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4/19/24 Friday

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US Progress on Ukraine Aid Will Only Prolong Ukraine's 'Agony'

On Thursday night, as the clock approached midnight in Washington in more ways than one, four Democratic members of the US House of Representatives Rules Committee joined five of their Republican counterparts to send aid packages for Ukraine, Israel and the Indo-Pacific to the House floor for a vote this weekend.

On Friday, The House, led by House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) and supported by Democratic leaders, voted to bring the long-delayed legislation to the floor. The move was an about-face by Johnson, who promised during his campaign to become speaker to push only single-issue bills and was a long-time opponent of further aid to Ukraine.

While the House Freedom Caucus wing of the Republican party, chiefly Marjorie Taylor-Greene (R-GA) has promised to put forward a vote to vacate the Speaker's chair like they did to former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA). However, Democrats have expressed a willingness to use procedural roadblocks to prevent that, if not outright voting for Johnson.

However, the $95.3 billion bill, which includes $60.8 billion for Ukraine, by far its largest expense, will do nothing to change the reality for the Kiev regime, which lacks the manpower to stand against Russia.

"Everything the West has done since [March 2022, has prolonged] Ukraine's agony, causing more death on both sides and, essentially, disarm itself because the Western military-industrial complex is manifestly incapable of replacing the weapons they've sent to Ukraine," Serbian-American journalist for RT Nebojsa Malic told Sputnik's The Final Countdown on Friday. "No matter how much we send, it's never going to be enough."

Throughout the week, Russia responded to an attempt by Ukraine to damage Russian energy facilities by hitting targets across Ukraine in 34 group strikes using missiles and drones. The attack targeted Ukraine's energy industry facilities, the military-industrial complex and railway infrastructure.

In addition to damaging Ukraine's combat readiness, the attack once again showcased Kiev's inability to mount an effective air defense against Russian attacks.

"And here's the US trying to bankrupt itself even more, sending even more money and weapons that… there aren't enough people to operate them," Malic explained.

In addition to the manpower shortage, the technological gap between Russia and not only Ukraine but the West itself is just too large for the Kiev regime to overcome.

"One side has Iskanders and the other doesn't. One side has hypersonic missiles, the other doesn't. One side has FAB glide bombs, the other doesn't," Malic said. "No amount of martial zeal is going to compensate for this."

"There is no substitute for victory. And, you know, in these situations, the cold equations take over, and it is really just a matter of math," he added.

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Medvedev: Alleged Zelensky Assassination Attempt May Be 'Evidence' That The West Wants Him Gone

On Thursday, authorities in Poland announced that they arrested a Polish man, charging him with “readiness to act for foreign intelligence against the Republic of Poland,” for his role in an alleged plot to assassinate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. The suspect, identified as Pawel K, faces up to eight years in prison for that charge.

Deputy Head of the Russian Security Council and former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev responded on social media, implying that the plot may be a warning from the West against Zelensky.

“An attempt on the life of the chief Banderite [Zelensky] in Poland? That is truly serious,” Medvedev wrote. “It may be the first piece of evidence that people in the West have made a decision to liquidate him. Be afraid, clown!”

The United States has a long history of removing allies that become an impediment to its strategic goals, Caleb Maupin an independent journalist and reporter for RT told Sputnik’s The Critical Hour on Friday.

“We know during the Vietnam War, for example, that the government of South Vietnam was basically purged by the CIA,” he explained. “You can even talk about how in the late ‘80s, at the same time the Eastern Bloc was falling, a number of nationalistic and military regimes that the United States had propped up throughout the Cold War, were being actively undermined by [billionaire] George Soros.”

Noting that Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines and Augusto Pinochet in Chile were both deposed during that time, Maupin also noted that South Korean leader Park Chung Hee also died under mysterious circumstances in 1979. However, he noted that “we know for a fact that the United States did indeed purge the government of South Vietnam.”

Subsequently released classified documents and recordings revealed thatformer US President John F. Kennedy, members of his administration and the CIA supported the assassination of South Vietnamese leader Ngô Đình Diệm and the coup of his government in 1963.

“There’s an understanding [in the West] that Zelensky may be a little bit of a loose cannon, and he may be making demands of Western leaders from behind closed doors that are not appreciated,” Maupin said. The US knows that Zelensky is “scraping off the top” and making “billions of dollars” off of US aid, Maupin added.

“Zelensky has very much been in this for Zelensky. Not for Ukraine, certainly. And not for the West and their campaign against Russia, but for Zelensky. He may have pushed the envelope too far,” Maupin contended.

“As Ukraine is kind of hopeless, there may be a feeling on the part of the United States that before this wraps up, the guy who has been the face of all this, the guy who knows where all the bodies are buried, he needs to be removed from the picture,” Maupin speculated.

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US Confiscation of Russian Assets Will 'Supercharge' De-Dollarization

On Saturday, the US House of Representatives passed the cheekily-named REPO Act, which would enable US President Joe Biden to confiscate roughly $6 billion in frozen Russian assets held in US banks and send it to Ukraine.

The provision is part of a package bill that also includes over $95 billion in aid to Ukraine, Israel and the Indo-Pacific, as well as a potential TikTok ban.The bill is expected to pass in the Senate and then be immediately signed by US President Joe Biden. While the $6 billion represents only a fraction of the more than $300 billion in Russian assets frozen by the G7 countries in 2022, most of that money is held in Europe and US lawmakers hope that it will encourage European lawmakers to do the same.

"We're making good progress in how to access that funds on an agreed basis that I think we can take forward to the G7," UK foreign minister David Cameron, whose government has already come out in support of seizing Russian assets, told reporters earlier this month.

The decision to confiscate Russian assets and provide them to Ukraine represents a major escalation in the West's sanction war against Russia. However, the move is short-sighted by the US because it will accelerate global de-dollarization, which will remove one of the most powerful tools the US has.

"It's reinforcing the need to de-dollarize on the part of any third-party country. Be it Russia, be it China - be it anybody else, including any country in the G-7 that may be marginally supportive of the United States. This is pure and simple economic blackmail," Paul Goncharoff, chief manager of consulting firm Goncharoff LLC. told Sputnik. "Now they're wondering 'Am I putting it into something that will be seized or frozen?' So lack of control [by the owners] over assets is not a good basis of any currency."

"So it just supercharges de-dollarization. And that's not good, especially when you have an America that is used to living on larger and larger debt raised by people placing the trust and buying treasuries and bonds," Goncharoff added.

The US's status as the world's largest reserve enables it to avoid the inflationary effects of its spending, particularly military spending. In 1984, as the US was ramping up its military spending under former President Ronald Reagan, economists studied the inflationary effects of military spending by examining military spending by four countries in the 1950s and 1960s, determining that military spending does increase inflation unless it is offset by slack in the domestic economy, or for nations with a global reserve currency, the slack of the global economy.

"The US used the key currency status of the dollar to export its inflation by running [a] balance of payment deficits in the 1950s and 1960s," they wrote. "Although the US has had by far the highest defense spending as a percentage of GNP of all the countries under study, the special position of the dollar may have allowed the US not only to use slack in its own economy to absorb possible inflationary effects of defense spending, but to use slack in the world economy as well."

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Two other countries in the study, West Germany and France, experienced high inflation, while the UK, whose pound sterling was still used widely as a reserve currency at the time, also did not experience high inflation.

Writing in an Op-Ed for The New York Times, columnist Christopher Caldwell agreed. “If Russia, China and other diplomatic rivals were to decide that their dollar assets were vulnerable and that they could no longer trust the dollar as a means of exchange, we would feel the pain of that $34 trillion in [US national] debt in a way we don’t now.”

The decision “seriously undermines the image and credibility of the West,” Lev Sokolshchik, an associate professor of the School of International Regional Studies and research fellow of the Centre for Comprehensive European and International Studies at the at the Higher School of Economics told Sputnik. “If, for example, a country pursues an independent policy from the US, accordingly, their assets may be at risk: they may be frozen and eventually confiscated.”

Sokolshchik noted that Saudi Arabia, which is partially responsible for the global dominance of the US Dollar because of its creation of the petrodollar, is increasing its collaboration with China, Russia and other BRICS nations. As far back as 2022, Saudi Arabia and China have held talks about settling oil sales to China in Chinese yuan rather than American dollars.

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Israeli Airstrike in Rafah Kills 10, Including Six Children, as Fears of Invasion Grow

Earlier this week, reports surfaced that the US warned Israel against an attack in Rafah, the southernmost city of Gaza where 1.5 million Palestinians have fled as Israel heavily bombed every other region.

Fears that Israel still plans to invade the last remaining refuge for Palestinians displaced from Israel’s bombardment and invasion of Gaza, are growing after an Israeli airstrike on the city reportedly killed 10 people on Friday, mostly women and children.

“This is a world devoid of all human values and morals,” Ahmed Barhoum told The Associated Press, who lost his wife, and five-year-old daughter, as well as his sister, brother-in-law and their three children in the bombing.

“They bombed a house full of displaced people, women and children. The only martyrs were women and children.”

The attack came after Israeli drones were reportedly shot down over Iran early Friday morning, seemingly in response to an Iranian attack earlier this week that was itself a response to an Israeli attack on Iran’s consulate in Syria’s capital city Damascus.

Shortly after Iran’s missile and drone attack, Israeli minister Benny Gantz vowed to “exact the price” from Iran “in the fashion and timing” that is right for Israel. It is unclear if that attack was intended to do that.

“It's very, very weird. I do have some suspicions and I saw some things about that on it, that looked to me that maybe this is a fake out [and Israel is] only going to come back later after Rafah is all over,” Jim Kavanagh, independent journalist and editor of The Polemicist told Sputnik’s The Critical Hour on Friday.

