added that Tuesday's slump came as traders "realized that the demand outlook for oil is not so rosy after all."

Oil markets also came under pressure after the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report that domestic crude balances rose by 2.735 million barrels during the week that ended on April 12, after three prior weekly builds of 5.841 million, 3.21 million and 3.165 million, respectively.

A consensus of forecasts by energy analysts on Wall Street showed crude stockpiles were expected to rise by just 1.6 million barrels last week.

However, fuel inventories fell, muting some of the pressure arising from the build in crude balances.

Gasoline stockpiles slid by 1.154 million barrels during the week to April 12, after a climb of 715,000 barrels previously, the EIA said. Gasoline is the primary motor fuel in the United States and makes up the largest component of the country's energy mix.

Distillate stockpiles were lower by 2.76 million barrels last week versus the prior build of 1.659 million. Distillates are primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses and ships, and also go into making airline fuel.

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UPDATE - US Will Not Renew Sanctions Waiver on Venezuela's Oil, Gas Sector - Official

(Updates with details in paras 3-5; background in paras 6,7)

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department will not renew a US sanctions waiver on Venezuela's oil and gas sector over US concerns on election-related issues in the Latin American country, a senior US administration official said on Wednesday.

"The Treasury will announce that general license 44 will not be renewed, and we will instead issue general license 44A authorizing a 45 day wind down period for transactions related to oil

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and gas sector operations in Venezuela," the official told reporters.

The official explained that the Biden administration will not renew the sanctions waiver because it determined that although the Venezuelan authorities have met some key commitments in the Barbados Agreement, they've also allegedly fallen short in several areas such as the disqualification of candidates and parties on technicalities, including opposition primary winner Maria Corina Machado, and an alleged continued pattern of harassment and repression against opposition figures and civil society.

The United States will continue to engage with representatives of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's government and the Venezuelan opposition after its decision to not renew the sanctions waiver on Venezuela's oil and gas sector, the official noted.

The Biden administration continues to believe that the Barbados Agreement is still viable, regardless of its decisions to reimpose these sanctions, and the US decision to not renew the sanctions waiver should not be viewed as a final decision that the United States no longer believes Venezuela can hold fair elections, the official added.

Any activity that was previously allowed under General license 44 with respect to the oil and gas sector of Venezuela will need to be wound down by May 31, and any new activity that was previously covered by General license 44 will no longer be allowed, according to the official.

The US Treasury Department issued General License 44 in October to authorize transactions involving Venezuela's oil and gas sector for six months, but the Biden administration had repeatedly warned that it would let the license expire on April 18 if it determined Maduro was preventing free and fair elections in the country.

Maduro's government has cracked down on opposition figures ahead of the elections over allegations they are plotting against him.

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US to Continue Talks with Maduro, Venezuelan Opposition Representatives - Official

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to engage with representatives of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's government and the Venezuelan opposition after the US decision to not renew a sanctions waiver on Venezuela's oil and gas sector, a senior US administration official said on Wednesday.

"We will continue to engage with all stakeholders, including Maduro representatives, democratic opposition, civil society, and the international community," the official told reporters.

The United States is in regular contact with the Venezuelan opposition, the official noted.

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US Will Not Renew Sanctions Waiver on Venezuela's Oil, Gas Sector - Official

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"The Treasury will announce that general license 44 will not be renewed, and we will instead issue general license 44A authorizing a 45 day wind down period for transactions related to oil and gas sector operations in Venezuela," the official told reporters.

The official explained that the Biden administration will not renew the sanctions waiver because it determined that although the Venezuelan authorities have met some key commitments in the Barbados Agreement, they've also allegedly fallen short in several areas such as the disqualification of candidates and parties on technicalities, including opposition primary winner Maria Corina Machado, and an alleged continued pattern of harassment and repression against opposition figures and civil society.

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US Senate Dismisses First Article of Impeachment Against Mayorkas

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday agreed with a constitutional point of order to dismiss the first article of impeachment against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

Senators agreed with the point of order that the first article of impeachment does not amount to an impeachable defense in a vote of 51 in agreement, 48 opposing and one present.

In February, the US House of Representatives passed articles of impeachment against Mayorkas for allegedly failing to secure the United States' borders from illegal immigration. The first article of impeachment accuses Mayorkas of "willful and systemic refusal" to comply with immigration laws.

The Senate is tasked with holding an impeachment trial on the recommendation of House lawmakers.

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Blinken Will Visit China Next Week for Talks With Senior Officials - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to China next week to meet with senior Chinese officials, Politico reported on Wednesday.

Blinken will depart for a four-day trip to China on April 23, the report said, citing three US officials familiar with the secretary's travel plans.

On Tuesday, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said that Blinken would raise the issue of China's alleged support for Russia's military-industrial complex during his upcoming trip to the country.