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“It's very confusing to me. What it means is that we have to [put the attention back on] what's going on in Gaza, which is a disaster that's still going on, and nobody's stopping the horror.”
On Saturday, Al Jazeera reported that the Israeli military has continued to attack the city, with one reporter saying “There has been no let-up in the fighting.”
It is also possible that Israel wants to move the domestic public's attention away from their seemingly failed attack on Iran.
"As long as [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] finds a way to continue spilling blood that isn't necessarily Israel's, he can stay in power, and that's where this whole thing is kind of heading right now. It's how long are people going to put up with it," Steve Poikonen told Sputnik's The Critical Hour.
Despite public US protests against a Rafah invasion, Israel continues to promise to invade the southern city. According to war monitors, US and Israeli officials held a “high-level virtual meeting” on Thursday about a possible Israeli military operation in Rafah. Previously, the US demanded that Israel develop a plan to evacuate civilians from the area and the reports say Israel did offer a plan on April 1, but it failed to include plans to provide food, water and other services to the civilians.
On Saturday, the US House of Representatives passed a $95 billion foreign aid bill that includes $26 billion in aid for Israel.

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Biden Fears RFK Jr. as Independent Candidate Gets on Another Ballot

On Thursday, Independent candidate Robert F Kennedy Jr. secured ballot access in the swing state of Michigan, bringing his total to nine states according to his campaign and an affiliated super PAC, though only two, Michigan and Utah, have been confirmed by election officials.
US President Joe Biden’s campaign and the DNC are upping their efforts to stop the presidential campaign of Robert F. Kennedy Jr., including opening up a department dedicated to stopping the independent’s campaign.
On Friday, the Biden campaign released an ad featuring several members of the Kennedy family endorsing the President over their relative who is running for the same spot. Fifteen members of the Kennedy family have also publicly endorsed Biden. Additionally, according to US media, the Biden campaign has been dumping opposition research and claiming in press conferences that a vote for RFK Jr. is a vote for former President Donald Trump.
They have also been challenging RFK Jr.’s ballot access, like in Hawaii where their efforts were shot down by a judge on Saturday.
Democrats have long blamed third-party candidates for their election failures. In 2000, Green candidate Ralph Nader was blamed for George W Bush’s victory over former Vice President Al Gore, despite more registered Democrats in Florida voting for Bush than Nader. Then in 2016, Green candidate Jill Stein was blamed by Democrats for Trump’s 2016 victory over Hillary Clinton, despite the Libertarian candidate (and former Republican governor) Gary Johnson far outperforming Stein.

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Nevertheless, Democrats are worried yet again about third-party candidates, particularly since Kennedy is already on the ballot in four swing states: Michigan, New Hampshire, Nevada and North Carolina. Kennedy has qualified for nine ballots so far.

“There will be a clear choice facing voters this November and the more they learn about RFK Jr, the more they will recognize that a vote for him is a vote for Donald Trump,” Matt Corridoni, a spokesperson for the DNC, told US media.

But polling data and Kennedy’s donor list don’t seem to back that up. In a recent national poll, Trump leads Biden by 2% in a two-way race, 46% to 44%. But when the race is expanded to include Kennedy, Green candidate Jill Stein and former Bernie Sanders surrogate Cornel West, Trump’s lead flips, with Joe Biden leading 39% to 37%. Kennedy receives 13%, Stein grabs 3% and West pulls in 2%.

The poll also notes that 15% of people who said they would vote for Trump in a two-way race say they would vote for Kennedy, compared to just 7% of Biden supporters who switched to Kennedy when given the chance.

Meanwhile, an analysis of Kennedy’s donor list revealed that he has received roughly $224,000 in donations from donors who gave to Trump’s 2020 campaign, compared to $105,000 that came from supporters of Biden’s 2020 campaign.

Despite these metrics, Trump and his campaign have treated Kennedy with a lighter touch. Trump previously said he likes him personally. He also seems to be working on making Democrat fears that Kennedy will siphon off votes from Biden become a reality.

In March, Trump called Kennedy the “most Radical Left Candidate by far” in the 2024 race and slammed his support of environmental issues.

“I guess that would mean that RFK Jr. is going to be taking away votes from Crooked Joe Biden. And he should because he is actually better than Biden. He’s much better than Biden. If I were a Democrat, I’d vote for RFK Jr. every single time over Biden," Trump said in the video.

However, one group of disaffected former-Biden voters who will likely not be voting for RFK Jr., are the ones upset with the Biden administration for its support of Israel and its campaign in Gaza.

Sixty-nine percent of young Democratic voters disapprove of Biden’s handling of the war, and RFK Jr. has had some good polling numbers among young voters in the past. However, RFK Jr. has been even more of a staunch supporter of Israel than Biden or Trump. In December, he said that Palestinians are arguably “the most pampered people by international aid organizations in the world.”

Since the Palestinian issue has become the forefront of the news following Hamas’ attack on October 7 and Israel’s subsequent campaign that has killed more than 34,000 Palestinians and has been called a genocide by multiple human rights organizations and heads of state, RFK Jr,’s poll numbers have dropped from over 16% to just over 7%. However, it is unclear if that drop in support came from his switch from a Democrat to an Independent or another reason, like his support of Israel.

On Friday, The House, led by House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) and supported by Democratic leaders, voted to bring the long-delayed legislation to the floor. The move was an about-face by Johnson, who promised during his campaign to become speaker to push only single-issue bills and was a long-time opponent of further aid to Ukraine.

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"Everything the West has done since [March 2022, has prolonged] Ukraine's agony, causing more death on both sides and, essentially, disarm itself because the Western military-industrial complex is manifestly incapable of replacing the weapons they've sent to Ukraine," Serbian-American journalist for RT Nebojsa Malic told Sputnik's The Final Countdown on Friday. "No matter how much we send, it's never going to be enough."

"And here's the US trying to bankrupt itself even more, sending even more money and weapons that… there aren't enough people to operate them," Malic explained.

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Deputy Head of the Russian Security Council and former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said on social media that the alleged assassination attempt against Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reportedly thwarted in Poland may be a warning from the West against Zelensky.

"An attempt on the life of the chief Banderite [Zelensky] in Poland? That is truly serious," he wrote. "It may be the first piece of evidence that people in the West have made a decision to liquidate him. Be afraid, clown!"

The United States has a long history of removing allies that become an impediment to its strategic goals, Caleb Maupin an independent journalist and reporter for RT told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Friday.

"We know during the Vietnam War, for example, that the government of South Vietnam was basically purged by the CIA," he explained.

"As Ukraine is kind of hopeless, there may be a feeling on the part of the United States that before this wraps up, the guy who has been the face of all this, the guy who knows where all the bodies are buried, he needs to be removed from the picture," Maupin speculated.

Israel's apparent insistence on launching a regional war in the Middle East is dragging the United States with it "Into the garbage bin of history," and US lawmakers seem willing to watch it

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happen, journalist Esteban Carrillo, the head of news at The Cradle, told Sputnik's Political Misfits on Friday.

While discussing the recent US vote against Palestinian statehood in the UN, Carrillo explained that it is working against US interests.

"It's completely a case of the tail wagging the dog. And US politicians just seem so content to just go along with it," he explained. "What does Netanyahu have over the heads of these people? Because it doesn't seem like they are even willing to consider at this point stepping away from this pariah that is just dragging them down into the garbage bin of history."

While tensions between the two countries have seemingly cooled slightly since Israel's attack on Friday caused virtually no damage to Iran according to Iranian officials, Carrillo does not think Israel is done trying to drag the US into the war.

"The United States government for so long now, hasn't seen a war they didn't want to be a part of."

"The Israeli government currently, I don't see them having an exit. They retaliated in such a small way overnight against Iran. That doesn't mean they're not going to try to do something in Lebanon, and that doesn't mean at all that they're not going to try to do something in Gaza," Carrillo said, noting reports that the US is now on board with an Israeli plan to invade the southern Gazan city of Rafa, where roughly 1.5 million Palestinians fled to after being forcibly displaced by Israel.

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The decision to confiscate Russian assets and provide them to Ukraine represents a major escalation in the West's sanction war against Russia. However, the move is short-sighted by the US because it will accelerate global de-dollarization, which will remove one of the most powerful tools the US has.

"It's reinforcing the need to de-dollarize on the part of any third-party country. Be it Russia, be it China - be it anybody else, including any country in the G-7 that may be marginally supportive of the United States. This is pure and simple economic blackmail," Paul Goncharoff, an analyst and management consultant at Dezan Shira & Associates in Moscow told Sputnik.

"So it just supercharges de-dollarization. And that's not good, especially when you have an America that is used to living on larger and larger debt raised by people placing the trust and buying treasuries and bonds," Goncharoff added.

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The decision “seriously undermines the image and credibility of the West,” Lev Sokolshchik, an associate professor of the School of International Regional Studies and research fellow of the Centre for Comprehensive European and International Studies at the Higher School told Sputnik.

“This is strictly just political testosterone on overdrive. Very short-sighted on the part of America.” Goncharoff concluded.

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Fears that Israel still plans to invade the last remaining refuge for Palestinians displaced from Israel’s bombardment and invasion of Gaza, are growing after an Israeli airstrike on the city killed 10 people on Friday, mostly women and children.

“This is a world devoid of all human values and morals,” Ahmed Barhoum told The Associated Press, who lost his wife, and five-year-old daughter, as well as his sister, brother-in-law and their three children in the bombing.

The attack came after Israeli drones were reportedly shot down over Iran early Friday morning, seemingly in response to an Iranian attack earlier this week that was itself a response to an Israeli attack on Iran’s consulate in Syria’s capital city Damascus.
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Shortly after Iran’s missile and drone attack, Israeli minister Benny Gantz vowed to “exact the price” from Iran “in the fashion and timing” that is right for Israel. It is unclear if that attack was intended to do that.

“It's very confusing to me. What it means is that we have to [put the attention back on] what's going on in Gaza, which is a disaster that's still going on, and nobody's stopping the horror.”

On Saturday, Al Jazeera reported that the Israeli military has continued to attack the city, with one reporter saying “There has been no let-up in the fighting.”

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Leaked NYT Style Guide Reveals Biased Reporting on Palestine-Israel Conflict

A leaked memo reveals the depth of the controversial newspaper’s anti-Palestinian bias.
A shocking internal style guide from The New York Times was leakedthis week, revealing the depth of the controversial newspaper’s bias regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict.

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“I’ve closely monitored the paper’s slanted coverage for more than a decade, and I admit to being stunned by this,” wrote Mondoweiss editor James North. “Arguably the worst example of bias is the Times’s directive that its reports should ‘avoid’ using the phrase ‘occupied territory’ when describing Palestinian land.”

“Israel’s military and police checkpoints and the fact that Israel’s military law is supreme – what is this if not an ‘occupation?’” wrote North of the situation in the occupied West Bank, clarifying that Israel’s years-long blockade of the Gaza Strip has been deemed by international legal experts to constitute an occupation as well.

“Occupied territories is the internationally accepted reference to the space,” noted host Wilmer Leon on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program Thursday. “I think it's important for people to also understand that the ability to define is the ability to control.”

“I think that's very true,” agreed Palestinian activist and author Robert Fantina. “The New York Times has for years been trying to define the occupation as something else. Sometimes they call it 'disputed territory' or other kinds of language… The United Nations has said it's still considered occupied. So there's no question about it, the legal term is ‘occupation.’”

UN officials have long criticized Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians, which has led Tel Aviv to frequently criticize the organization, even though the country owes its creation to a 1948 act of the international body. Recently the Israeli government alleged that several members of UNRWA, the UN organization responsible for aid to Palestinian refugees, were involved in Hamas’ October 7 uprising last year.

US intelligence found no evidence for the claim, and it later emerged the Israeli military had tortured UNRWA employees to extract false confessions, waterboarding the aid workers and threatening them with rape and murder. Israeli torture of detainees is reportedly a routine practice as the country holds thousands of Palestinians without charge.

“Even the United States government accepts [Palestine is] occupied, and that's saying something,” noted Fantina. “So the fact that The New York Times is trying to avoid using 'occupation' and deceive its readers is an attempt to control the narrative. It's about control… and that's what they want to do, control the narrative in Israel's favor.”

“There are international laws governing occupation,” he added. “For the occupied, they have the right – the legal right – to resist the occupation in any way at their disposal, including armed struggle. That is specified.”

“Fortunately, people aren't buying it anymore because of the prevalence of social media and people seeing what's actually happening. And the prevalence of independent news sources. They're seeing that, yes, Palestinian people are being massacred in huge numbers – men, women, and children.”

Discussion then turned towards the leak of several US State Department cables that revealed the Biden White House, despite publicly declaring its support for a so-called two-state solution, has undermined efforts towards that end at the United Nations. The leaks revealed Washington was privately lobbying foreign countries to vote against full recognition of Palestine at the international body in order to avoid the embarrassment of a lone veto against the measure.

“[Biden] believes, as a Zionist, in this myth of God-given land to the Jewish people or whatever,” noted Fantina. “Yet then he says he supports a two-state solution, which would deprive the Israelis of a good portion of land. So he can't be seen as an honest broker between the two.”

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“He can't be seen as anyone with the rights of the Palestinians in his mind. He only cares about the Israelis, and the Palestinians can all be killed as he's supporting now, as he's financing. And it doesn't matter to him as long as Israel gets whatever it wants.”
Despite its constant violation of international law, Israel frequently manages to intimidate its critics into silence through extensive lobbying and influence in Western politics. Jewish scholar Norman Finkelstein documented the settler colonial country’s efforts in a book entitled “The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering.”
“After the Holocaust, Jews can do whatever they want,” claimed former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, summing up the mindset of Israel’s defenders.
In fact, many Jewish people reject any association with the Zionist cause, decrying the country’s abuses. The Zionist lobby has persecuted Jewish and non-Jewish critics of Israel alike; in 2007 Finkelstein was denied tenure and forced out of his position at DePaul University after a campaign against him by pro-Israel lawyer Alan Dershowitz.

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Blinken Protects Israeli Military Units Accused of Killings, Assault – Report

State Department officials are sounding the alarm after the US Secretary of State failed to act on accusations of major human rights abuses by Israeli security forces.
A report by investigative outlet ProPublica revealed that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has for months refused to act on staff recommendations to withhold US aid from Israeli security units accused of rape and extrajudicial killings.
Under a 1997 law sponsored by US Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), the United States is required to cut off funding to foreign police and military units credibly accused of major human rights violations. The law was amended and strengthened in 2020 and has reportedly been applied hundreds of times in countries such as Mexico, Colombia and Cambodia.
But the US State Department treats accusations against Israel less seriously than those lodged against security forces in other countries, according to several employees.
“If we had been applying Leahy effectively in Israel like we do in other countries, maybe you wouldn’t have the IDF filming TikToks of their war crimes now because we have contributed to a culture of impunity,” said former State Department director Josh Paul, who resigned in protest last year over the Biden administration’s defense of Israeli abuses.
Briefings on the alleged Israeli abuses were reportedly sent to Blinken four months ago, according to a source familiar with the situation. “They’ve been sitting in his briefcase since then,” said another official.
The majority of the accusations under investigation took place before Hamas’ October 7 uprising, and many involve teenagers.
One allegation involved the arrest of a 15-year old Palestinian boy by Israeli border police. The teenager was reportedly held in a detention center for five days after being accused of throwing stones and Molotov cocktails. A Palestinian child human rights group shared credible evidence

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the boy had been tortured into confessing to the act, enduring violent assault and sodomization by an object.
After the State Department inquired about the incident the Israeli government raided the child welfare nonprofit that brought light to the allegation and designated it as a terrorist organization.
Leaked NYT style guide reveals biased reporting on the Palestine-Israel conflict (Part 1)

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A shocking internal style guide from The New York Times was leaked this week, revealing the depth of the controversial newspaper's bias regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict.

"I've closely monitored the paper's slanted coverage for more than a decade, and I admit to being stunned by this," wrote Mondoweiss editor James North. "Arguably the worst example of bias is the Times's directive that its reports should 'avoid' using the phrase 'occupied territory' when describing Palestinian land."

"The New York Times has for years been trying to define the occupation as something else," noted activist and author Robert Fantina on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program. "Sometimes they call it 'disputed territory' or other kinds of language… The United Nations has said it's still considered occupied. So there's no question about it, the legal term is 'occupation.'"

UN officials have long criticized Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, which has led Tel Aviv to frequently criticize the organization, even though the country owes its creation to a 1948 act of the international body. Recently the Israeli government alleged that several members of UNRWA, the UN organization responsible for aid to Palestinian refugees, were involved in Hamas' October 7 uprising last year.

US intelligence found no evidence for the claim, and it later emerged the Israeli military had reportedly tortured UNRWA employees to extract false confessions.

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Leaked NYT style guide reveals biased reporting on the Palestine-Israel conflict (Part 2)

"Even the United States government accepts [Palestine is] occupied, and that's saying something," noted author Robert Fantina on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program. Fantina made the observation in response to a leaked New York Times memo instructing its reporters not to use the term "occupation" in regard to Israel's control of Palestine.

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“So, the fact that The New York Times is trying to avoid using 'occupation' and deceive its readers is an attempt to control the narrative. It's about control… and that's what they want to do, control the narrative in Israel's favor,” Fantina said.

“There are international laws governing occupation,” he added. “For the occupied, they have the right – the legal right – to resist the occupation in any way at their disposal, including armed struggle. That is specified.”

“Fortunately, people aren't buying it anymore because of the prevalence of social media and people seeing what's actually happening. And the prevalence of independent news sources. They're seeing that, yes, Palestinian people are being massacred in huge numbers – men, women, and children,” Fantina stressed.

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TikTok Plans to Fight Looming Forced Divestiture in Courts - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 22 (Sputnik) – TikTok plans to take the fight to the courts if a US bill that calls for its Chinese parent company ByteDance to divest its ownership stake in the app is signed into law, Bloomberg reported on Monday, citing a company memo to its US employees.
"At the stage that the bill is signed, we will move to the courts for a legal challenge," Michael Beckerman, TikTok’s head of public policy for the Americas, stated in the memo. "We’ll continue to fight … This is the beginning, not the end of this long process."
Beckerman called the bill a "clear violation" of the First Amendment rights of the short video social media app’s estimated 170 million users in the United States.
On Saturday, the House passed legislation that would require ByteDance to divest its ownership stake in Tiktok or else the app would be banned in the United States. The bill is expected to be promptly passed by the Senate and signed into law by US President Joe Biden.

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Biden to Announce $7Bln in Solar Energy Grants - White House

WASHINGTON, April 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will announce on Monday $7 billion in solar energy grants, the White House said.
"President Biden will travel to Prince William Forest Park in Triangle, VA, a national park system site developed by FDR’s Civilian Conservation Corps, to announce $7 billion in awards through EPA’s [Environmental Protection Agency] Solar for All program and unveil major steps to advance the American Climate Corps," the White House said in a statement.
The event will mark Earth Day, which is celebrated on April 22.

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The EPA's Solar for All program is a key component of the US efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Companies selected under this project will deliver residential solar power to over 900,000 households in low-income and disadvantaged communities in all states. This will save households more than $350 million in electricity costs annually, or approximately $400 per household, according to the statement.

"Joined by future members of President Biden's American Climate Corps, including current AmeriCorps members, President Biden will also announce several new actions to stand up the American Climate Corps – a groundbreaking initiative … that will put more than 20,000 young Americans to work fighting the impacts of climate change today while gaining the skills they need to join the growing clean energy and climate-resilience workforce of tomorrow," the White House said.

The Biden administration will announce a number of other environmental actions throughout the week, the White House added.

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Trump Meeting with Argentine President Raises Ire of Biden Administration – Axios

WASHINGTON, April 22 (Sputnik) – Donald Trump's recent meeting with Argentine President Javier Milei raised the ire of the Biden administration amid the tightly-contested US presidential election, Axios reported on Monday.

Milei met backstage with Trump at the CPAC convention in February and the Trump campaign subsequently circulated a video of their embrace.

Axios reported that the meeting was not planned in advance, citing two unnamed sources. CPAC leader Matt Schlapp only contacted Milei's aides after the Argentine president's arrival in Washington to relay Trump's request to meet with him before his speech.

The US State Department was caught off guard by the meeting, and US Ambassador to Argentina Marc Stanley later confronted Argentina's foreign minister about the meeting at a private event in Buenos Aires, Axios reported, citing one unnamed source. The US conveyed to Argentina that it was inappropriate for other countries to get involved with US elections.