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Last week, the Chinese embassy in the United States told Sputnik that China has not provided weapons to Russia or Ukraine. Normal trade relations between China and Russia should not be interfered with or restricted, the embassy said.

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US Eyes 'Early Decisive Action' to Shield EV Sector From China - Trade Chief

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is embarking on "early decisive action" to shield its electric vehicle industry from China's price discounting and "harmful" subsidies, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said Wednesday.

Addressing a Senate hearing on the Biden administration's 2024 trade agenda, Tai said the threat to the American EV industry was evolving in the same pattern seen earlier with the US steel, aluminum and solar panel businesses. She spoke as President Joe Biden called for a tripling of US tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminum.

Tai stated that the United States had a growing steel and aluminum industry in the early 2000s "that got washed out by exactly these same anti-competitive practices, enormous amounts of [Chinese] state support fostering an overproduction and over-capacity that brought world prices down so far that no one could compete or survive."

With EVs, she said the Biden administration could see "we are facing this again … so we have to take early action, decisive action."

US-owned Tesla and China's BYD are currently the world's largest EV makers, becoming direct competitors in the Chinese market as well as much of the world outside the United States.

Other EV startups from China, such as Nio, Li Auto and Xpeng, are also gearing up for a slice of the global market. The rivalry comes as Tesla is already losing sales momentum in the United States — it delivered fewer cars in the first-quarter of this year than even the most bearish estimates of Wall Street analysts despite its own price cuts.

Tai, referring specifically to the threat to US-made EVs from China, said the pitfalls of "leaving these types of policies unchecked" were clear.

"We already know what's going to happen," she said. "We're going to lose the capacity to produce and compete. And as we lose that capacity, it is so hard to rebuild that capability".

Biden has insisted that his administration was not at a trade war with Beijing despite the punitive new tariffs proposed on Chinese steel and aluminum.

China reportedly accounts for about half of global steel production, while exporting the metal at a significantly lower cost than US prices. The average US tariff on Chinese steel and aluminum is now 7.5%.

Tai's USTR office has also announced a probe into China's trade practices in the shipbuilding, maritime and logistics sectors, prompting an indignant response from Beijing.

The US trade chief told her Senate audience that protecting American businesses had to be framed in the right context of the World Trade Organization ideals.

"We have to be really clear about why we're taking the action," Tai said. "We are looking for a level playing field because the current playing field is not level. For all the talk about free trade

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being the ideal ... it's the Chinese government against American businesses and American workers, and so it's absolutely critical that we act."

The United States regularly accuses China of implementing non-market policies. Beijing maintains that it firmly supports the multilateral trading system and points to the US practice of bullying and imposing sanctions to suppress other countries' companies.

Beijing is strongly opposed to the US investigation into Chinese practices in the maritime, logistics, and shipbuilding sectors, the Chinese Commerce Ministry said on Wednesday.

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BIden Says Strongly Supports House's Foreign Aid Bills, Package Must Be Passed This Week

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he strongly supports the House's foreign aid bills for Ukraine, Israel and the Indo-Pacific and that the package must be passed this week.

"I strongly support this package to get critical support to Israel and Ukraine, provide desperately needed humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza, and bolster security and stability in the Indo-Pacific," Biden said in a statement.

He added that the House must pass the package this week and that the Senate should quickly follow.

House lawmakers are set to vote on the legislation on Saturday evening, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said in a message to colleagues earlier on Wednesday.

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US Ready to Take More Steps Against Alleged Chinese Support of Russia Military -State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to take further steps to crack down on alleged Chinese support of Russia's operation in Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Wednesday.

"We've sanctioned relevant firms in the PRC and are prepared to take further steps as necessary," Patel said.

The United States has raised these concerns with the Chinese government and has also briefed its allies and partners on this matter over the past few weeks, Patel noted.

Last week, US media reported that China has surged sales of weapon-making equipment and technology to Russia for use in Ukraine, citing two senior Biden administration officials familiar with a US assessment.

The Chinese Embassy in the United States previously told Sputnik that China has not provided weapons to either Russia or Ukraine and has urged Washington to refrain from disparaging the relationship between Beijing and Moscow.

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China has been playing a constructive role in facilitating a political settlement of the conflict in Ukraine, the Embassy added.

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World Banks Holds Closed-Doors Ministerial Round Table on Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The Fifth Ukraine Ministerial Roundtable on financial support for that country is taking place behind closed doors at the World Bank headquarters in Washington.

The round table is taking place during the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund Spring Meetings. The meeting started at 01:15 p.m. EST (5:15 GMT).

The organizers decided to hold the meeting without broadcasting the opening statements and prohibiting the presence of any media.

Earlier in April, IMF spokesperson said the IMF would hold a ministerial-level discussion on budget support for Ukraine during the Spring Meetings.

The IMF has repeatedly emphasized Ukraine's dependence on external funding amid the uncertainty over whether the US Congress would pass an additional aid package.