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Guterres Accepts Recommendations in Report on Alleged UNRWA-Hamas Links - Office

UNITED NATIONS, April 22 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres accepts the recommendations made by an independent review group upon completion of its probe into claims that some employees of the UN relief agency UNRWA have ties to Hamas, his spokesman said on Monday.

"The Secretary-General accepts the recommendations contained in Ms. Colonna's report. He

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has agreed with Commissioner General Philippe Lazzarini that UNRWA, with the Secretary-General's support, will establish an action plan to implement the recommendations contained in the Final Report," Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

The final report of the review group led by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna is set to be published after noon New York time on Monday.

The report makes clear that Israel has yet to provide evidence of alleged involvement of UNRWA staff in Hamas or Islamic Jihad, The Guardian reported earlier in the day, citing the document.

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DPRK's Latest Missile Launch Poses No Immediate Threat to US Troops, Allies – USINDOPACOM

WASHINGTON, April 22 (Sputnik) – The latest launch of a ballistic missile by North Korea poses no immediate threat to the United States, US servicemen or allies, the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) said on Monday.

"We are aware of the ballistic missile launch and are consulting closely with our allies and partners. While we have assessed that this event does not pose an immediate threat to U.S. personnel or territory, or to our allies, the missile launch highlights the destabilizing impact of the DPRK's illicit weapons program," USINDOPACOM said in a statement.

The Command reiterated that its defense commitments toward Japan and South Korea remain "ironclad."

Earlier on Monday the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff said that North Korea had launched several short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM's) toward the Sea of Japan.

Japan's NHK broadcaster reported citing Japanese government sources that an SRBM presumably fired by North Korea toward Japan, had fallen out of the country's exclusive economic zone after flying more than 250 kilometers (155 miles) and reaching a maximum flight altitude of 50 kilometers.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida instructed the responsible ministries to investigate the situation in connection with North Korea's suspected ballistic missile launch. In addition, Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi informed Tokyo had lodged a strong protest with Pyongyang over the incident.

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Some US House Lawmakers Waive Ukrainian Flags After Aid Bill Passage, Draw Criticism

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - Some members of the US House of Representatives waved Ukrainian flags on the House floor during a passage vote on a $60.84 billion Ukraine aid bill on

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Saturday, drawing criticism from several House Republican colleagues.

"For the Swamp, it's Ukraine First and America Last. Gleefully waving Ukrainian flags as the American people suffer under Biden's border invasion," US Congressman Dan Bishop said in a statement via social media platform X.

House lawmakers passed the nearly $61 billion Ukraine aid package, which includes a measure providing for the delivery of long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS), sending it to the Senate for further consideration.

US Congresswoman Mary Miller noted that Democrats passed out Ukrainian flags after voting against a border security bill earlier on Saturday.

US Congressman Troy Nehls called it "disgusting" to wave the foreign flag after voting to send billions of dollars abroad.

The so-called "DC Cartel" cares more about Ukraine than Americans, US Congressman Andy Biggs said, adding that the United States passed the multi-billion-dollar foreign aid bill while it approaches $35 trillion in debt.

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US House of Representatives Passes $26.38Bln Israel Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Saturday passed legislation to provide for $26.38 billion in Israel-related aid, amid the country's conflict with Palestinian organization Hamas and Iran.

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Israel Security Supplemental Appropriations Act, in a vote of 366 in favor and 58 opposed, sending it to the Senate for consideration.

The legislation provides $4 billion to replenish Iron Dome and David's Sling missile defense systems, $1.2 billion for the Iron Beam defense system, $2.4 billion for US military operations in the region and $3.5 billion to procure advanced weapons systems, defense articles and services through the Foreign Military Financing Program.

The bill also prohibits funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency.

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Blinken in China to Urge Beijing Curtail Support for Russia's Defense Industry - Official

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) – While in China, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will urge China to cease supporting Russia's defense industrial base amid the conflict in Ukraine, a senior US State Department official said during a press briefing.

"Through Chinese support, Russia has largely reconstituted its defense industrial base … That's deeply concerning to us. We'll express those concerns to China, and we will express our intent to have China curtail that support which is starting to pose a threat to European security,"

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the official said on Friday.

In his meetings with Chinese officials, Blinken will make the case that the implications of China's support for Russia are not in "China's interest going forward," the official added.

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Blinken in China to Discuss Middle East Crisis, South China Sea, DPRK's Actions - Official

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during his upcoming trip to China will discuss the crisis in the Middle East, China's alleged provocations in the South China Sea and North Korea's actions, a senior US State Department official said during a press briefing.

"The Secretary will raise clearly and candidly our concerns on issues ranging from human rights, unfair economic and trade practices to the global economic consequences of PRC industrial over-capacity," the official said on Friday. "He will discuss the crisis in the Middle East, and of course, the Secretary will discuss challenges in the Indo-Pacific, including PRC provocations in the South China Sea, as well as the DPRK's threatening rhetoric and reckless actions."

Blinken also intends to reiterate the deep US concern regarding China's alleged support for Russia's defense industrial base, discuss the crisis in Myanmar, and reaffirm the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

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Blinken to Visit China April 24-26 to Meet Senior Officials, Wang Yi - Official

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to China on April 24-26 to meet with senior officials in Beijing and Shanghai, including with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, as part of Washington's continued efforts to communicate a range of concerns, a senior US State Department official said during a press briefing.

"Secretary Blinken will travel to the People's Republic of China April 24 through 26. He will meet with senior PRC officials in both Shanghai and Beijing," the official said on Friday. "He'll spend considerable time with his counterpart Director and Foreign Minister Wang Yi."

During his visit, Blinken intends to progress on key issues of the bilateral relationship, clearly and directly communicating concerns on bilateral, regional and global issues, and responsibly manage competition so that it does not result in miscalculation or conflict, the official added.

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

blinken in china to raise clearly and candidly us concerns about human rights 'unfair economic and trade practices' - official

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blinken in china will seek to communicate concerns on regional and global issues, responsibly manage competition to avoid miscalculation - official

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US House of Representatives Passes $60.84Bln Ukraine Aid Bill, Sending on to Senate

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Saturday passed a bill with $60.84 billion in Ukraine-related aid, amid warnings from the Biden administration that Ukraine could face battlefield setbacks without further assistance.

The House of Representatives passed the bill, dubbed the Ukraine Security Supplemental Appropriations Act, in a vote of 311 in favor, 112 opposed and one voting present. House lawmakers rejected a series of Republican amendments to slash funding in the bill.

The legislation includes $23.3 billion to replenish defense articles and services provided to Ukraine, $13.8 billion for the procurement of advanced weapons systems and $11.3 billion for US military operations in the region. The bill also includes a measure to provide long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) to Ukraine.

On Thursday, CIA Director William Burns said that Ukraine could lose on the battlefield by the end of 2024 without further assistance from the US Congress.

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US House of Representatives Passes $8.12Bln Indo-Pacific Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation on Saturday to provide $8.12 billion in funding for security initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region, sending it to the Senate for consideration.

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Indo-Pacific Security Supplemental Appropriations Act, in a vote of 385 in favor, 34 opposed and one present.

The legislation includes $2 billion in foreign military financing for Taiwan and other partners in

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the region to counter China.
The bill also features $3.3 billion to develop submarine infrastructure, including investments in dry dock construction. The bill includes $1.9 billion to replenish defense articles and services provided to Taiwan and other regional partners as well.

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US House Passes Bill to Give Frozen Russian Assets to Ukraine, Compel Sale of TikTok

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation on Saturday to transfer frozen Russian sovereign assets to Ukraine and ban TikTok unless it severs ties to its Chinese parent company.
House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the 21st Century Peace through Strength Act, in a vote of 360 in favor and 58 opposed.
The legislation allows the executive branch to transfer frozen Russian sovereign assets to Ukraine, sanctions Iran, disrupts the ability of Palestinian organization Hamas to fund terrorism and sanctions entities involved in international fentanyl trafficking.
Moreover, the bill prevents app stores or web hosting services in the United States from featuring TikTok unless it severs ties to Chinese parent company ByteDance.
Russia views potential attempts by the US and EU to seize Russian assets as theft and also an act of trade war, and Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has warned that Moscow would have a tough response to such an escalation of economic aggression.

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US House Republicans Push Amendments to Slash Funding in $60.84Bln Ukraine Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - US House Republican lawmakers introduced several amendments to a $60.84 billion Ukraine aid bill, including measures to slash the funding provided by the legislation.
On Saturday, the House of Representatives debated the legislation, dubbed the Ukraine Security Supplemental Appropriations Act, and related amendments.
US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene spoke in favor of her amendment to the bill, which would reduce every dollar amount in the bill to zero.
“Ukraine is not a member of NATO, but the most important thing you hear in Washington, DC is: we have to spend Americans’ hard-earned tax dollars over to Ukraine and keep the money going to continue to murder Ukrainians … it’s repulsive,” Greene said during remarks on the House floor.
US Congresswoman Kat Cammack also introduced an amendment to cut all non-military funding in the legislation, which totals $10.5 billion.

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Refugee assistance, US State Department programs and US Agency for International Development expenses do not merit the urgency to add to the national debt, Cammack said in a statement via social media platform X.

Additionally, US Congressman Kevin Hern backed an amendment to prohibit funds in the Economic Support Fund from being used to pay pensions or government salaries.

The House of Representatives is set to vote on the Ukraine aid bill and its amendments on Saturday, alongside legislation with aid for Israel and Taiwan. The Senate is set to take up the legislation next week.

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US House Begins Consideration of Ukraine, Israel, Indo-Pacific Aid Bills

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives is set to vote on a series of foreign aid bills on Saturday, including billions of dollars in Ukraine- and Israel-related assistance.

House lawmakers will consider $60.84 billion in Ukraine-related aid, as well as a measure to transfer frozen Russian sovereign assets to Ukraine. The legislation also includes a measure to provide long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) to Ukraine.

The legislation includes mandates on repayment for economic support by the government of Ukraine, although it also features provisions to cancel the debt. The loan measure for Ukraine is “all smoke and mirrors,” US Congressman Scott Perry said.

The House of Representatives will also consider $26.38 billion in Israel-related aid, including $4 billion to replenish Iron Dome and David’s Sling missile defense systems and $1.2 billion for the Iron Beam defense system. The bill also prohibits funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency.

Moreover, House lawmakers will consider $8.12 billion in funding for the Indo-Pacific region. The legislation provides $2 billion in foreign military financing for Taiwan and other partners in the region to counter China.

Additionally, the House of Representatives will consider legislation to ban application stores or web hosting services from featuring TikTok unless the social media platform severs ties to Chinese parent company Byte Dance.

The legislation also seek sanctions on ports and refineries that receive and process Iranian oil, as well as more export restrictions against the Islamic Republic to curb its missile and drone programs.

The US Senate has reached a tentative deal to consider the bills on Tuesday if they are advanced by the House of Representatives, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Saturday.

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US-Led Coalition Says Didn't Participate in New Attack in Iraq, Monitoring Situation

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - The US-led Coalition said in a statement that it did not participate in a strike on locations in Jurf Al Sakhar, Iraq, but is continuing to monitor reports of the attack.

"Coalition Forces did not participate or strike locations in Iraq. We are monitoring reports of an incident in Jurf Al Sakhar and remain prepared to support our Iraqi partners," the Coalition said in a statement on Friday.

An explosion occurred at the Kalsu military base south of Baghdad in the Iraqi province of Babil, an Iraqi security service source told Sputnik.

According to Al Arabiya broadcaster, one person was killed and two others injured in the blast.

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Death of Russian Journalist Eremin Must be Investigated- UN Spokesperson

(adds context in para 3)

UNITED NATIONS, April 20 (Sputnik) - The UN is opposed to the killing of any journalist, UN Spokesperson Farhan Haq told Sputnik.

“We are opposed to the killings of any journalists and believe that they must be fully investigated,” Haq told Sputnik when asked about the killing of Russian journalist Semyon Eremin from Izvestia newspaper.

Izvestia on Friday reported the death of its war correspondent Semyon Eremin in the zone of Russia's special military operation. He was killed by a munition drop from a Ukrainian FPV drone.

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US to Withdraw 1,000 Troops From Niger in Coming Months - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - The United States will withdraw 1,000 US military personnel from the West African country in the coming months, the New York Times reported.

The report said on Friday that the US government had notified the transitional government in Niger about its plan.

According to the Washington Post, State Department Deputy Secretary Kurt Campbell met with Niger's prime minister earlier in the day and accepted the government's demand.

The report noted that this move will transform the United States' counterterrorism posture in West Africa.

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

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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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Death of Russian Journalist Eremin Must be Investigated- UN Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, April 20 (Sputnik) - The UN is opposed to the killing of any journalist, UN Spokesperson Farhan Haq told Sputnik.

"We are opposed to the killings of any journalists and believe that they must be fully investigated," Haq told Sputnik when asked about the killing of Russian journalist Semyon Eremin from Izvestia newspaper.

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US Logistics Agency Orders $70Mln of Radar Spare Parts From Honeywell - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - Honeywell International has received a $70 million Defense Logistics Agency contract to produce spare parts for Radar Altimeter Common Core APN-209 receiver transmitters, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Honeywell International [of] Clearwater, Florida, has been awarded a ...$70 million ...contract to produce spare parts in support of the Radar Altimeter Common Core APN-209 receiver transmitters," the release stated on Friday.

The contract will also include indicator receiver transmitters spares and repairs, the Defense Department added.

The contract will be carried out over five years with a performance completion date of October 29, 2029, the Defense Department said.

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US Air Force Orders New Digital Message Systems For Aging Stealth Bombers - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin Rotary and Mission Systems awarded a $88,380,255 US Air Force contract to overhaul old digital receiver and message systems on B-2 Stealth bombers, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

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"Lockheed Martin Rotary and Mission Systems [of] Owego, New York was awarded a $88,380,255 Captains of Industry contract for the overhaul of B-2 digital receiver and legacy defense message system," the release stated on Friday.

Work on the contract will be performed at Owego, New York over the coming decade and is expected to be completed by April 16, 2034, the Defense Department said.

The Air Force Sustainment Center, Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma, will oversee the project as its contracting activity, the Defense Department said.

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US Ban of Russian Aluminum on Global Exchanges May Impact World Market - Trade Group

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - The US decision to block the London Metal Exchange and Chicago Mercantile Exchange from trading new Russian aluminum could impact the trade of this metal on the global market, the US-based Aluminum Association said in a statement to Sputnik.

Last week, the US Treasury Department announced the United States is prohibiting the imports of aluminum, copper, and nickel of Russian origin. In addition, the Treasury said the London Metal Exchange and Chicago Mercantile Exchange are prohibited from accepting aluminum, copper, and nickel produced by Russia.

"The determination to limit the acceptance of new Russian aluminum on global exchanges could have an impact on the trade of aluminum as a global commodity," the trade group said on Friday.

The Aluminum Association said that although it is still reviewing the specifics of the ban, it does support the decision.

The trade group noted that Russia accounts for less than 1% of total US aluminum imports at present, so the ban's direct impact on US aluminum supply should be "minimal."

Many US aluminum companies have diversified away from Russian imports since sanctions were first placed, and later lifted, on aluminum in 2018, the trade group noted.

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Slovenia Joins Artemis Accords to Establish US-Rules-Based Order in Outer Space - NASA

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - Slovakia has formally signed on to the US-crafted and led Artemis Accords to establish and maintain an international rules-based order in space, NASA announced in a news release.

"NASA and Slovenia affirmed their cooperation in future space endeavors on Friday as Slovenia became the 39th country to sign the Artemis Accords," the release said on Friday.

The signing certified Slovenia’s commitment to pursue safe and sustainable exploration of

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space and took place during a US-Slovenia strategic dialogue in Ljubljana, Slovenia, NASA said.

"We look forward to taking our collaborations with Slovenia on science, technology, and innovation to new frontiers," US Ambassador to Slovenia James Harpootlian said.

Economy, Tourism and Sport Ministry State Secretary Matevz Frangez signed the accords on behalf of Slovenia and US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien participated in the event, the release said.

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US 'Begged' Israel Not to Strike Iran But Request Was Embarrassingly Ignored - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) - The United States allegedly begged Israel not to carry out a counterattack against Iran in the early hours of Friday, but the Israeli decision to ignore Washington is part of an "embarrassing" trend, Politico reported, citing a US official.

"The US begged [Israel] not to do it, and literally no one from the Pentagon to the Joint Chiefs to the CIA to the intel community thinks this is a good thing," the official was quoted by Politico ass saying on Friday. "At this point, it's truly embarrassing how much Israel does not listen to us, but yet this doesn't keep President Biden from blind fealty."

The United States' silence on this Israeli strike on Iran is part of an effort to de-escalate tensions in the Middle East between Israel and Iran, according to the report.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre declined to comment on the matter during an earlier briefing, and the Pentagon and US Central Command also declined to comment to Sputnik on this matter.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's only comment on this matter was to rule out any US involvement in the Israeli attack.

Earlier on Friday, Israel carried out an airstrike against Iran in response to Tehran's missile and drone attack over the weekend, media reported. Explosions were reported near the city of Isfahan. Air defense systems responded to the approach of drones in a number of the country's provinces. Three Iranian officials told The New York Times that the target of the strikes was an airbase near Isfahan.

Israeli drones shot down over the city of Isfahan by Iranian air defenses caused no damage, but pro-Israel media are trying to exaggerate the impact of the airstrike, according to Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

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WASHINGTON, April 20 (Sputnik) –

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* If Congress passes the national security supplemental bill currently under consideration, the United States will be able to get aid to Ukraine "right away," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.

* Russia's Kursk and Voronezh regions announced drone attack alerts, the regional governors said.

* The NATO defense ministers agreed to send more air defense systems to Ukraine after the NATO-Ukraine Council, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

* The West is one step away from deploying military forces in Ukraine, which could mean an end for Europe, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said.

* Russell Bentley, an American reporter who has previously worked with Sputnik, has been killed in Donetsk, Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of RT and the Rossiya Segodnya media group, said.

IRAN-ISRAEL TENSIONS

* The White House does not have a comment to offer on reports of Israeli strikes on Iran earlier in the day, Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.

* An air defense radar at Iran's Natanz nuclear facility was the target of Israel's strike early, ABC News reported, citing a senior US official.

* The latest escalation between Israel and Iran will have negative consequences on the global economy, International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC) Chair Mohammed Aljadaan said.

* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemns the ongoing retaliation cycle between Israel and Iran and appealed to the international community to prevent further escalation, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Friday, after Israel's overnight attack on Iran.

* Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Friday declined to answer whether Israel had alerted the United States about its overnight attack on Iran, but said that Washington has not been involved in any offensive operations.

DEVELOPMENTS IN GAZA, WEST BANK

* The death toll from Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip since October 7, 2023, when the Israel-Hamas conflict escalated, has surpassed 34,000, while over 76,000 others have suffered injuries, the enclave's health ministry said on Friday.

* The United States is imposing sanctions on an Israeli far-right activist and two entities for their roles in violence against the Palestinians in the West Bank, the Treasury Department said.

* The United States cannot support a major military operation in Rafah, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

INCIDENT IN PARIS

* An unknown individual locked himself up in the building of the Iranian consulate located in Paris and is threatening to blow himself up, the Europe 1 radio station reported on Friday, citing a French police source.

* The French police have detained a man who locked himself in the Iranian consulate in Paris with an explosive device, the French broadcaster BFMTV reported.

G7 FOREIGN MINISTERS MEETING

* The G7 states are calling on all countries to reduce energy imports from Russia and will

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continue to "put pressure on Russia's energy revenues," according to the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting Communique published on Friday.

* The G7 countries are concerned about supplies of dual-use products from China to Russia, according to the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting Communique.

* The G7 states are urging Iran to engage in dialogue and cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the nuclear program, according to the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting Communique.

* The G7 foreign ministers are concerned about Moscow's withdrawal from the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and call for maintaining the moratorium on nuclear tests, according to the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting Communique.

* The G7 countries will take additional sanctions against countries that are cooperating with Russia, according to the Foreign Ministers' Meeting Communique.

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Russia Calls on Parties in Sudan to End Armed Confrontation - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 19 (Sputnik) - Russia would like to see an end to the conflict in Sudan and calls on the parties to cease the violence, the Russian Deputy Ambassador to the UN Anna Evstigneeva said on Friday.