Reports circulated in Western media ahead of the meeting that Ukraine may not be able to repay its debts and the IMF said it had no plans to consider the possibility of restructuring Ukraine's debt to the organization.

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Israel Called Off Attack on Iran on Monday, Decided to Postpone It – Reports

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) – Israel was planning to strike Iran on Monday but called off the attack and decided to wait as tensions rise high following its attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus and retaliatory strikes by Tehran, Axios reported on Wednesday, citing US official and Israeli officials.

The Israeli war cabinet was preparing to authorize a strike against Iran on Monday, but decided to postpone it due to "operational reasons," the report said.

One of the US officials confirmed Israel notified the Biden administration on Monday about its decision to postpone the strike, according to the report.

Despite the two postponements since Saturday when Iran conducted its retaliatory strike with drones and missiles that did not result in any deaths or widespread destruction, Israel is committed to striking Iran and the only question remains when and how, the report said.

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State Dept. Says 'Deeply Concerned' About Reports Israeli Forces Mistreating UNRWA Workers

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel on Wednesday said that they are aware of and deeply concerned about a recent report claiming that Israeli forces are abusing UN humanitarian workers it has detained.

The UN Palestinian Refugee Agency (UNRWA), in a report published on Tuesday, said some of its staff members detained by Israeli forces in Gaza were subjected to ill-treatment, including severe beatings and being forced to strip naked. The report also states that in some cases UNRWA staff members were detained by Israeli forces while performing official duties.

"So we are aware of this recent report that the UN put out highlighting some of these allegations of extensive human rights abuses. We're deeply concerned by these reports," Patel said during a press briefing when asked about the report.

UNRWA is the primary humanitarian agency in the Gaza Strip, with over 2 million people depending on it for their survival. In January, Israel shared data with the agency's leadership on the alleged involvement of some of its staff members in the October 7 Hamas attack and vowed to hold accountable anyone involved in "acts of terror."

The United States, Finland, Italy, Australia, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, and some other countries responded by suspending funding for the agency. In early February, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appointed an independent review panel led by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna to examine UNRWA activities.

As of today, Canada, Sweden, and Australia have lifted their suspensions of UNRWA funding after a pause of more than two months.

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Israel-Iran Rhetoric Becoming 'Increasingly Dangerous' - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 17 (Sputnik) - The rhetoric between Iran and Israel has increasingly become dangerous and the world can not have another conflict in this region, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"We are seeing a lot of rhetoric, increasingly dangerous rhetoric in the region," Dujarric said during a press briefing. "We are very concerned and we continue to call for maximum restraint as the Secretary General said: the world, let alone the region cannot afford another open conflict."

On Tuesday, media reported Israel had decided how to respond to Iran's recent retaliatory strike but has yet to decide on its timing.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi warned on Wednesday that Israel would face a powerful and fierce retaliation if it carries out even the slightest attack on Iran.

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Brazil Open to Using National Currencies for Trade Inside BRICS - Finance Minister

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) – Brazil is open to the possibility of using national currencies for settlements when trading inside BRICS and is actively discussing it at the moment, Brazilian Minister of Finance Fernando Haddad said on Wednesday.

"There are a lot of discussions in BRICS regarding the use of alternative financial instruments to develop trade between BRICS members, and trade between BRICS members and third countries. What is currently attracting the most attention is the ability to trade in local currencies. In my opinion, this is something that can be used in the short term to develop regional trade," Haddad said in response to a question from Sputnik on the margins of the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings.

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Microsoft Claims Russia Began Influence Campaign Targeting US Support for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Russia has allegedly been engaged in covert and overt influence campaigns targeting the United States' support for Ukraine by using traditional and social media over the past two months, Microsoft said on Wednesday.

"Russian influence operations have picked up steam in the past two months. The Microsoft Threat Analysis Center has tracked at least 70 Russian actors engaged in Ukraine-focused disinformation, using traditional and social media and a mix of covert and overt campaigns," Microsoft said in a press release.

Russia has been employing a network of individuals presenting themselves online as journalists or media personalities who spread certain narratives that are then picked up by the unsuspecting American public, the release said.

While Russia is more focused on Ukraine, China has been allegedly aiming at exploiting societal polarization to diminish faith in US democratic systems, the release added.

In March, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia does not interfere in any foreign elections and will work with any elected US president.

Last year, then-National Security Agency chief Paul Nakasone said the agency had not seen evidence of attempts by Russia or China to affect the 2024 US presidential election.

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US House Israel Aid Bill Includes $4Bln to Replenish Iron Dome, David's Sling Systems

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - A $26.38 billion Israel aid bill proposed in the US House of Representatives includes $4 billion to replenish Iron Dome and David's Sling missile defense systems, according to a US House Appropriations Committee summary released Wednesday.