"Without a doubt, the Russian Federation calls on parties to the conflict to exhibit political will and to take the necessary steps to end the armed confrontation," Evstigneeva told the Security Council during a meeting on Sudan.

The conflict is not a superficial one but has deep roots that run deep in Sudanese society and lessons need to be drawn from that, she added.

On Tuesday, participants of the international conference on Sudan and neighboring countries pledged to donate over 2 billion euros ($2.1 billion) to assist Sudanese people affected by the ongoing armed conflict in the country, the French Foreign Ministry said.

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

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US Sanctions Entities for Supplying Ballistic Missile Items to Pakistan - State Department

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WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned three entities in China and one in Belarus for allegedly supplying ballistic missile items to Pakistan, the State Department said in a release on Friday.

"Today, we are designating four entities pursuant to Executive Order 13382, which targets proliferators of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery. These entities – three based in the People's Republic of China and one in Belarus – have supplied missile-applicable items to Pakistan's ballistic missile programs, including its long-range missile program," said State Department Spokesman Matthew Miller in the release.

The sanctions target the Belarus-based Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant along with China (PRC)-based Xi'an Longde Technology Development Company Limited, Tianjin Creative Source International Trade Co Ltd and Granpect Company Limited, Miller said.

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Politicizing Economic Agenda Worsens Economic Climate of Major Advanced Economies-Overchuk

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - Politicizing the economic agenda makes the economic climate worse in the major advanced economies, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk said on Friday.

"In contrast, major advanced economies, especially those within the European Union, are experiencing a worsening economic climate, largely due to the politicization of the economic agenda, inadequate economic decisions including interruption of reliable energy supply chains and emphasis on military spending," Overchuk said.

In a statement issued at the 109th Meeting of the Development Committee, Overchuk noted that the Global South is advancing and strengthening its cooperation and trade ties, which makes provision for a more equitable economic framework.

Overchuk went on to say that the Russian Ministry of Economic Development forecasts that GDP growth this year will surpass 2% annually, with unemployment remaining at historically low levels.

"This impressive economic performance has beneficial effects on neighboring countries, specifically those that are members of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States," he said. "Advising these nations to sever economic relations with Russia would undermine their economic well-being and the prospects for regional collaboration and development. Therefore, we strongly encourage the WBG to adhere to its founding principles and avoid engaging in discussions that could detract from its mission."

Washington is currently hosting the 2024 Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group, an annual conference to discuss global challenges facing the global economy.

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World Bank Provides Commendable Post-Quake Aid to Turkey, But Not Syria - Russian Gov't

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The World Bank Group (WBG) should abandon political bias and provide assistance to Syria, which together with Turkey was hit by a devastating earthquake last year but has not received any significant aid, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk said on Friday.

"We expect the WBG to demonstrate an evenhanded approach to all the shareholders and find a solution to re-engage with Syria and provide assistance to its people," Overchuk said in a statement following a World Bank Group Development Committee meeting. "Following the devastating earthquake in 2023 that hit Turkey and Syria particularly hard, the World Bank Group provided remarkable and commendable assistance to Turkey; however, Syria was left behind despite facing severe challenges."

The situation deteriorated further after the World Food Programme ceased its food assistance across Syria in December due to a lack of funds, Overchuk recalled.

In addition, the conflict in the Middle East has direct repercussions for the Syrian economy, the senior Russian official said.

As a member of the WBG, Syria is entitled to an unbiased and equitable treatment in accordance with the Articles of Agreement, Overchuk stressed.

Russia finds it "disconcerting" to observe a deviation from these principles as a result of political reasoning, the deputy prime minister said.

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San Francisco Zoo to Welcome Giant Pandas From China as Part of Diplomacy Program - Mayor

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - San Francisco is excited that China has chosen the city's zoo as an institution where it will deliver for temporary giant pandas as part of Beijing's Panda Diplomacy Program, Mayor London Breed said on Friday.

"San Francisco is absolutely thrilled that we will be welcoming giant pandas to our San Francisco Zoo. We have been working closely with our local API community to advocate for pandas nearly a year ago leading up to APEC in November and it is an honor that our city has been chosen for the first time to be a long-term home for Giant Pandas," Breed said.

London alongside US National Forestry and Grassland Administration officials joined the China Wildlife Conservation Association in Beijing to sign a memorandum of understanding serving as the first official leased agreement for Giant Pandas to reside at the San Francisco Zoo.

The date of the Giant Pandas' arrival in the United States has not been confirmed yet because the San Francisco Zoo must first finish erecting a suitable enclosure for them.

Last year, the National Zoo in Washington returned three giant pandas to China and said the

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United States was sad to see them go as well as expressed openness to welcoming the pandas again in the future.

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Russia Urges World Bank to Extend More Operations to Gaza Amid 'Inadequate' Aid -Overchuk

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - Russia is calling on the World Bank Group to expand more of its operations into the Gaza Strip amid its inadequate aid for the people of the conflict-torn enclave, Alexey Overchuk, Russian Deputy Prime Minister said on Friday.

"In light of the catastrophic situation in the Gaza Strip and the deadly threats of famine and epidemics of infectious diseases looming over it, we urge the World Bank to urgently extend more of its operations to the territory," Overchuk said. "The present degree of support from the World Bank Group is critically inadequate and stands in stark contrast to the billions spent to support the agonizing Nazi regime in Ukraine, demonstrating that the institution is both keen and capable of identifying solutions when it deems the situation sufficiently critical."

In the statement issued after the 109th Meeting of the Development Committee, Overchuk also urged the World Bank to develop a comprehensive strategy towards the Palestinian territories.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel and breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. Nearly 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted during the attack. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Nearly 33,900 people have been killed so far by Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip, according to local authorities.

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Man Who Set Self on Fire Outside Trump Trial Courthouse in Critical Condition - Police

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - A man is in critical condition after he set himself on fire outside of the New York City courthouse where former President Donald Trump's so-called hush money trial was taking place, a New York Police Department official said on Friday.

"We were able to extinguish the fire and from that point we removed him to Cornell Burn Unit where right now he's there in critical condition," the official said during a press conference.

Another New York Police Department official identified the man who set himself on fire as Maxwell Azzarello from the state of Florida.

Police said Azzarello threw pamphlets on the ground before he set himself on fire.

"The pamphlet seems to be propaganda based, almost like a conspiracy theory type of pamphlet - some information in regards to Ponzi schemes, and the fact that some of our local

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educational institutes are fronts for the mob. So a little bit of a conspiracy theory going on here," a police investigator said.

Police said Azzarello did not breach any security measures on site for Trump's trial because the incident took place at a nearby park open to the public at the moment.

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Thai-Based Plastics Giant Pays US $20Mln to Settle Iran Sanctions Dispute - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - SCG PLastics, part of a Thailand based global conglomerate, has agreed to pay the US government $20 million to settle a dispute over its alleged violation of US sanctions imposed on Iran, the us Department of the Treasury announced in a statement on Friday.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) today announced a settlement with SCG Plastics Company, part of a multinational enterprise headquartered in Bangkok, Thailand," the statement said. "SCG Plastics has agreed to pay $20 million to settle its potential civil liability for 467 apparent violations of OFAC sanctions on Iran."

From 2017 to 2018, SCG Plastics caused US financial institutions to process $291 million in wire transfers for sales of Iranian origin polyethylene resin manufactured by a joint venture in Iran, the statement said.

The $20 million settlement amount reflected the findings of the OFAC that SCG Plastics' apparent violations were egregious and, with the exception of some transactions, were not voluntarily disclosed, the statement added.

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Musk Says Banning TikTok Would Be Contrary to Freedom of Speech in US

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - US billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk on Friday spoke out against banning the social media platform TikTok in the United States, arguing that such a move would be contrary to freedom of speech and expression.

"In my opinion, TikTok should not be banned in the USA, even though such a ban may benefit the X platform. Doing so would be contrary to freedom of speech and expression. It is not what America stands for," Musk said via X.

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

On Monday, US House Speaker Mike Johnson unveiled a multi-billion-dollar foreign aid plan, which includes support for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, as well as measures to sanction Iran and

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

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US Senate Unlikely to Vote on FISA Bill Before Friday Night Deadline - Source

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The US Senate is unlikely to hold a final vote on the House-passed legislation that reauthorizes and reforms Section 702 spying authorities of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) before it expires at midnight on Friday, a congressional source told Sputnik.
"I do not believe a final vote will happen tonight," the source said.
However, the source added that the situation remains fluid, so the timeline is subject to change.
Earlier on Friday, US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell warned that there could be serious consequences if the Senate does not approve the measure, adding that even a brief lapse in the authority could be exploited by bad actors wanting to do harm to the United States.
McConnell said this measure is an essential tool for staying ahead of non-US persons seeking to harm the United States.
However, Democratic Senator Ron Wyden, during remarks on the floor, opposed the legislation, emphasizing that it is a very substantial and dangerous expansion of warrantless surveillance authorities.
US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer already noted that it's possible the Senate will have to continue work on the FISA legislation over the weekend.

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NASA Launching Six Missions to Monitor Climate Change Processes on Earth - Officials

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - NASA is launching six new missions working with other US and international bodies to monitor processes around the world caused by climate change, NASA Earth Science Division Director Karen St. Germain said on Friday.
NASA has selected six new airborne missions that include domestic and international studies of fire-induced clouds, Arctic coastal change, air quality, landslide hazards, shrinking glaciers, and emissions from agricultural lands, according to the space agency.
The missions will monitor Arctic coastal changes on Alaska's North Slope, how wildfires in North America create pyrocumulus nimbus clouds and generate their own weather patterns and on how pollutants affect human health, St Germain said.
The other new missions will study how wildfires clear vegetation and set off droughts, the rates

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at which glaciers are retreating or advancing and the effects of gas emissions into the atmosphere from agricultural processes, St. Germain added.

The six missions will also utilize early data from NASA's ocean-watching Plankton, Aerosol, Cloud, Ocean Ecosystem mission, according to the agency.