The bill also includes $1.2 billion for the Iron Beam defense system and $3.5 billion to procure advanced weapons systems and defense articles, the summary said.

House lawmakers are set to vote on the legislation, as well as Ukraine and Taiwan aid bills, on Saturday evening, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said in a message to colleagues earlier on Wednesday.

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US Says Discussed With Baltic,Polish Officials Ways to Constrain Russia's Access to Goods

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Wally Adeyemo met with the ministers of finance of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Polish Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Finance Paweł Karbownik to discuss ways to constrain Russia's access to goods needed for military production, the US Department of the Treasury said on Wednesday.

"They also discussed the ways to constrain Russia's access to the goods it needs to build weapons, including the role China plays in supplying Russia's military-industrial complex," the statement said.

The participants focused on their commitment to Ukraine and building sanctions pressure on Russia, it added.

"In particular, they discussed ways to continue providing near-term financial assistance to Ukraine, as well as ways to unlock the value of immobilized Russian sovereign assets to support Ukraine's continued resistance and long-term reconstruction," the statement said.

Adeyemo also welcomed his counterparts' efforts to implement multilateral restrictions, especially the price cap on Russia's oil, 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 legally tap the frozen funds. Russia has said that such acts would be illegal, in addition to ruining the West's already shaken image as a safe haven for global investors.

In December 2022, the G7, the EU and Australia introduced a price cap on Russian oil at $60 per barrel, meaning it is prohibited to transport and insure more expensive oil. At the end of 2023, the G7 tightened control over compliance with the price ceiling and imposed a series of sanctions against companies and individual tankers transporting Russian oil allegedly in violation of the restrictions.

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US House Israel Aid Bill Includes Prohibition on UNRWA Funding

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - A $26.38 billion Israel aid bill includes a prohibition on funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), according to a US House Appropriations summary released Wednesday.

The US House of Representatives is set to vote on the legislation, as well as Ukraine and Taiwan aid bills, on Saturday evening, House Speaker Mike Johnson said in a message to colleagues earlier on Wednesday.

UNRWA is the primary humanitarian aid agency in the Gaza Strip. In January, Israel shared data with UNRWA's leadership on the alleged involvement of some of the agency's staff in Palestinian movement Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel, leading several countries to suspend funding to the agency.

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US Ukraine Aid Bill Requires Biden to Enter Repayment Arrangement With Kiev - Text

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The Ukraine aid bill that will be considered by US lawmakers this week would require the US president to enter an arrangement with Kiev related to repayment of US economic assistance provided to the country, a draft text of the bill revealed on Wednesday.

"Notwithstanding any other provision of law, not later than 60 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the President shall enter into an arrangement with the Government of Ukraine relating to the repayment by Ukraine to the United States of economic assistance provided to Ukraine by the United States," the draft text stated.

The Ukraine aid bill would also prohibit the US president from any move to cancel Ukraine's debt prior to November 15, 2024, but it would allow for canceling 50% of that debt after that date, according to the proposed legislation.

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US House Ukraine Aid Bill Requires Prompt Delivery of Long-Range ATACMS Missiles

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - A $60.84 billion Ukraine aid bill proposed in the US House of Representatives requires President Joe Biden to promptly deliver long-range Army Tactical

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Missile Systems (ATACMS) to Ukrainian forces, according to a copy of the bill text released on Wednesday.

"As soon as practicable after the date of enactment of this Act, the President shall transfer long range Army Tactical Missile Systems to the Government of Ukraine in defending itself and achieving victory against the Russian Federation," the bill text said.

House lawmakers are set to vote on the legislation, as well as Israel and Taiwan aid bills, on Saturday evening, Speaker Mike Johnson said in a message to colleagues earlier on Wednesday.

Russia has repeatedly warned against the continued delivery of weapons to Ukraine by Western backers, contending that such actions only prolong the conflict.

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US House Releases Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan Foreign Aid Bill Texts

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives released bill texts on Wednesday for legislation with aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan ahead of votes on the bills on Saturday.

The bills provide $60.84 billion in Ukraine-related funding, $26.38 billion in Israel-related funding and $8.12 billion to counter China in the Indo-Pacific region, according to a US House Appropriations Committee summary.

The legislation also requires the State and Defense departments to submit a US strategy on Ukraine within 45 days of the bill's adoption.

House lawmakers are set to vote on the bills on Saturday evening, House Speaker Mike Johnson said in a message to colleagues earlier on Wednesday.

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France Ready to Get Best Possible Use of Frozen Russian Assets to Aid Ukraine - Minister

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - France stands ready to get the best possible use of Russia's frozen assets to support Ukraine, Economy, Finance and Recovery Minister Bruno Le Maire said on Wednesday.

"We stand ready to get the best possible use of the Russian assets to support the Ukrainian government," Le Maire said during a press briefing.

In March, European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell presented to the EU member states a proposal to use the revenues of $3.19 billion annually from Russia's central bank's frozen assets to provide military aid to Ukraine, with 90% of the revenue expected to be spent on weapons shipments to Kiev already in 2024.

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, Western

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countries imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia, including the freezing of nearly half of the country's foreign currency reserves - estimated at $300 billion - and have discussed possible legal ways to tap them.

Russia has said that such acts would be illegal in addition to ruining the West's already shaken image as a safe haven for global investments.

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Canada Appoints Francois Lafreniere as New Ambassador to Hungary – Foreign Ministry

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) – The Canadian Government has appointed Francois Lafreniere as Ottawa's new acting Ambassador to Hungary, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said on Wednesday.

"The Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced the following diplomatic appointment: François Lafrenière becomes Ambassador to Hungary. Mr. Lafrenière replaces Caroline Charette," GAC said in a statement.

Lafreniere joined the Canadian International Development Agency in 2005 and has held several positions throughout the Asian and African continents. He served as director of the Afghanistan and Sri Lanka development programs from 2015 to 2016 and the Myanmar and Philippines development programs from 2016 to 2019.

More recently, Lafreniere acted as Canada's Ambassador to Myanmar from 2019 to 2022 and to Mali from 2022 to 2023.

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Austin Describes His First Engagement With Chinese Counterpart as 'Really Good'

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Wednesday described his first engagement with Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun as "really good" and expressed hope to continue communicating with him in the future.

"The initial engagement I think was really good and we spent an hour talking to each other and I hope to continue that at some point in the future," Austin said during a hearing of the US House Appropriations Committee.

Austin emphasized that the United States is going to do everything it can to maintain open lines of communication with China following a row in bilateral relations over the 2023 balloon incident.

The two military chiefs had a chance to speak via teleconference on Tuesday to discuss regional and global security issues, including Ukraine and alleged provocations by North Korea.

The phone call was the first engagement between the military chiefs of the two countries in more than a year and Austin's first communication with Dong following his appointment at the

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end of 2023.

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Johnson's Foreign Aid, Border Security Plan Violates Promises - US House Freedom Caucus

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The US House Freedom Caucus said on Wednesday that House Speaker Mike Johnson's foreign aid and border security plan violates promises made to Republicans.

Earlier in the day, Johnson informed lawmakers that the House of Representatives will vote on Saturday on bills with foreign aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, as well as legislation to seize Russian sovereign assets and sanction Russia, China and Iran. House lawmakers will also separately consider a border security bill, Johnson said.

"[Johnson] is surrendering the last opportunity we have to combat the border crisis. This flies in the face of every promise Republicans have told you," the House Freedom Caucus said in a statement via the social media platform X.

The so-called "uniparty" cares more about funding Ukraine than it does about securing the United States' borders, the statement said.

US Senator JD Vance said in a statement that Johnson's plan is "stupid politics" and a betrayal as it gives Democrats everything they want with political cover.

US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said that Johnson is out of step with Republicans by continuing to push bills dependent on Democratic support.

Earlier this week, US Congressman Thomas Massie said he is joining Greene in supporting a motion to vacate Johnson as House Speaker, in response to the foreign aid plan. Johnson said that he will not resign from the leadership role, adding that he considers himself a "wartime" speaker in difficult circumstances.

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US Believes China Beginning to Warn Companies on Precursor Chemicals - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that Beijing has begun warning China-based companies about increased measures related to the production and distribution of precursor chemicals aimed to stop illicit drug trafficking, US Assistant Secretary of State Todd Robinson said on Wednesday.

"We believe that the PRC [People's Republic of China] is beginning to work more closely on notifying those companies based in the PRC of these increased efforts to monitor the production of precursor chemicals going around the world, particularly going to Mexico, to warn those companies that there will be increased measures to distribute these chemicals," Robinson said.

The United State sand China are cooperating more closely and specialists from both countries

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have already held two meetings in Beijing and Vienna on this issue, Robinson said.
The efforts reflect the commitment by US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping to cooperate more closely on counter-narcotics efforts, Robinson said.
Last year, Biden met with Xi on the sidelines of the leaders' summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in San Francisco and the two leaders agreed then to strengthen efforts to curb fentanyl production.
From February 2022 to January 2023, at least 105,000 Americans died from drug overdoses, the majority of which involving synthetic opioids such as fentanyl and its analogues. Fentanyl is 50 times more potent than heroin and 100 times more potent than morphine, according to reports.