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World Bank's Focus on Renewables Doesn't Ensure Affordability in Long Term - Russian Gov't

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The World Bank Group's (WBG) overfocus on renewable energy sources guarantees neither affordability in the long-term nor tangible results, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk said on Friday.

Russia, however, remains committed to the sustainable development goal on affordable and clean energy and believes it to be of utmost importance for the WBG’s new mission and vision, Overchuk stated.

"The current exclusive focus of the WBG on renewable energy sources does not ensure either affordability in the long-term or tangible results. The WBG should be a role model for other MDBs by undertaking more ambitious and transformative projects that align with the needs of our clients, reminiscent of our pioneering efforts in the 1950s," Overchuk said in a statement following a World Bank Group Development Committee meeting.

With this overfocus, the WBG risks becoming a "media-oriented institution rather than a development-oriented one," the senior Russian official said.

"Furthermore, we object to the prejudiced views of advanced economies, which have reaped the benefits of fossil fuels for their development and continue to rely heavily on them to sustain their economic activities, yet oppose affording similar opportunities to low- and middle-income countries," Overchuk said.

Overchuk stressed that Russia believes that the World Bank should place greater emphasis on technological advancements.

"In the energy domain, for example, there is a pressing need to accelerate decarbonization efforts," he explained. "By refusing to implement projects related to natural gas at scale, the WBG is missing opportunities to promote the electrification of the liquefied natural gas (LNG) industry. Such initiatives could significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, providing low and middle-income countries rich in natural gas with climate-friendly energy solutions."

Washington is currently hosting the 2024 Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group, an annual conference to discuss global challenges facing the global economy.

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World Bank's Politicized Approach to Conflicts Compromises Its Credibility - Overchuk

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The World Bank Group's (WBG) politicized approach to different conflicts compromises its credibility and impacts its reputation, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk said on Friday.

"We must emphasize that the biased and politicized approach followed by management, as evidenced by the language employed to characterize different conflicts (in Gaza, Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine) in various WBG documents, severely compromises the integrity and credibility of our institution," Overchuk said. "This biased approach affects the WBG's reputation as a knowledge institution, given that numerous analytical reports do not

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adequately pinpoint the underlying structural causes of the global food crisis."

In a statement issued after the 109th meeting of the Development Committee, Overchuk said the reports present insufficient analysis of the Central Asian countries and urged maintaining impartiality and objectivity to avoid incurring "substantial reputational harm."

Overchuk also said that a number of staff experience discriminatory hurdles when trying to obtain the necessary G4 visa to work at international organizations.

"Although the issuance of visas does not fall under the purview of the World Bank Group, it is incumbent upon the institution to safeguard the welfare of its employees and to strive for equitable treatment for all," Overchuk said. "This state of affairs goes against our principles and values and should not be tolerated. We anticipate that the Management will develop mechanisms to compensate for these barriers, ensuring all staff members have equal opportunities."

The 2024 Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group, an annual conference to discuss global challenges facing the global economy, is currently being held in Washington.

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White House Says Ukraine to Get Aid 'Right Away' if National Security Supplemental Passed

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - If Congress passes the national security supplemental bill currently under consideration, the United States will be able to get aid to Ukraine "right away," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.

"Right away," Jean-Pierre told a briefing, when asked how soon the United States could get aid to Ukraine if the supplemental is passed by Congress.

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Judge Swears in Remaining 5 Jurors, Sets Trump ‘Hush Money’ Trial to Start on April 22

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - Judge Juan Merchan, who oversees former President Donald Trump’s "hush money" case, has sworn in the remaining five alternate jurors and set the trial to begin on April 22, CNN reported on Friday.

"We have our full panel," the report cited the Merchan as saying after both parties agreed on the names of the remaining five alternate jurors. "I expect we're going to begin the trial on Monday."

Merchan said the trial will proceed only if all 18 jurors are present each day, according to the report.

The remaining five alternates included four women and one man. A total of eight men and ten women have been sworn in to decide on the soundness of criminal charges against Trump.

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While Merchan was finishing the swearing in of the remaining jurors, a person set themselves on fire in front of the courthouse and the journalists covering the trial in southern Manhattan.
Video footage broadcast showed the person being completely engulfed in flames as police officers tried to extinguish the flames.
On Monday, Trump arrived at court to face his first day of trial in the case involving alleged hush money he paid via his attorney Michael Cohen to pornography actress Stormy Daniels and other persons from August 2015 to December 2017.
Last year, Trump pleaded not guilty on all 34 counts of falsifying business records in connection with hush money.

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White House Says Doesn't Have Comment on Reports of Israeli Strike on Iran

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The White House does not have a comment to offer on reports of Israeli strikes on Iran earlier in the day, Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.
"We do not have any comment on the reports at this time," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.
However, in more general terms, Jean-Pierre reiterated that the United States does not want to see the Gaza conflict escalate in the region, and Washington will continue to consult with its allies and partners in the region to reduce further risk of escalation.

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Person Sets Themselves on Fire Outside of Trump Trial Courthouse in New York - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - An individual set themselves on fire outside of the New York City courthouse where former President Donald Trump's so-called hush money criminal trial is taking place, according to media footage from CNN.
Video footage broadcast by CNN shows a person completely engulfed in flames in front of the courthouse. The person collapses to the floor as police officers try to extinguish the flames.

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US House Lawmaker Joins Motion to Oust Speaker, Cites Aid for 'Endless War in Ukraine'

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WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Paul Gosar said on Friday that he is backing a motion to oust House Speaker Mike Johnson for prioritizing foreign matters like the Ukraine conflict over the ongoing crisis on the US southern border.

"Rather than spending the resources to secure our southern border and combating the invasion of 11 million illegals and despite repeated promises there would be no additional money going to Ukraine without first securing our border, the United States House of Representatives, under the direction of the Speaker, is on the verge of sending another $61 billion to further draw America into an endless and purposeless war in Ukraine," Gosar said in a press release.

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

Congress cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the consequences of President Joe Biden's "disastrous" open border policies, Gosar added.

Gosar further emphasized that he added his name in support of the motion to vacate the Speaker because the US border crisis cannot continue to be an afterthought.

"We need a Speaker who puts America first rather than bending to the reckless demands of the warmongers, neo-cons, and the military-industrial complex making billions from a costly and endless war half a world away," Gosar said.

Greene recently filed a motion to remove Johnson from his position but has held off on requesting a vote pending the Speaker's handling of key issues such as Ukraine aid funding. So far the motion has support from three House lawmakers, including Gosar.

Greene previously noted that it's pretty clear and obvious that Johnson does not have the support of the House Republican Conference.

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Israel Targeted Air Defense Radar at Iranian Nuclear Facility in Friday Strike - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - An air defense radar at Iran's Natanz nuclear facility was the target of Israel's strike early on Friday, ABC News reported, citing a senior US official.

Israel attacked the Natanz nuclear facility with three missiles, but it remains unconfirmed whether the strike has destroyed the air defense radar site.

Earlier on Friday, Iranian media reported that Israel carried out an airstrike against Iran in response to Tehran's missile and drone attack over the weekend. Explosions were reported near the city of Isfahan. Air defense systems responded to the approach of drones in several of the country's provinces. Three Iranian officials told The New York Times that the target of the strikes was an airbase near Isfahan.

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Biden Admin. Limits Oil, Gas Leasing in 13.3Mln Acres in Alaska - US Interior Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has limited future oil and gas leasing and industrial development on 13.3 million acres in Alaska to keep wildlife habitat intact, the US Department of the Interior said on Friday.

"The final rule codifies protections for 13.3 million acres encompassed by the existing Special Areas, limiting future oil and gas leasing and industrial development in the Teshekpuk Lake, Utukok Uplands, Colville River, Kasegaluk Lagoon and Peard Bay Special Areas - places collectively known for their globally significant intact habitat for wildlife, including grizzly and polar bears, caribou and hundreds of thousands of migratory birds," the Department of the Interior said in a press release.

The new rule has also codified existing prohibitions on new oil and gas leasing in 10.6 million acres, the release said.

The Department of the Interior also recommended rejecting the Ambler Road project, which would entail building a 210-mile industrial road connecting four large mines in north-central Alaska.

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

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

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Geopolitical Tensions Have Significant Impact on Global Economy - IMFC

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) – Geopolitical tensions in different parts of the world have a significant impact on the global economy, International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC) Chair Mohammed Aljadaan said on Friday.

“While recognizing the IMFC is not the forum to resolve geopolitical and security issues and these issues will be discussed in other fora, IMFC members acknowledged that these situations have significant impacts on the global economy,” Aljadaan, Saudi Arabia’s Minister of Finance, said in a statement.

He shared that the committee members discussed the global macroeconomic and financial impact of current wars and conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, during the latest meeting in Washington, DC. They also focused on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the shipping disruptions in the Red Sea, he added.

“Today’s era must not be of war and conflict,” Aljadaan stressed.

This time, the IMFC did not issue a communique, as the committee traditionally has done until

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recent years, after its meetings during the sessions of the IMF and the World Bank.

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McConnell Warns of 'Serious Consequences' If Senate Doesn't Reauthorize FISA

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Friday that there could be serious consequences if the Senate does not approve House-passed legislation that reauthorizes and reforms Section 702 spying authorities of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), which is set to expire at midnight.

"There will be serious consequences if the Senate fails to do its job today," McConnell said during remarks on the Senate floor.

The legislation would reauthorize FISA Section 702 warrantless surveillance authority to 2026.

McConnell said this measure is an essential tool for staying ahead of non-US persons seeking to harm the United States.

However, if the Senate fails to approve the measure, it could be exploited by bad actors, the senator added.

US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said it's possible the Senate might not meet the midnight deadline and will have to continue work on FISA over the weekend.

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

Democratic Senator Ron Wyden, during remarks on the floor, opposed the legislation, emphasizing that this legislation is a very substantial and dangerous expansion of warrantless surveillance authorities.

"Under the provision, there would be virtually no limits to who can be forced into spying for the government," Wyden said.

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

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IMFC Chair Says Latest Mideast Incidents to Have Negative Consequences on Global Economy

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The latest escalation between Israel and Iran will have negative consequences on the global economy, International Monetary and Financial

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Committee (IMFC) Chair Mohammed Aljadaan said on Friday.
"The members recognize that geopolitical tensions have negative consequences on the world economy," Aljadaan, who also serves as finance minister of Saudi Arabia, said after the IMFC meeting during the International Monetary Fund and World Bank spring meeting.