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US House Set to Vote on Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan Aid Bills on Saturday - Speaker

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will vote on bills to provide aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan on Saturday, House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday.
"After significant Member feedback and discussion, the House Rules Committee will be posting soon today the text of three bills that will fund America's national security interests and allies in Israel, the Indo-Pacific, and Ukraine… We expect the vote on final passage of these bills on Saturday evening," Johnson said in a message to colleagues circulating on social media.
House of Representatives lawmakers will also consider a fourth bill that includes a TikTok restriction measure; a measure to seize Russian sovereign assets; and impose sanctions on Russia, China and Iran, Johnson said.
The legislation includes a loan structure for the foreign aid, as well as enhanced strategy and accountability, Johnson added.

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Schumer Says Will Move to Dismiss DHS Secretary Mayorkas Impeachment Effort

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Wednesday that he will move to dismiss an impeachment effort against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.
"To accommodate the wishes of our Republican Senate colleagues, I will seek an agreement for a period of debate time… and then move to dismiss," Schumer said during remarks on the Senate floor.
In February, the US House of Representatives passed impeachment articles against Mayorkas, citing his alleged failure to secure the United States' borders from illegal immigration. The

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impeachment 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 based on the recommendation of the House of Representatives.

Schumer called the impeachment an illegitimate and politicized effort that could set a dangerous precedent.

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China Needs to Resolve Property Crisis as Soon as Possible - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - China needs to urgently address the property crisis and its impact on public finances, Director of the IMF's Fiscal Affairs Department Vitor Gaspar said on Wednesday.

"The second priority that I would stress is the need for China to as quickly as possible solve the property crisis and the impact of the property crisis on the public finances," Gaspar said during a briefing.

The country is also facing insufficient aggregate demand, which poses a risk of deflation, the IMF official added.

China does have the policy space and a number of options to exercise control over deficits and debt, according to Gaspar.

China's public debt is set to increase to 88.6% of GDP in 2024 and exceed 110% in 2029, the IMF said in its latest Fiscal Monitor report on Wednesday.

The country's economic growth is projected to slow from 5.2% last year to 4.6% in 2024 and 4.1% in 2025, the IMF said in its latest World Economic Outlook on Tuesday. It comes as the positive effects of the post-pandemic boost to consumption and fiscal stimulus ease and weakness in the property sector persists, the report said.

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Canada Joins NATO Air Battle Decisive Munitions Framework - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Canada has joined NATO’s Air Battle Decisive Munitions initiative, the military alliance said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Canada has joined NATO’s Air Battle Decisive Munitions (ABDM) framework, which reduces the costs and delivery times of ammunition," the statement said. "The agreement was signed on Wednesday (17 April 2024) in the margins of the bi-annual meeting of NATO’s National Armaments Directors."

By placing multinational buys, NATO has been able to reduce the acquisition costs of

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precision-guided munitions by 15-20% and has reduced the delivery timetable by nearly a year, the statement said.

ABDM was launched in 2014 and is one of NATO's so-called high visibility projects. The framework was created for member states to aggregate their air-related munition and missiles necessities, converting them into multinational purchases.

NATO states are expected to have placed $383 million worth of new contracts through the ABDM initiative in the first half of 2024, according to the statement.

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US National Nuclear Security Admin 'Slow to Adapt to Modern Threats' – Administrator

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) – The US National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) admitted on Wednesday that it was "slow to adapt to modern threats" but was making improvements.

"There's lots of evidence that we're slow to adapt to modern threats, but I think we're proving we're capable and we're making some changes now to do that," NNSA Administrator Jill Hruby testified at a Senate committee on armed services hearing.

Hruby noted that the agency had added two programs to its nuclear weapons program of record in the last eight months for a total of seven. However, she said the NNSA needed a stronger industrial base and stronger government base to do more.

Hruby also noted that the agency had unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) detection and counter-UAS systems deployed at all of its sites, but was upgrading them as they were not adequate to meet evolving future threats.

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US Supplemental Bill to Allow Support Not Only Ukraine But US Armed Forces - Pritzker

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Approving the US foreign aid supplemental bill would provide the necessary weapons for Ukraine to fight Russia but would also modernize the US military, US Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery Penny Pritzker said on Wednesday.

"With the passage of this supplemental, we will not only send much-needed weaponry to Ukraine, but we will also invest in 117 production lines across more than 31 [US] states, which will replenish our stocks with fresh Howitzers from Minnesota, Bradleys from Alabama and HIMARS from New Jersey," Pritzker said at the US-Ukraine Partnership Forum in Washington.

Pritzker also said that providing military support to Ukraine would also boost US defense innovation that would result in modernizing the US military.

Congress has been deadlocked for months over a foreign aid supplemental bill that would

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provide funding for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan. While the Senate approved a $95 billion version of the bill in March, US House Speaker Mike Johnson has refused to bring it to the House floor for a vote.

Russia has sent a note to NATO regarding arms supplies to Ukraine while Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has said any cargo that contains weapons for Ukraine will become a legitimate target.

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Loose US Fiscal Policy Puts Upward Pressure on Global Interest Rates - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - Loose US fiscal policy has put upward pressure on interest rates worldwide, resulting in higher funding costs globally, Director of the IMF's Fiscal Affairs Department Vitor Gaspar said on Wednesday.