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IMF Goal to Maintain Ukraine Debt Sustainable on 'Forward-Looking Basis' - Official

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) goal is to maintain Ukraine's debt sustainable in the foreseeable future, International Monetary Fund (IMF) European Department Director Alfred Kammer said on Friday.
"We have a fund program in place, which is very successfully implemented by the Ukrainian authorities. As part of that, one of the objectives is to have debt in Ukraine sustainable on a forward-looking basis," Kammer said.
The IMF is not considering restructuring Ukraine's debt, Kammer added.
Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said earlier that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who expressed readiness to receive US aid as credit to continue military actions against Russia, is ready to get into the pocket of future generations of Ukrainian citizens so that living Ukrainians will continue to die on the battlefield.

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Seizure of Russian Assets to Be Decided by Courts But Would Threaten Global Economy - IMF

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The seizure of Russian assets should be determined by relevant jurisdictions and courts but may threaten the global economy with unintended consequences, International Monetary Fund (IMF) European Department Director Alfred Kammer said on Friday.
"With regard to the seizure of Russia's assets, our view is that [this] is something for the relevant jurisdictions and courts to determine and to decide," Kammer said.
The potential implications of these decisions must be taken into account for the functioning of the international monetary system, Kammer said.
"Our managing director recently emphasized that the Board [of Directors] needs to be wary of unintended consequences," Kammer added.
After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in 2022, the European Union and the Group of Seven (G7) nations froze almost half of Russia's foreign currency reserves, which amount to about $319 billion at current rates. More than $200 billion of the total sum is in the European Union, mainly in the accounts of Belgium's Euroclear - one of the world's largest

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settlement and clearing systems.

The EU is discussing ways to use the frozen Russian assets to allegedly finance the reconstruction of Ukraine. The European Central Bank warned that this could pose reputational risks to the European currency in the long term.

The Kremlin said freezing Russia's reserves is yet another step by the collective West in violating the rules and norms of international law. The Russian Foreign Ministry called the freezing of Russian assets in Europe a theft.

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US House Adopts Rule Governing Debate on Ukraine, Israel Aid Bills

(Adds details on legislation and rule in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The US House adopted a rule governing debate on a four-part national security package that includes aid for Israel and Ukraine, as well as new sanctions on Russia and Iran, setting up a vote on final passage on Saturday.

The rule, which was adopted in a 316-94 vote, will allow for votes on a total of seven amendments to the legislation on three of the bills: Ukraine aid, Indo-Pacific assistance and national security measures. The rule does not allow any amendments to the Israel aid bill.

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.

A fourth bill includes measures to transfer frozen Russian sovereign assets to Ukraine, impose sanctions on Iran, and force TikTok to either separate from its parent company within a year or face a US ban.

The rule passed by the House will allow members to vote on four amendments to the proposed aid package to Ukraine, including Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene's proposed change to "reduce every dollar amount in the bill to zero."

Additionally, the rule will allow lawmakers to consider Congressman Kevin Hern's amendment that would prohibit any economic support to pay pensions or government salaries in Ukraine as well as Congresswoman Kat Cammack's amendment aiming to eliminate all non-military funding related to Ukraine.

However, several proposed amendments were rejected overnight by the Rules Committee, including Congressman Andy Ogles' proposal to prohibit the use of funds to arm, train or otherwise assist Ukraine's neo-Nazi Azov Battalion (banned in Russia as a terrorist organization) or any successor organization.

Greene had also introduced amendments to prohibit funding for Ukraine until it holds free and fair elections, stops persecuting Christians, closes all bio-laboratories, begins peace talks with Russia, and turns over information related to Hunter Biden and the Ukrainian energy company Burisma, but they were not included in the final version of the rule.

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

US House Advances Bills to Aid Israel and Ukraine, Sanction Russia and Iran

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The US House adopted a rule governing debate on a four-part national security package that includes aid for Israel and Ukraine, as well as new sanctions on Russia and Iran, setting up a vote on final passage on Saturday.

The rule, which was adopted with more than two-thirds of House members voting in favor, will allow for votes on a total of seven amendments to the legislation on three of the bills: Ukraine aid, Indo-Pacific assistance and national security measures. The rule does not allow any amendments to the Israel aid bill.

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UPDATE - Russian Economy 'Resilient' in Face of Large-Scale Western Sanctions - IMF

(Updates with details from report in paras 4-12)

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The Russian economy has proven resilient despite the comprehensive sanctions imposed by West countries, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Friday.

"Over the past two years and amid large-scale sanctions imposed by a host of countries, the Russian economy has proven resilient," the IMF said in its new Regional Economic Outlook for Europe report.

The Russian economy again outperformed expectations in 2023, growing by 3.6%, despite an initial, relatively mild contraction of 1.2% in 2022 when the sanctions were first imposed, the report said.

The IMF highlighted several factors that have played a key role in the continued resilience of the Russian economy, the foremost being the fact that oil export volumes have been very steady despite the sanctions.

"This is because the oil that used to go to Europe is now being absorbed elsewhere, notably China and India," the report said.

Oil revenues remain high and continue to bolster the Russian economy, the report added.

The recovery of corporate investment is another factor that has added 4.5 percentage points to the economy's growth this year just as the necessary retooling of the Russian economy to substitute imports with domestic goods has gotten underway, resulting in investments in new production facilities, the report said.

Private consumption has recovered strongly and added 2.9 percentage points to GDP growth, the report said.

In addition, government spending has also added to growth, albeit more modestly, with the fiscal impulse estimated at 1.2 percentage points of GDP in 2023, the report said.

"Despite a large increase in military spending, overall government spending has increased but not as much in real terms," the report said.

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The IMF projected that the Russian economy may not grow at the same pace in 2024 as in the previous year despite signs of overheating, which can be seen in record-low unemployment, elevated rates of inflation and fast-growing wages.

The IMF also said that it expects modest growth in the Russian economy in the middle term, according to the report.

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Russian Economy 'Resilient' in Face of Large-Scale Western Sanctions - IMF

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US Sanctions 1 Activist, 2 Entities Over West Bank Violence - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing sanctions on an Israeli far-right activist and two entities for their roles in violence against the Palestinians in the West Bank, the Treasury Department said on Friday.

"The Department of State is designating Ben-Zion Gopstein, the founder and leader of an organization whose members have engaged in violence, including assaults on Palestinian civilians," the Treasury said in a statement.

The sanctioned entities are Mount Hebron Fund and Shlom Asiraich, which established fundraising campaigns on behalf of Yinon Levi and David Chai Chasdai. The two violent extremists were sanctioned on February 1 in connection with violence in the West Bank, the statement said.

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Blinken Says Not Right Time for Palestine's Recognition, Diplomacy Needed

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - The United States believes it is not the right time for Palestine's recognition as diplomacy is needed to bring the parties together, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday, following a US veto of Palestine's request for full UN membership amid the Israeli war in Gaza.

"There is going to be a proper time, a rightful time for recognition. This is not that time. We need to do the diplomacy," Blinken said at a press conference in Capri, Italy.

We need to do the hard work to bring parties together, to bring the region together, and to demonstrate that there is a much better future that awaits everyone if they follow this path," he added.

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Guterres After Israeli Attack on Iran Says Condemns Any Act of Retaliation

UNITED NATIONS, April 19 (Sputnik) – UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemns the ongoing retaliation cycle between Israel and Iran and appealed to the international community to prevent further escalation, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Friday, after Israel's overnight attack on Iran.

"The Secretary-General condemns any act of retaliation and appeals to the international community to work together to prevent any further development that could lead to devastating consequences for the entire region and beyond," Dujarric said in a statement.

Earlier in the day, Israel carried out an airstrike against Iran in response to Tehran's missile and drone attack over the weekend, Iranian media reported. Explosions were reported near the city of Isfahan. Three Iranian officials told The New York Times that the target of the strikes was an airbase near Isfahan.

Last Saturday night, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps launched over 300 drones and missiles at Israel in its first-ever direct attack on Israeli territory, The attack came in response to Israel's deadly airstrike on the Iranian consulate in the Syrian capital in early April. IDF spokesman Daniel Hagari said Israel had intercepted 99% of the aerial targets fired by Iran, including all drones.

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UN Chief After Strikes on Iran Condemns Any Act of Retaliation, Appeals to International Community to Work to Prevent Further Escalation - Spokesman

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US Cannot Support Major Military Operation in Rafah – Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) – The United States cannot support a major military operation in Rafah, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"We cannot support a major military operation in Rafah," Blinken said at the press conference in Capri, Italy.

He expressed confidence that the key goals Israel wants to achieve in Rafah can be achieved by other means.

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Blinken Says 'Real Risk' That Ukraine Aid Will Come Too Late If Further Delayed

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - If Congress further delays its vote on the Ukraine aid bill, there is a risk that it will be too late to help Kiev, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"Most important thing is getting this aid voted and moving it forward and it will, I know, make a profound difference and make a profound difference almost right away … It is too late? No. If it happens now, it is not too late. If it does not happen or takes a lot more time, there is a real risk that yes it will be too late," Blinken said at a press conference in Capri, when asked if the $60.84 billion Ukraine aid bill is "coming too late."

House lawmakers are set to vote on the national security supplemental package, which includes multi-billion-dollar aid for Ukraine, on Saturday evening.

The US foreign aid bill seeks to provoke Kiev to "fight to the last Ukrainian" while ensuring

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guaranteed profit for the US defense industry, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

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Blinken on Israeli Attack on Iran: US Has Not Been Involved in Offensive Operations

WASHINGTON, April 19 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Friday declined to answer whether Israel had alerted the United States about its overnight attack on Iran, but said that Washington has not been involved in any offensive operations.
"I'm not gonna speak to that except to say that the United States has not been involved in any offensive operations. What we're focused on, what the G7 is focused on … is our work to deescalate tensions," Blinken said at a press conference in Capri, when asked if the US was alerted in advance about the Israeli attack.

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blinken on israeli overnight strike on iran: US was not involved in any offensive operations, is working to deescalate

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