"Loose fiscal policy in the United States exerts upward pressure on global interest rates and the dollar pushes up funding costs into the rest of the world, thereby exacerbating existing fragilities and risks. While modest fiscal tightening is projected over the medium term, it will be insufficient to stabilize public debt in many countries," Gaspar said during a briefing.

On Wednesday, the IMF released its latest Fiscal Monitor report titled Fiscal Policy in the Great Election Year, where it highlighted that although the global economic outlook appears to be stabilizing, it struggles with high debt and deficits legacies while also facing several new challenges.

The global public debt is expected to grow from 93.2% of GDP last year to 93.8% in 2024 and reach 98.8% in 2029.

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Vote on UNSC Resolution to Admit Palestine in UN Requested for Thursday - Polyanskiy

UNITED NATIONS, April 17 (Sputnik) - A vote on a UN Security Council resolution recommending that the UN General Assembly admit Palestine as a full member will take place on Thursday afternoon, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

“A short draft resolution has been submitted to the UN Security Council recommending that the UN General Assembly accept Palestine as a full member. Voting on it is requested at 15:00 New York time (22:00 Moscow time) on April 18,” Polyanskiy said via Telegram on Wednesday.

Earlier in April, Palestine officially asked the UN Security Council to consider its request for full membership in the United Nations. The request was supported by the so-called Arab Group, Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Non-Aligned Movement.

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Polyansky said that Russia supports the admission of Palestine as a full member of the United Nations.

Admission of states to the United Nations is carried out by a decision of the UN General Assembly on the recommendation of the UN Security Council. At least nine UN Security Council member states - but none of the five permanent ones - must vote in favor in order for an application to advance to the UN General Assembly for consideration. Two-thirds of the states in the UN General Assembly members must vote in favor for a state to be admitted as full member of the United Nations.

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US Midrange Missiles Deployed in Philippines to Be 'Dark Day' for Int'l Security - Antonov

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) – The deployment of US medium-range missiles in the Philippines will become a "black day" for international security, opening a Pandora's Box of instability on a global scale, Russian Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Antonov said on Wednesday.

"The deployment of medium-range missiles by the Pentagon [in the Philippines] will become a 'black day' for international security," Antonov told reporters.

Antonov recalled that Russia agreed to unilaterally suspend the deployment of medium- and short-range missiles under the condition that the United States does not deploy such missiles in any part of the world.

"We urge the United States not to open a Pandora's Box and to follow the example of our country by taking all necessary steps to ensure global stability and predictability," Antonov added.

The US Army announced on Monday in a press release that it has deployed the Mid-Range Capability also known as the Typhon Weapon System, to Northern Luzon, Philippines, on April 11 as part of the ongoing exercise Salaknib 24.

The system is capable of firing the Standard Missile 6 (SM6) and Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles, the release said.

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US Charged More Than 1,380 People, Convicted Over 940 for January 6 Crimes - Garland

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The United States Justice Department has charged more than 1,380 people and convicted more than 940 for crimes linked to the January 6, 2021 breach of the US Capitol building, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Wednesday.

"We have initiated prosecutions and secured convictions across a wide range of criminal conduct that occurred on January 6, as well as in the days and weeks leading up to the attack,"

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Garland said in testimony to the US Senate Appropriations Committee. “So far, we have charged over 1,380 individuals and obtained over 940 convictions in connection with the January 6 attack.”

The Justice Department’s efforts on January 6 are one of the most complex and resource-intensive investigations in the department’s history, Garland said.

Pavel Durov, founder of the messaging app Telegram, said in an interview with Tucker Carlson on Tuesday that US lawmakers requested the company hand over data in relation to January 6. Telegram ignored the request because it did not want to get involved in internal US politics, Durov said.

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Iran Evacuating Syria-Based IRGC Personnel in Anticipation of Israeli Attack - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) – Iran is evacuating part of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) personnel based in Syria as it braces for an Israeli response to its retaliatory airstrikes, The Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday, citing Syrian and Iranian officials.

On Tuesday, The Jerusalem Post reported, citing multiple sources, that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had decided how to respond to Iran's recent missile and drone barrage on Israel. However, the IDF has yet to decide on the timing of the retaliation. On Wednesday, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi warned that Israel would face a powerful and fierce retaliation if it carries out even the slightest attack on Iran.

Iran is preparing its air assets for strikes and its navy would escort Iranian commercial vessels through the Red Sea, the WSJ report said.

The Islamic republic has also begun the evacuation of IRGC personnel from several locations in Syria, the report said.

The IRGC and the Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah have reduced the presence of their senior officers in Syria, whereas midranking officers are shifting from their original locations in Syria, the report added, citing Syrian security officials.

The report also said that as Israel seems eager to retaliate, the enthusiasm is not shared by the United States, which has been encouraging it not to respond to the attacks and to be satisfied that the Iranian strikes were repelled.

On Saturday night, the IRGC launched over 300 drones and missiles at Israel in its first-ever direct attack on Israeli territory, the IDF said. The attack came in response to Israel's airstrike on the Iranian consulate in the Syrian capital on April 1. Most of the aerial targets were intercepted by Israel’s air defense systems as well as US, UK, French and Jordanian forces.

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American Confidence in National Institutions Falls Below G7 Counterparts – Poll

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) – The United States has fallen behind most of the other G7 countries in terms of its citizens' confidence in the government, military, and judiciary, among various other indicators measured in 2023, according to a Gallup poll released Wednesday.

The US scored 49 of 100, ranking last for the second consecutive year, on the National Institutions Index, which is a composite measure of citizens' confidence in key national institutions, including the national government, military, judicial system, as well as election integrity. In comparison, it had the highest score (63) among G7 countries in 2006.

Looking at these indicators separately, Americans' confidence in their national government dropped to 30, ranking lowest among the G7.

Americans' confidence in the military fell to a new low of 81. While it still ranked third among the G7, its score was meaningfully lower than that of another country (France) for the first time.

Americans' confidence in its judiciary has also been steadily declining since 2020 and fell to a record low of 42, tying with Italy in last place.

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US Public Debt to Exceed 123% of GDP in 2024, Reach Nearly 134% in 2029 - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The US public debt will exceed 123% of GDP in 2024 and almost reach 134% in 2029, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in its latest Fiscal Monitor report on Wednesday.

The level of public debt is expected to reach 123.3% of GDP in 2024 and 126.6% in 2025, the report said.

This level will continue growing steadily over the the next years and reach 133.9% of GDP in 2029, the report added.

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IMF Raises Forecast for Euro Area Public Debt to 88.7% of GDP in 2024 - Fiscal Monitor

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a new report on Wednesday that it expects the euro area public debt to reach 88.7% of GDP in 2024 before decreasing to 87.7% of GDP in 2029.

The euro area public debt in 2024 would represent a 0.1 percentage point increase compared with the level in 2023, the report said.

The IMF projected that regional public debt will decline to 88.3% of GDP in 2025 and then fall further each year before reaching 87.7% of GDP in 2029, the report added.

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China's Public Debt to Grow to 88.6% of GDP in 2024, Exceed 110% in 2029 - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a new report on Wednesday that it expects China's public debt to reach 88.6 % of GDP in 2024 and exceed 110% in 2029.

China's public debt will grow to 88.6% in 2024, which is 3 percentage points more than the level of public debt in 2023, the IMF said in its latest Fiscal Monitor report.

The IMF expects that in 2025, China's public debt will be 93% of GDP and will reach 110.1% of GDP in 2029, the report added.

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IMF Reduces Projection on Russia's Public Debt in 2024 to 20.8% of GDP - Fiscal Monitor

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a new report on Wednesday that it has reduced the projected level of Russia's public debt in 2024 to 20.8% of GDP and to 21.9% in 2025.

Russia's public debt is projected at 20.8% this year, compared with 19.7% the year before, the IMF said in its latest Fiscal Monitor report. In 2025, the IMF expects the figure to rise to 21.9%, and in 2029 it will reach 24% of GDP.

In its previous Fiscal Monitor report in October 2023, the IMF projected that Russia's public debt would be 21.8% of GDP in 2024 and 21.7 in 2025.

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IMF Projects Global Public Debt to Grow to 93.8% of GDP in 2024, 98.8% in 2029 - Report

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund expects the level of global public debt to increase to 93.8% of GDP in 2024 and reach 98.8% in 2029, according to its latest Fiscal Monitor report released on Wednesday.

Global public debt is expected to grow to 93.8% of GDP in 2023, compared to 93.2% of GDP the year before, the report said.

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

US P-8A Poseidon Aircraft Flies Through Taiwan Strait - 7th Fleet

WASHINGTON, April 17 (Sputnik) – The US Navy's P-8A Poseidon reconnaissance aircraft flew through the Taiwan Strait in international airspace on Wednesday, the United States Seventh Fleet said.

"A U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon transited the Taiwan Strait in international airspace on April 17 (local time). By operating within the Taiwan Strait in accordance with international law, the United States upholds the navigational rights and freedoms of all nations," the 7th Fleet said in a statement.

The move is demonstrating the US's commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, the statement said.

The US military conducts operations, flies, sails and operates anywhere international law allows, it added.

Chinese fighters were scrambled to monitor the transit in line with laws and regulations, the Eastern Theater Command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) said in a statement released on social media.

The PLA maintains a high degree of combat readiness to protect the country’s sovereignty and security, as well as peace and stability in the region, the statement said.

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